

# **A Vision of Regeneration: Reconstruction after the Explosion, 1917-21**

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"A Vision of Regeneration" was chosen as the theme of this chapter because it focuses on the rebuilding of the devastated areas of Halifax and Dartmouth, and because this presentation results from an exhibition by that name mounted at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. Other chapters have addressed the design, construction, architectural significance, and changes to the Hydrostone district; this chapter will focus on the more than 600 additional residences built by the architectural firm of Ross and Macdonald. These houses dot the urban landscape of Halifax and Dartmouth, and influenced the house designs of other local architects.

After the horrific event of December 6, 1917, the north ends of Halifax and Dartmouth were in ruins and as devastated as any city or town at the fronts in war-torn Europe. Within hours of the explosion, the Halifax Relief Committee,<sup>1</sup> a volunteer organization, was mobilized. Within days, the awesome task of reconstruction was begun, and the clean-up and construction of temporary housing commenced. With the appointment by federal order-in-council of the Halifax Relief Commission on January 22, 1918,<sup>2</sup> a permanent commission was entrusted to expend the nearly \$27 million donated by the Canadian, British, and other governments, and by the general public.<sup>3</sup> The work of reconstruction began in earnest.

To assist in the planning of the devastated area, the commission turned to famed town planner Thomas Adams, who, with his able assistant Horace L. Seymour, drew up a plan for the new Richmond district.<sup>4</sup> Adams was also joined by another capable professional, architect George Ross, of the firm of Ross and Macdonald of Montreal and Halifax, who offered their services in February 1918.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Ross was in Halifax supervising completion of their designs for the Camp Hill Military Hospital for the federal government.

Adams laid out a plan for North End Halifax where he altered the grids with diagonals; rerouted roads along contours; eased grades; varied street widths according to function; improved access; provided a central square, park, and playgrounds; reduced housing densities; and expanded industrial space.<sup>6</sup> However, it was only in the area under the commission's jurisdiction that Adams' plan was adopted.

Immediately west of Gottingen Street, twenty-three acres known as "Merkelsfield,"<sup>7</sup> were developed as a rental housing project. This area is now known as the "Hydrostone district," or simply "the Hydrostone," after the building material used in its construction.<sup>8</sup> This area was developed to replace the rental housing units available prior to the explosion.

George Ross completed his report on the Merkelsfield housing first. It was his intention that the development of 324 housing units, with sixteen shops and offices on West Young Street, serve as a model of modern construction.<sup>9</sup> His goal was to maximize the aesthetic qualities of the development and to provide fire-resistant and sanitary buildings at a reasonable cost. To provide variety, he designed six different types of four- and six-unit buildings, as well as a variety of two-unit houses at the end of the row of terraced houses. He altered roof designs and arrangements of timber and stucco to give buildings an individual appearance. By using Tudoresque detailing, he gave these terraces a look associated with the homes of the wealthy.

At first, Ross's sole responsibility was the Merkelsfield development. After the plans were made public, the architect's offices were inundated by property owners whose houses had been destroyed.<sup>10</sup> They pored over plans and sought consultations and designs for homes in the area west of the Hydrostone district, along the Richmond slope area, and in the devastated areas of Dartmouth. The houses were built in hydrostone, wood and shingle, wood and stucco, or some other variation thereof.

There was variety not only in the materials used in construction but also in the size and dimensions of the houses. Some, like the three-unit apartment building for John Forsyth, 36 Fairbanks Street (Figure 1), were rental units where one of the units was occupied by the owner. Not all houses were particularly large, as can be seen in the small house built for Mrs. William Walsh at 4 Sullivan Street, Halifax (Figure 2); more common was the larger house with a porch designed for H.D. Sellon at 37 Columbus Street, Halifax (Figure 3).

