

Conservation Guidelines

AN OWNER'S MANUAL FOR THE FORMER CITY HALL, OTTAWA

■ JAMES ASHBY

City Halls are supposed to weather and age well; and Ottawa's city hall is a thoughtful attempt at achieving a quality which modern architects often find so elusive: permanence.¹

DRAMATICALLY SITED on its own verdant island, Ottawa's city hall was a refined expression of civic monumentality. It was completed in 1959 during an intense period of urban expansion and economic growth in Canada. Almost half a century later, the building had become part of a much larger urban ensemble and was subject to a change of use into a government conference facility. This paper describes the challenges of stewardship for this building and its site, and the role of conservation guidelines in protecting the modern heritage values of the former City Hall in Ottawa.

A MODERN CITY HALL FOR OTTAWA

As the location of Canada's parliament buildings and the seat of the national government, the city has long been the subject of negotiations between the federal authorities and the local civic government, often characterized as "crown versus town." Following the destruction of Ottawa's town hall by fire in 1931, it took twenty-six years for the launching of a national architectural competition for a new city hall. A Montreal firm of architects, Rother Bland Trudeau, won the competition with a restrained and refined design. The functional expression and crisp rectilinear geometry communicated the principles and design aesthetics of the international style (fig. 1). Its use of noble materials such as limestone, slate, and bronze imparted a sense of civic monumentality. Commissioned art in the form of fountains on the podium, a coat-of-arms on the façade, and mosaics within the interior complemented the restrained monochromatic palette. The completed building, sited dramatically on its own island within the

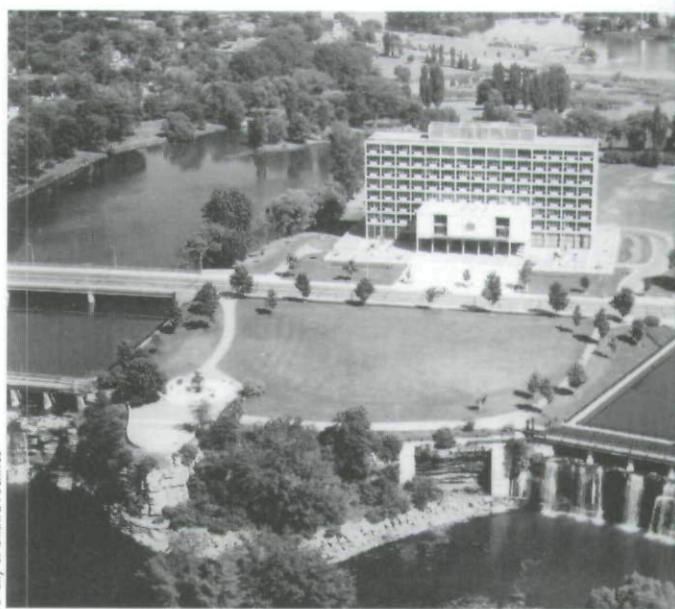


Fig. 1. Rother, Bland, Trudeau Architects, City Hall on Green Island, aerial view, Ottawa, built 1957–1959

Rideau River, achieved international recognition and garnered a prestigious Massey Medal for architecture.² Ottawa's city hall was to have considerable influence on the designs of city halls built elsewhere in Canada in the following decade.

BY THE LATE 1980s, the rapidly expanding city of Ottawa required additional space from which to administer its programs: approximately a five-fold increase of area. Moshe Safdie Associates in partnership with the local firm of Murray & Murray won the international design competition. Certain components of the proposed design were eventually eliminated for economic reasons. The resulting urban ensemble reduced the original city hall to one of a series of elements connected by a grand glass gallery (fig. 2). The completed project did not garner awards and the reviews in the architectural press were reserved in their praise. Less than ten years later, the amalgamation of local

municipal governments into a larger metropolitan organization made a number of city hall facilities in the region redundant. The new regional government sold the former Ottawa city hall to the federal government for use as a conference facility.

As a government building, the former city hall was subject to a policy that applies to buildings of over forty years.³ This policy requires evaluation to determine heritage character, and this evaluation is based on recognized criteria to assess historical associations, architecture, and contextual significance. For those buildings that receive designation (either "Classified" or "Recognized" status) the policy requires protection of heritage character. The former city hall achieved status as a Classified Federal Heritage Building due to its historic associations, architectural significance, and its environmental values.

THE CHALLENGE OF STEWARDSHIP

The compliance to the policy protecting the heritage character of designated buildings has been incorporated into a variety of stewardship practices. These have been most challenging to apply to places of the mid-twentieth century. There is a lack of experience with respect to the technical and philosophical challenges of conserving these places. In the context of limited resources, the traditional monuments from the nineteenth century are invariably the focus of attention.

