

THE SPIRIT OF '67: FREDERICTON'S MODERN MASTERPIECE

The Centennial Building

> JOHN LEROUX

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Public appreciation for traditional architecture is strong in New Brunswick, but buildings outside the boundaries of these historical conventions are suspect. This attitude has resulted in significant postwar buildings being met with disdain, ignorance, and in many cases demolition. Of those modern-era buildings that still stand, the most noteworthy include examples constructed in Fredericton during the 1950s and 1960s that express a purity of form and quality of material remarkable for their time and locale.

Faced with a number of technical and financial challenges at their outset, there are indeed notable instances throughout the province where visionaries fused the artistic, technical, and economic conditions of the times. This is manifest most evidently in the largest structure built in the capital city before the close of the 1960s: the Centennial Building, which marks the apex of the formal pursuit of modernism in New Brunswick (fig. 1).

The Centennial Building's inherent modernist principles evoke notions of idealism and the human spirit through a visionary architectural framework that is both clear and austere. It is perhaps for these reasons that the building has suffered from a lack of stature in a municipality rich in vernacular charm and Victorian ornament throughout its built landscape. In 1929, Canadian architect John Lyle described the modern movement as "a revolt against archaeology in architecture,"¹ and it is this very revolt that still has citizens and politicians of New Brunswick unsure of their feelings toward the immense monument.



FIG. 1. CENTENNIAL BUILDING, FREDERICTON, NB; COMPLETED 1967. ARCHITECT: BÉLANGER & ROY. | JOHN LEROUX.



FIG. 2. HUGH JOHN FLEMMING BRIDGE, HARTLAND, NB; COMPLETED 1960. DESIGNER: FOUNDATION OF CANADA ENGINEERING CORPORATION LTD. | JOHN LEROUX.



FIG. 3. ARTICLE FROM THE MARCH 13, 1967 FREDERICTON DAILY GLEANER REGARDING THE UPCOMING OPENING OF THE CENTENNIAL BUILDING THE FOLLOWING DAY.

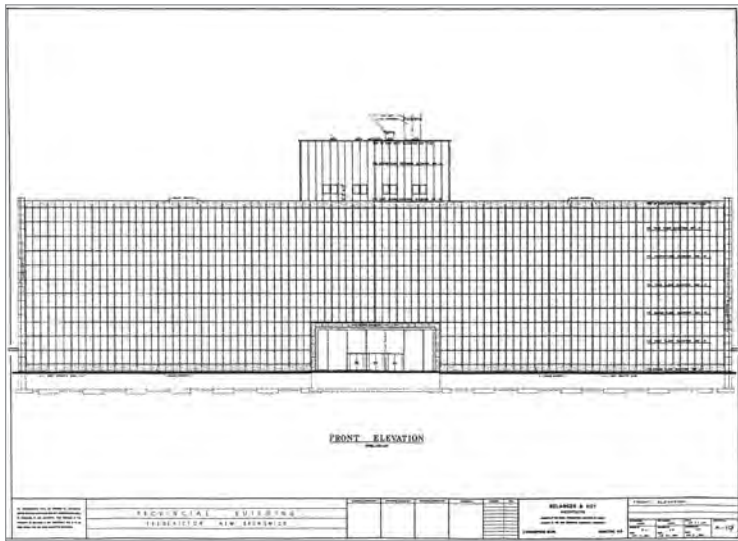


FIG. 4. FRONT ELEVATION DRAWING OF THE CENTENNIAL BUILDING (THEN CALLED THE "PROVINCIAL BUILDING"), BÉLANGER & ROY, 1964. | NEW BRUNSWICK DEPARTMENT OF SUPPLY AND SERVICES.

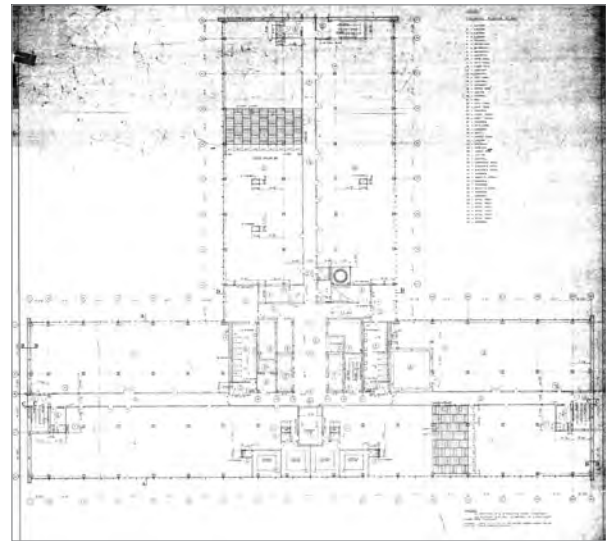


FIG. 5. FOURTH FLOOR PLAN DRAWING OF THE CENTENNIAL BUILDING, BÉLANGER & ROY, 1964. | NEW BRUNSWICK DEPARTMENT OF SUPPLY AND SERVICES.

