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New house will kill me, woman says

Fragrance and chemical aversion keeps resident in crumbling west-end home slated for demolition

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A handwritten sign hangs in an upper-floor window, its meaning not immediately clear.

"Ontario abandons people to die in sick buildings," it reads, one of the curiosities on some prime Bloor St. W. real estate facing High Park.

A dozen stately brick homes stand in the block immediately west of Keele St., between Oakmount Rd. and Pacific Ave., along with a four-unit apartment building.

All are owned by W.J. Properties. All are boarded up except the house with the sign. All but two tenants left more than a year and a half ago.

The owner intends to replace the buildings with a condominium, but has encountered delays.

"We're talking to a couple of developers to do a joint venture," said company spokesperson Perry Fryers. "If all goes well, we'll start to move quickly (on a design), but it could be another 14-month process before it's approved" by the city.

Linda Sepp hopes nothing new gets built for a while, but not for the usual reasons.

The "sick buildings" her sign refers to are not the boarded-up homes around her, or the one she and her mother occupy, where a tarp on the roof keeps out the rain.

She and her mother are not angry holdouts against developers. In fact, the owner sympathizes with their situation and has not forced them out, and the city parks people keep Sepp in mind when they do a controlled burn in High Park.

Sepp suffers from multiple chemical sensitivity. It is a syndrome about which the medical community is split, with some doctors recognizing it as a disease involving acute sensitivity to even tiny amounts of chemicals and others dismissing it as a psychological condition.

Sepp says it is physical. The smell of certain shampoos makes her legs wobbly, she says. A whiff of fabric softener can knock her out for days.

She can't let anyone into the house wearing aftershave or perfumed deodorant. And she says that if she allowed the roof to be fixed, the chemicals involved would kill her.

"As long as I have stable housing and family support, I can have a natural lifespan," she said yesterday through a face mask. "If I protect myself, I can do more than survive. I can live a creative life."

Sepp moved into the house in 1991 as a single mom with two children. At the time, certain grooming products bothered her, but not severely.

Then, in 1994, her system "crashed," she said. She fell ill and began a more restricted existence. Her children grew up and her mother moved in.

"Except for a trip to the farmers' market, I've been housebound for the last three years," she said.

Her main challenge now, Sepp said, is finding a new home free of volatile organic compounds.

That means a self-contained living space not contaminated by other people's perfumes and laundry and cleaning products. That also means ceramic or wood floors, not laminated ones, and other natural materials, not wallboard.

In other words, she needs an old house like the one she is living in, except she cannot find an affordable one. She cannot work. She lives on payments from the Ontario Disability Support Program.

"I hope I don't go down with the house when the ceiling comes down," she said.

But with no agency mandated to help people like her, she said, her only alternative appears to be dying abandoned in a "sick" building.

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