The goal of stewardship activities is to make decisions that are values-based, that is, that protect heritage values. In Canada, heritage values are defined as "aesthetic, historic, scientific, educational, cultural, social, or spiritual importance or significance for past, present or future generations."⁴ The statement of significance for Ottawa's former city hall, developed during the designation process, identified three key values for this historic place. Regarding historical associations, the former city hall "is associated with the assertion of municipal governance in the post-war era of urban expansion in Ottawa and was influenced by post-war concerns with creating a modern form of civic monumentality."⁵ Regarding architecture, the former city hall is "an excellent example of the adaptation of the international style of architecture to a civic facility in Canada, marking the departure from the traditional town hall building type."⁶ Regarding the contextual values, the former city hall reinforces the National Capital's Confederation Boulevard. It is the protection of these values that is one of the key responsibilities of the former city hall's stewards.

APPROACHES TO GUIDANCE

At the Heritage Conservation Directorate within Public Works and Government Services Canada, the response to proposed changes to these modern buildings and their sites has been to develop tools to help guide



Fig. 2. **Moshe Safdie Associates** with Murray and Murray Architects, *Ottawa City Hall addition, south elevation, built 1993*

decisions that protect heritage values. The approach is not a regulatory one that attempts to police the management of heritage buildings. Rather, the approach is based on the premise that if decision-makers understand the heritage character of the buildings in their care, they are better able to manage change responsibly. Three types of property management tools have been developed: conservation guidelines, specific to a particular property; conservation advice, specific to a particular project; and training, specific to a particular audience.

GUIDELINES have been prepared at a variety of levels, for example, introductory and comprehensive. Comprehensive conservation guidelines typically address the site, the building exterior and the building interiors. Because of the considerable investment associated with comprehensive guidelines, they are appropriate only if the place is of sufficient cultural value and if it is of sufficient size, scale or complexity. If these criteria are met, guidelines may be an effective investment over the long term.

The objectives of the conservation guidelines report are ease of use and frequency of consultation by a broad number of people, people who will be making decisions that may have an impact on the heritage character of the building and its landscape. These include architects and engineers hired to accommodate new requirements, such as meeting building codes or tenant needs. Project managers might consult the guidelines regarding how to accommodate new security requirements. Facility managers might consult the guidelines with regards to housekeeping practices or recommended cleaning products. The guidelines are meant to support values-based decision-making at a variety of scales. At the micro scale for example, routine cleaning of terrazzo floors must not contribute to further deterioration. At the macro scale, additions to the building must be compatible. The conservation guidelines attempt to address a wide variety of possible activities including unanticipated needs.

PREPARING CONSERVATION GUIDELINES

The methodology for developing and presenting the former Ottawa city hall guidelines was consistent with the heritage conservation principles of understanding, planning, using and intervening, as defined in the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada.

The first step in preparing the guidelines was to form a multi-disciplinary team comprised of an architectural historian, conservation architects, conservation landscape architects, and materials conservators. It was recognized that the field has sufficient specificity to require specialized expertise. The contributors were carefully selected to ensure that they had experience with mid-century modern cultural heritage in Canada. Research was executed in various archives to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the design development, construction, and subsequent evolution of the building and its site over time. The archival research was complemented by detailed on-site research focusing on the physical and conceptual integrity of the former city hall.

THE GUIDELINES REPORT began with an illustrated chapter on the history of the building and site, focusing on enhancing the understanding of the historical, architectural, and environmental values. It presented, in

a narrative form, the story of Green Island from its first settlement to the present day, and in parallel the story of Ottawa's city government. Rother Bland Trudeau's award-winning design was repositioned within the emergence of the modern movement in architecture in Canada.

The archival research also determined the contribution of the various members of the design team and the various visual artists. This additional research revealed the contribution of interior designer Sigrun Bulow-Hube, a Swedish émigré, responsible for the interiors and furnishings (*fig. 3*). In addition to the architectural history was the political history, which documented the association with former mayor, Charlotte Whitton, who is commemorated with an historic plaque on the riverbank. The focused research enabled an enhanced understanding of the former city hall, beyond the earlier historical report prepared to support the building's heritage designation by the Federal Government.

FOLLOWING the illustrated history of the building and its site, is a description of the heritage character. For the authors of the guidelines, this was the key to the entire document. If the users of the guidelines do not understand the heritage character it is unlikely that the subsequent recommendations will be followed. The description of heritage character for the former city hall was based on



Fig. 3.
Council
Chamber,
interior,
circa
1959

© City of Ottawa Archives

all of the prior research, and in consultation with the multi-disciplinary team. There were nine key points identified, summarized as follows: 1- the commemorative theme of Ottawa's civic identity; 2- the open relationship between the former city hall building, the podium, the street, and the rivers; 3- the public accessibility around the island site; 4- the distinguishable architectural quality of former city hall within the present urban ensemble; 5- the combined expression of functional and symbolic meaning; 6- the interplay between the axial symmetry of the exterior and the asymmetry of the interior public spaces; 7- the crisp rectilinear geometry; 8- the curvilinear elements complementing the predominant rectilinear geometry; and 9- the monochromatic palette of traditional and modern materials.

