

City considers buying philosopher Marshall McLuhan's boyhood home in Highlands

BY GORDON KENT, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM JANUARY 12, 2012



Cheryl Toshack at her home which was once the residence of famous Canadian media visionary Marshall McLuhan.

Photograph by: Rick MacWilliam, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON - The childhood home of acclaimed Edmonton-born philosopher Marshall McLuhan is being offered to the city to buy and preserve as an arts and writing centre.

McLuhan, a communications theorist and literary critic who coined such phrases as “the medium is the message,” lived in the Highlands house until his family moved to Winnipeg in 1915 when he was four.

Cheryl Toshack, who, with husband Doug, has owned and lovingly maintained the 1 1/2-storey structure for 37 years, said Thursday they plan to move and want the city to purchase the property to ensure it isn't destroyed.

“A lot of homes in Highlands get flattened. That's our biggest fear,” she said, explaining the 22-metre-wide lot would be attractive to someone who wanted to build a much larger, single-family residence.

“Last year, with it being (McLuhan's) 100th birthday, we had an international group come through ... they were just so delighted to get in and see it.”

The house, assessed by the city at \$450,000, still has such original features as the oak fireplace, pocket doors and a

chandelier.

Toshack is also concerned a new owner might keep the home standing, but modernize it to the point that its century-old charm is lost.

While one option is to have it designated as a historic site so it can't legally be demolished or heavily altered, "we would prefer to have the city buy it. They would use it in a positive manner," she said.

However, the couple, which has been working on the idea since last year, wants to complete a deal by March 1 or they'll put their home on the open market.

The Edmonton Arts Council says the main floor could be used for a writer's office, library and interpretive displays about McLuhan, a longtime University of Toronto professor who died in 1980.

The rest of the building might be turned into studios, offices for such groups as the University of Alberta's Festival of Ideas and a suite for visiting scholars and artists.

These revenues should cover the operating costs, arts council executive director John Mahon said.

"The idea of a writer's house, a place for professional writers to go to work outside their home, has been there for a while, and also I think the symbolism is important," he said.

"The city needs to claim its intellectual past as much as its built architectural heritage ... The fact is that he was born here, that his family roots were here, that he maintained contact with our community throughout his life."

The move is supported by the Highlands Community League, which is also interested in having 112th Avenue renamed Marshall McLuhan Avenue.

Although Coun. Ben Henderson said he's intrigued by the idea of buying the house, he needs more details such as where the money would come from before deciding whether to support the scheme.

"There is a strong connection to McLuhan, who was one of the really formative thinkers of the last half of the last century, and there hasn't been a lot of recognition of that connection," he said.

"I think it creates a kind of energy that would not be creatable in another situation."

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