The architectural modernism which emerged in Europe following World War I was championed by its practitioners as a fusion of contemporary technology with a utopian sense of social change. Although some of the inspiration for the European modernists derived from such functional forms as Canada's concrete grain elevators, as famously cited in Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* of 1923,² the

acceptance of "international style" modernism by the architectural establishment came late to Canada, and much later yet to sleepy New Brunswick.

The orthodoxy of long-established methods of expression was hard to break, especially in Fredericton, where architectural heritage is a visible and cherished resource. The tree-lined streets display

outstanding examples of Loyalist homes, British colonial buildings, and several nineteenth-century churches, including Christ Church Cathedral, considered a masterpiece of North American Gothic Revival. This architectural abundance was directly related to the social and economic conditions during the robust times of the mid- to late-nineteenth century when the province was the shipbuilder and lumber

merchant to the world. The steady economic downturn during the early twentieth century had a decisive effect on the built environment, as the citizens and politicians of New Brunswick became increasingly indifferent toward the creation of distinctive new architecture.

This outlook would shift after the end of the Second World War. Although 1940s New Brunswick was still very much a traditional rural society, significant economic progress throughout the next decade became a catalyst for rapid change throughout the province.³ The discovery of massive mineral deposits near Bathurst led to increased industrialization in the northeast; a hydroelectric dam was constructed at Beechwood to harness the Saint John River; Canadian Forces Base Gagetown was built near Fredericton, boasting Canada's most modern military facilities and a planned community for over ten thousand citizens; and the Hugh John Flemming Bridge was erected at Hartland in the upper Saint John River Valley (fig. 2). Based on the revered concrete bridge designs of Robert Maillart in Europe, the Flemming Bridge symbolized the virtues of engineering and the efficient use of materials, and became a critical component in the new Trans-Canada Highway that would connect the entire country.⁴ At the end of the 1950s, New Brunswick desperately wanted to become "modern" and to be part of a forward-looking Canada.

The centennial year of 1967 was a key defining point in the cultural aspirations of Canada. Montreal's Expo 67 was a resounding success that showcased both the country and innovative modern architecture to the rest of the globe, and the world became captivated. This confidence was reflected in a wealth of centennial construction projects from coast to coast, often resulting in shining



FIG. 6. THE CENTENNIAL BUILDING'S TWO-STOUREY MAIN ENTRANCE INCLUDES A RICH VARIETY OF MATERIALS, INCLUDING POLISHED NEW BRUNSWICK BLACK GRANITE, STAINLESS STEEL WINDOW FRAMING, A REFLECTIVE GLASS CURTAIN WALL, AND TRAVERTINE MARBLE LINING THE LOBBY WALLS. | JOHN LEROUX.

new public government buildings such as Fredericton's Centennial Building.

MARKING CANADA'S CENTENNIAL

Occupying half of a prominent downtown city block, the Centennial Building was the first project in Canada to be completed under the federal-provincial Confederation Memorial Program that assisted the construction of permanent memorials to celebrate the Nation's one hundredth anniversary.

Officially opened to great fanfare on March 14, 1967 (fig. 3), the structure was built to "streamline the efficiency"⁵ and accommodate nearly all the Provincial Civil Service in one edifice.⁶ Six storeys in height with a T-shaped plan and two hundred and fifty thousand square feet of floor space (figs. 4-5), the seven-million-dollar Centennial building housed



FIG. 7. VIEW OF THE JUNCTION OF THE CENTENNIAL BUILDING'S MAIN WINGS, SHOWING THE PLATE GLASS AND BLACK SPANDREL CURTAIN WALL FACADES, STAINLESS STEEL MULLION FRAMING GRID, AND THE REFLECTIVE QUALITIES OF THE EXTERIOR. | JOHN LEROUX.

over one thousand employees. Its structural steel framework is clad in polished New Brunswick black granite, olive sandstone quarried in Nova Scotia and cut/dressed in New Brunswick, stainless steel and reflective glass curtain wall, all laid out in a rational grid distinctive of the international style (figs. 6-8). The main lobby is truly one of the great interior spaces in the province, with terrazzo floors, round travertine marble columns, a lofty translucent panel ceiling, and polished travertine walls embellished with bronze-lettered historic texts from New Brunswick statesmen, poets, and notable citizens (fig. 9). Giving an air of culture and narrative to the headquarters of the Provincial Civil Service, these passages include Champlain's 1604 diaries, the Lord's Prayer transcribed in Mi'kmaq by Father Christian Le Clerq in 1677, speeches by our Fathers of Confederation, and poems by Bliss Carman and Sir Charles G.D. Roberts (fig. 10).