As various users of the guidelines do not necessarily have an academic background in history, architecture, or conservation, there was concern that the written descriptions of the heritage character might be somewhat difficult to understand. The convention in these types of reports has been to select appropriate photographs, often archival ones, to complement the text. However, there was a fear photographs themselves would not effectively communicate the messages to all of the users. So visual images were designed with the goal of communicating the values as effectively as the text (fig. 4).

For example, the "combined expression of functional and symbolic meaning" is described with both a custom-designed image as well as an explanatory text that states: "Each of the major forms of the building massing expresses both its former functional and symbolic roles. The podium is an open and accessible plane expressing democratic public gathering. The ground floor is a transparent continuation of the plaza expressing the accessibility of civic government to its citizens. The chamber extends over the plaza and is finished in the highest quality materials expressing the stature and responsibility of city council. The slab block is an office tower expressing the administrative functions. The top floor balcony re-asserts the openness and accessibility of civic government to its citizens."⁷

AFTER THE DESCRIPTION of heritage character is a more detailed examination of the integrity of the building and its site. First, was the documentation of the changes that the building and its site have undergone since its completion in 1959. These changes were subsequently analyzed with respect to their impact on the heritage character of the place, as either positive or negative. All of the analysis led to the establishment of a hierarchy of spaces. Plans include zones that indicate areas of high, moderate, or low heritage value (fig. 5). These help to direct property managers when planning projects. New requirements should, whenever possible, be accommodated within areas of low value. When changes are planned within areas of moderate or

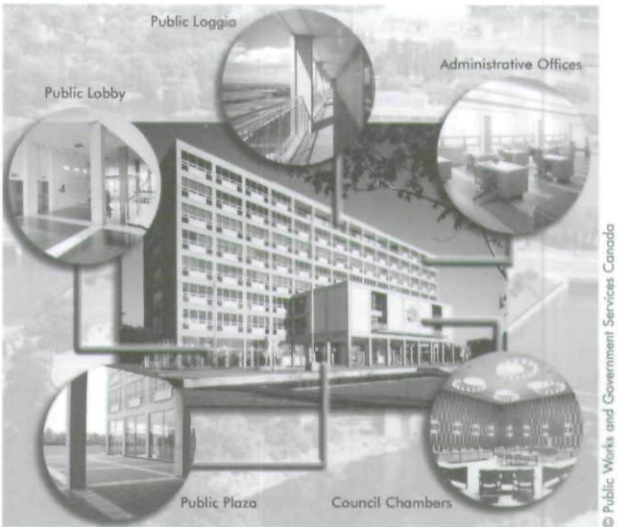


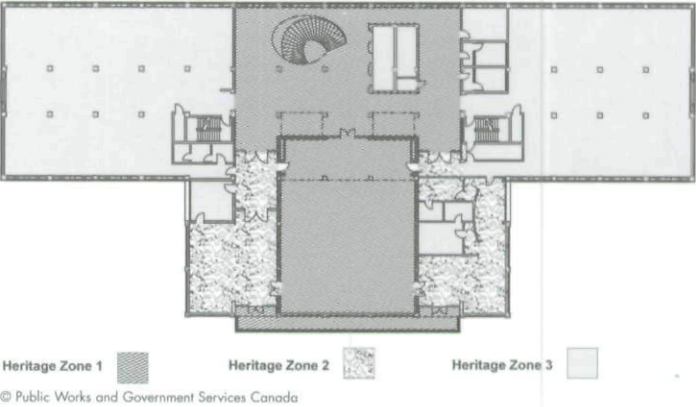
Fig. 4. A vignette depicting the combined expression of functional and symbolic meaning

high value, appropriate specialist conservation expertise should be sought and the specific guidelines for those areas should be followed.

Character-defining elements are also identified and described. Character-defining elements are defined as "the materials, forms, location, spatial configurations, uses and cultural associations or meanings that contribute to the heritage value of a historic place."⁸ For the architectural elements, a team of materials conservators from the Canadian Conservation Institute analyzed the architectural finishes (fig. 6). Facilities staff members were interviewed to determine the routine maintenance practices. Activities such as snow removal, window cleaning, and terrazzo cleaning were noted and subsequently assessed as to their impact, if any, on the long-term performance of the heritage materials. Specific guidelines were developed with respect to care and maintenance of these surfaces. Specific recommendations for improved maintenance practices were included.