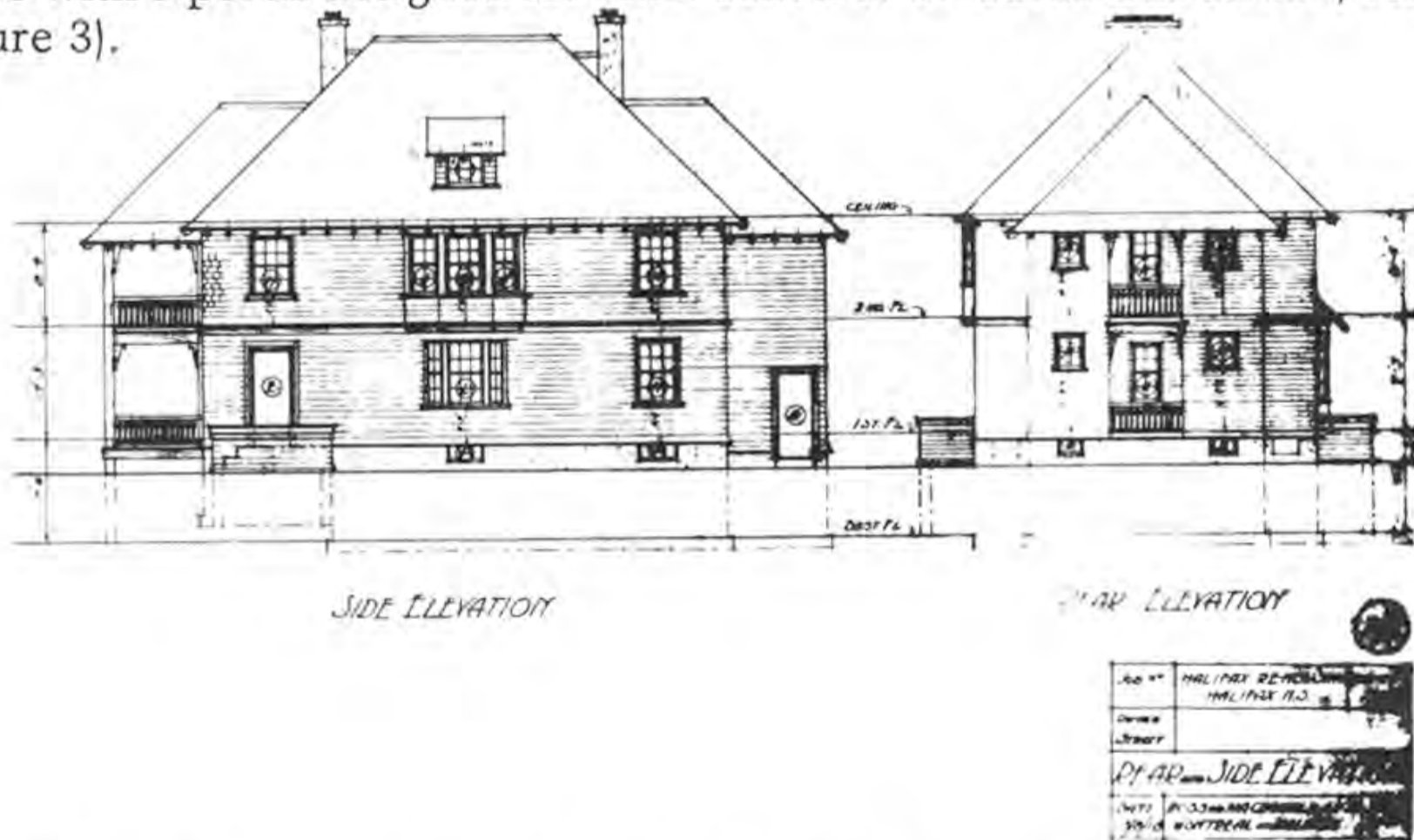


Figure 1. A three-unit apartment building erected at 36 Fairbanks Street, Halifax, and a limited number of other locations in Halifax and Dartmouth, with two three-bedroom apartments with living and dining rooms and kitchen, and one two-bedroom unit with a living room and kitchen. (PANS, negative OSN-582)

