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Houses get coffee break

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They won't look the same and they won't be in the same places, but they will be remain standing: A compromise has spared two heritage homes in Scarborough that were slated to be bulldozed to make way for a new mall.

When Landmark Canada decided to construct one of the largest malls in North America, The Landmark, on Steeles Avenue East west of Markham Road, it first had to figure out how to deal with two actual landmarks on the site: houses that were each more than 120 years old. In the end, the company Danforth decided to incorporate them into the plans.

Paul Ainslie, the area's city councillor and self-professed "history guy" says he lobbied Landmark to persuade the company that it could build its shopping centre to incorporate the two old homes, citing the example of BCE Place, where old brick buildings are sheltered within a modern office tower.

Instead, both of the officially designated heritage buildings -- the William Stonehouse House, at 5951 Steeles Ave. E.; and the Underwood House, at 5933 Steeles Ave. E. -- will be moved from their original sites, and instead of demolition they'll be given a new life as commercial space.

"We have decided to renovate the two old homes," says Terry Yiu, Landmark Canada's CEO. "We wanted to get rid of them at first, because we didn't know their significance. [Ainslie] contacted us and so did the heritage department so we started talking about possible solutions. To us, it is important to preserve these houses as well.

"We are looking into making them into a coffee shop," Yiu continues. "I am pushing for it because people can sit and see the architecture from inside, but I am pretty open-minded. We have made several recommendations to the heritage department and we are still waiting on a word from them."

The developer adds: "We see this as a feasible plan and ? it will tell local residents about their history. It will be something unique--a mall and a historical site."

Richard Schofield, chairman of the Scarborough Preservation Panel, a subcommittee of the Toronto Preservation Board, says he can live with the compromise. "If a developer wants a mall there and there are two old empty homes in their way, this is the best option. You have to weigh the rights of the individual property owner vs. heritage preservation. I lean more toward preserving

heritage, but I can say I am reasonably happy with this."

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