In the closing chapter, recommendations are offered with respect to restoration, preservation, or rehabilitation of the exterior, interiors, and the surrounding site. Addressed aspects included plan and layout, spatial hierarchy, circulation, materials and craftsmanship, artwork and commemorative features.

Fig. 5. A plan of the second floor indicating the hierarchy of heritage character



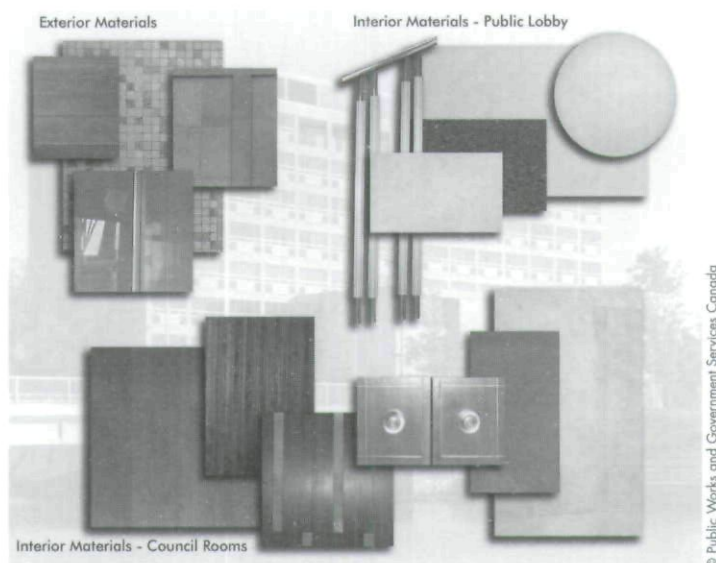


Fig. 6. A vignette depicting the materials palette

GUIDELINES IN PRACTICE

The conservation guidelines for the former city hall have been in place for approximately three years, and it is possible to reflect on their initial effectiveness. The guidelines have been successfully used to implement the design of a new driveway at the front of the site for taxis and buses (fig. 7). In that case, the lost integrity of the podium and central steps has been recovered. At this early stage in the life of the guidelines, the documentation and recommendations appear to remain valid and relevant. Although it is recognized that this may change over time, as new research emerges, particularly with respect to the major additions of 1993.

Since the success of the guidelines for the Former Ottawa City Hall, similar guidelines have been developed for other modern heritage places: the Public Archives

and National Library and Place du Portage 1 & 2. The Guidelines continue to influence the preservation and rehabilitation of all three buildings. Hindsight has also allowed for observations that could enhance the usefulness of the guidelines. It has been suggested that a web-based document would be more easily navigated than a hard copy report, and possibly easier to update. It has been suggested that investing considerable resources on a small number of high profile modern heritage buildings leaves the more modest buildings vulnerable. In the future, Heritage Conservation Directorate may prepare conservation guidelines that could be used for a number of office buildings. General guidelines on modern plazas and lobbies would be useful for a great number of office buildings that face similar pressures such as increased security requirements.

It is to be expected that the conservation guidelines report for the former city hall will become a historic document in its own right. The document will reflect the heritage values attributed to the site in the early twenty-first century and the approach to protecting those values at that time. While it is recognized that the guidelines may eventually become dated, it is hoped that the research, documentation, and the analysis of the conservation issues will remain valuable resources. The former city hall may gain additional heritage values with respect to its role as a government conference center. In the future, the existing guidelines document may support stewards in making decisions that protect the heritage values of Ottawa's former city hall as the values are perceived at that time.

JAMES ASHBY, a conservation architect, was the co-chair of Canada's first national conference on modern heritage: *Conserving the Modern in Canada*. For the Heritage Conservation Directorate, Public Works and Government Services Canada, he delivers technical workshops including one on a values-based approach to conserving modern construction assemblies.

Fig. 7. The recently added driveway re-instates the original design of the podium and central stair, 2006



NOTES

1 Peter Blake, "Ottawa's Modern City Hall," *The Architectural Forum* (March 1959).

2 The Massey Medals, Canada's most prestigious national architectural honor, were awarded by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada between 1950 and 1970. In 1982, the tradition was re-established as the Governor General's Medals for Architecture.

3 The Treasury Board Policy for the Management of Real Property is a Government of Canada policy that applies to all buildings owned by the federal government.

4 Parks Canada, *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada* (Ottawa: Her Majesty in the Right of Canada, 2003), 2.

5 Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office, Parks Canada, *Heritage Character Statement 01-042* (Gatineau: Her Majesty in the Right of Canada, 2002), D-3.

6 Ibid.

7 Heritage Conservation Directorate, *Conservation Guidelines: Former Ottawa City Hall (Sussex Pavilion)* (Gatineau: Her Majesty in the Right of Canada, 2003): 55.

8 Parks Canada, *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada* (Ottawa: Her Majesty in the Right of Canada, 2003), 2.

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