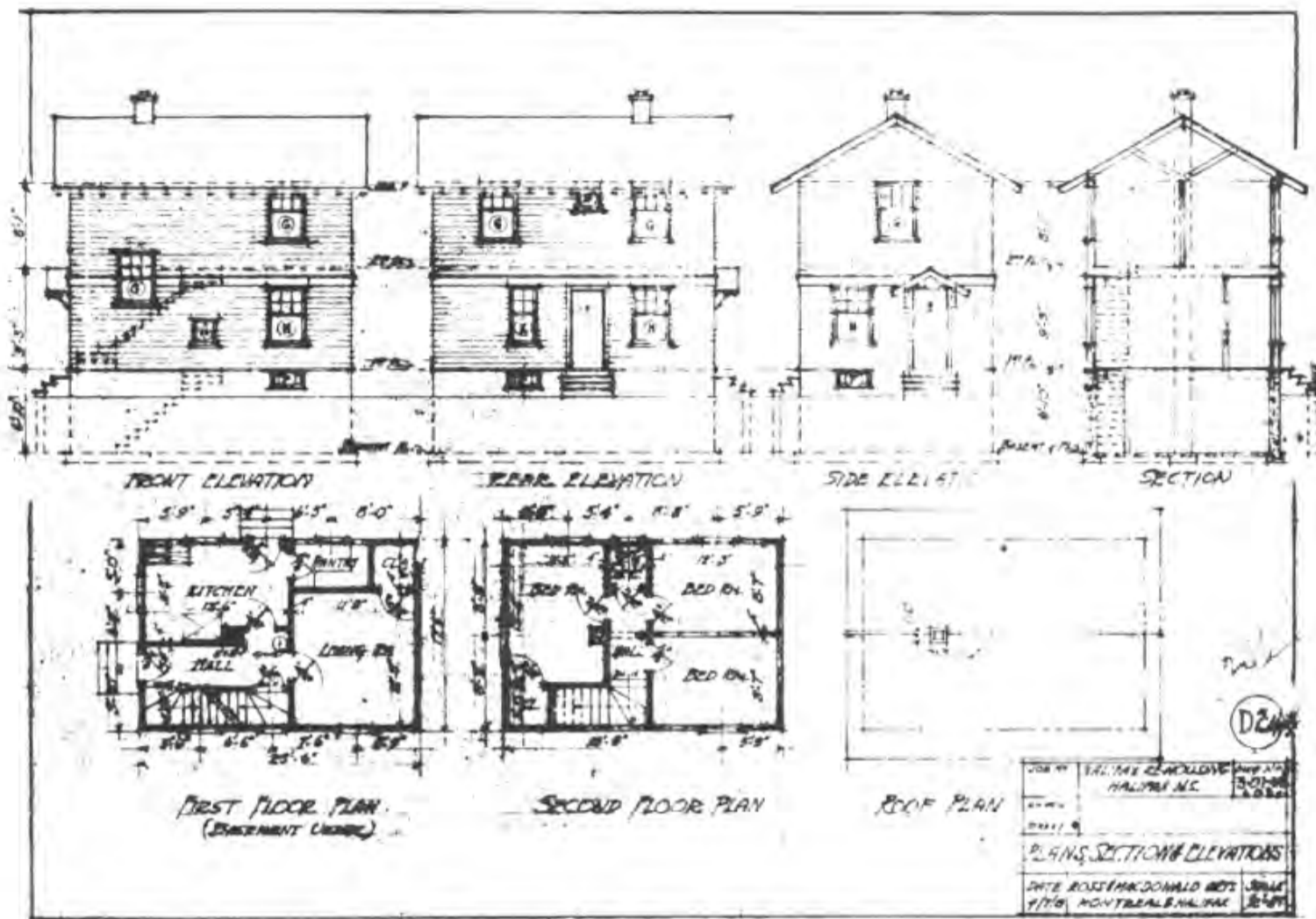


Figure 2. 4 Sullivan Street, Halifax: the smallest and simplest house design by Ross and MacDonald. (PANS, negative OSN-580)

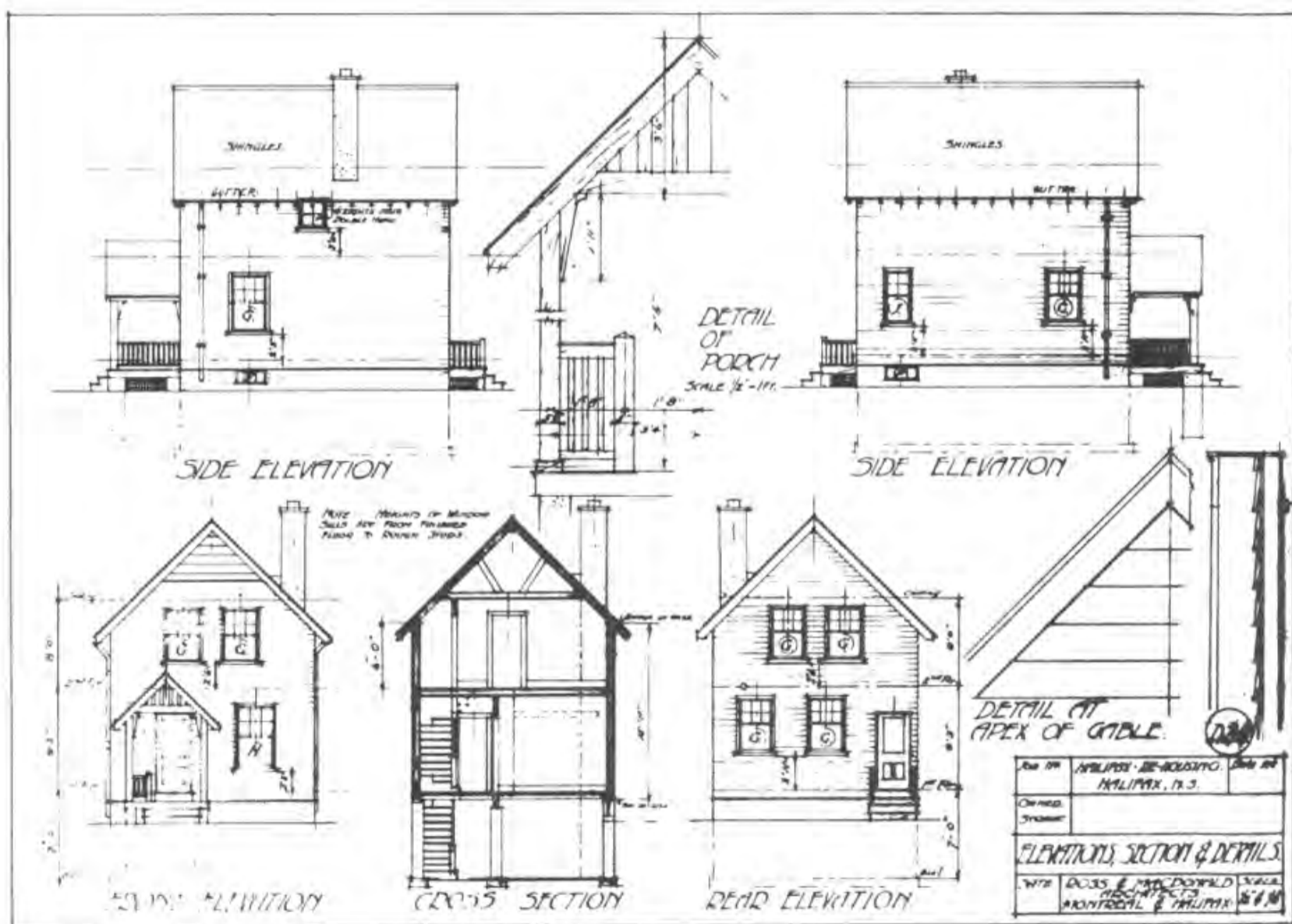


Figure 3. The largest number of houses built after the explosion were the same size as this one at 37 Columbus Street, Halifax. (PANS, negative OSN-581[2])

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The most popular design is represented in the house at 5443 Young Street (Figure 4). More than fifty houses of this style were built in Halifax and Dartmouth, not only in the devastated area but throughout the metropolitan area. The most unique is the house at 5410 Young Street, which is one of a kind (Figure 5).



**Figure 4.** The design of this house at 5405 Roome Street was so popular that examples of it can be found in the west end on Norwood and Beech streets and as far south as Henry Street. (Gauvin & Gentzel, PANS negative N-7152)



**Figure 5.** The residence of A.M. Strong at 5410 Young Street (formerly 76 East Young Street), Halifax, had a unique design by Ross and Macdonald. (PANS, negative N-7040)

The architects also designed and laid out a second district called "Highfield," where seven different house plans were mixed and matched in a subdivision of forty-nine houses (Figure 6).<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 6. The Highfield subdivision, soon to be owner-occupied, under construction at Robie and West Young streets. (Gauvin & Gentzel, PANS negative N-7042)**

Ross and Macdonald also designed for the Halifax Housing Commission, which was funded by the federal housing Act of 1915 and built houses in the North End after the explosion. This Act permitted municipal loans to limited dividend housing companies in an effort to provide Canadians with an inexpensive way to build their own houses.<sup>12</sup>

The firm of Ross and Macdonald is said to have designed, in total, more than a thousand houses in Halifax and Dartmouth. Commencing less than a year after the explosion of December 6, 1917, these ranged from small rental units of four rooms with bath, to the Killam house on Kaye Street with its living room, dining room, library, kitchen, six bedrooms, and child's playroom (Figures 7 and 8).<sup>13</sup>

The importance of the illustrations is that they dispel the notion that the north ends of Halifax and Dartmouth were areas of working class people living in squalid conditions. The illustrations show the variety of houses designed and constructed there. These houses were both working class and middle class, and most of the occupants owned their own homes. The guiding principle of the Halifax Relief Commission was to guarantee that people were reimbursed

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"on a percentage basis of loss suffered, rather than that ascertained need."<sup>14</sup> No one was reimbursed more in restitution than they deserved. The diversity in income and profession that exists in the Richmond district today also existed there in 1917.

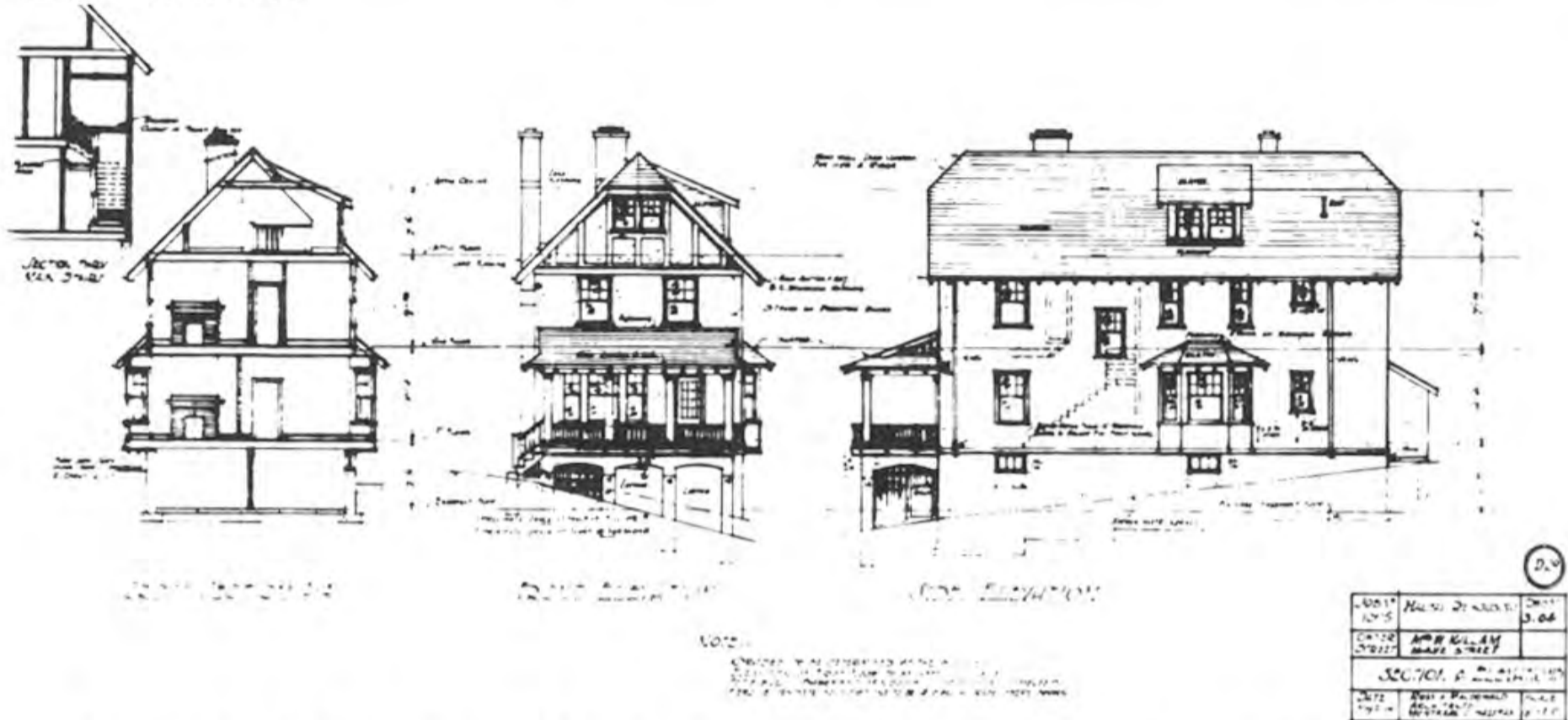


Figure 7. The majority of houses built after the explosion were designed to replace those which had been destroyed. The new William Killam house at 29 Kaye Street, Halifax, was one of the largest. (PANS, negative OSN-583)



Figure 8. Recently completed homes on Albert Street in Halifax. (MacLaughlin, PANS negative N-7084)

### Shutlak: A Vision of Regeneration

1. The Halifax Relief *Committee* was established on December 6, 1917, to deal with the emergency resulting from the explosion and consisted of seventeen members. The Halifax Relief *Commission* was appointed by federal order-in-council on January 22, 1918, and consisted of three members.
2. Act to Incorporate the Halifax Relief Commission, Chapter 61, *Statutes of Nova Scotia*, 1918, and confirmed by Chapter 24 of the *Statutes of Canada*, 1918.
3. "T.S. Rogers, K.C. Explains Financing of Halifax Relief Commission; Says All Vouchers are Preserved and Available," *Halifax Herald*, June 17, 1921, 3.
4. Michael Simpson, *Thomas Adams and the Modern Planning Movement in Britain, Canada and the United States, 1900-1940* (London and New York: Alexandrine Press, 1984), 88-90.
5. George A. Ross, "The Halifax Disaster and the Re-Housing," *Construction: A Journal for the Architectural Engineering and Contracting Interests of Canada* 12, no. 10 (October 1919): 293-94.
6. John C. Weaver, "Reconstruction of the Richmond District in Halifax: A Canadian Episode in Public Housing and Town Planning," *Plan Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Institute of Planners, 1976), 4.
7. The name "Merkelsfield" is from a plan by H.B. Pickings, provincial land surveyor, found at the Registry of Deeds, plan no. 48, dated April 20, 1918. This subdivision was on land worked as a farm and owned for many years by the Merkel family.
8. "Hydrostone" is made of gravel, crushed stone, sand, and Portland cement moulded under pressure.
9. Weaver, "Reconstruction of the Richmond District in Halifax," 40-41.
10. "The Architects' Office Will Increase Staff," *Halifax Herald*, June 15, 1918, 8.
11. "Plan of Subdivision of the Western Portion of 'Highfield' so called," Ross and Macdonald, Architects; Pickings & Roland, Engineers; Halifax, N.S., July 19, 1918. PANS, V6/240—1919 Halifax.
12. "In the Big North End," *Halifax Herald*, July 24, 1920, 23; "The Housing Commission," *Halifax Herald*, August 3, 1920, 12; "Houses Are Expected to be Ready for Occupancy First of Next Year," *Halifax Herald*, September 9, 1920.
13. House for Mr. W. Killam, 29 Kaye Street, Halifax, Halifax Relief Commission, PANS, MG 26, series R, no. 906.
14. Samuel H. Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change*, Studies in History, Economics and Public Law (New York: Columbia University, 1920), 80-99.