FIG. 8. VIEW OF THE CENTENNIAL BUILDING'S REAR FACADE, WITH ITS PATTERNED SANDSTONE BLOCK CLADDING SURROUNDING A TRIPARTITE VERTICAL SET OF CURTAINWALL GLAZING AT THE HALLWAY ENDS, ABOVE A CANOPIED ENTRY. | JOHN LEROUX.



FIG. 9. CENTENNIAL BUILDING MAIN LOBBY, LOOKING TOWARD THE GLAZED STREET ENTRY. NOTE THE TRAVERTINE WALLS AND COLUMNS, TERRAZZO FLOORS, OPAQUE GLASS CEILING, AND PERIOD BENCHES. | MDS PHOTOGRAPHY.

Behind the imposing facade is one of New Brunswick's foremost structures of the twentieth century, labelled as a handsome symbol of progress during one of the most optimistic times in Canada's history. Designed under the principal direction of Cyrille Roy, senior partner in the architecture firm of Bélanger & Roy of Moncton, the Centennial Building was crafted with a tectonic sense and technical refinement that has not been matched to this day in the region.

Firmly adhering to the dictum of Mies Van Der Rohe that "God is in the details," the Centennial Building is clean, uncluttered, and supremely elegant in both its craftsmanship and spatial/material arrangement. In the accompanying pamphlet to the official opening on March 14, 1967, André Richard, Minister of Public Works, stated that the building was "beautiful," "magnificent," and "[a]esthetically, it provides suitable surroundings for conducting the affairs of the province" (fig. 11).⁷

Dr. Robert Pichette, the former administrative assistant to Premier Robichaud during the mid-1960s, remembers that:

The move of the Public Service to a modern, utilitarian and properly appointed new building very much epitomized the sea of changes that Premier Robichaud had brought to governance in a relatively short period of time. You could taste and feel the change. The move out of the very gloomy and dusty Victorian Departmental Building was a physical relief as well as highly symbolic. Furniture was old, non-descript and decrepit. It looked like a backwoods county council office. The relief was palpable and we genuinely believed that this was a new beginning on modern lines. Out with the non-functional old, and in with the promise of the new!⁸

The Centennial Building represents the culmination of the international style of high modernism in New Brunswick, and it was an admirable execution of Mies Van der Rohe's ideals combined with some subtle Canadian refining of the exterior. It is clearly kindred to his Seagram Building in New York, whose bronze and glass tower was built with the utmost precision and clarity. The Seagram building was uncompromising in its technical refinement, designed with a tall bright

lobby with travertine marble walls, and an external grid of windows and black vertical metal bands, evoking the structure within. Van der Rohe's austerity was a mixture of both necessity and virtue, embodying his conviction that architecture was subject to neither the passing day, nor to eternity, but fully anchored in its time—expressing the conditions of modern economy, technological advancement, and a monastic sense of spirituality in the austere. His buildings readily welcomed the concepts of an open plan, full expanses of glass, and movable partitions that freely adapted to the changing uses within.

The inherent paradox of such a minimalism of form is that it requires the finest materials and craftspeople; where a pursuit of tectonic proficiency reaches its highest principles. In the Centennial Building's case, the Miesian severity was tempered by the addition of local sandstone at the end walls; surfaces that appear imposing at first, but are given scale and texture by the warm variation of colour and by their makeup of individual two foot by three foot blocks (the stone



FIG. 10. MAIN LOBBY TRAVERTINE WALLS WITH DIMENSIONAL BRONZE-LETTERED HISTORIC TEXTS. PRESENTED HERE ARE AN 1818 ADDRESS BY JOHN JOHNSON, ATTORNEY GENERAL OF NEW BRUNSWICK, AND "THE SHIPS OF ST. JOHN", A POEM BY BLISS CARMAN. | JOHN LEROUX.



FIG. 11. OFFICIAL OPENING PAMPHLET FOR THE CENTENNIAL BUILDING, 1967.

walls actually shimmer like a checkerboard in the varying light of the day). Like Peter Dickinson's eminent CIBC (Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce) tower in Montreal completed in 1963, which used green slate spandrels between the glazing rather than Van der Rohe's ubiquitous black opaque panels, the Centennial Building's choice of Nova Scotian Wallace sandstone as an equal to the slick metal/glass skin adds an unmistakable articulation of texture to the usual international style structural language. This can be seen as an injection of regional expression and a metaphor of robust Canadian geography rather than absolute adherence to the conventional internationalist methodology.

In keeping with what was seen as the trend in public buildings of the era, the Centennial Building catered to "the cultural as well as the functional."⁹ The building contained six large site-specific murals, one at each floor's elevator lobby, depicting a different theme from New

Brunswick's industry or history. Six of the province's most prominent artists were chosen to execute the murals, each of a different theme and medium:

- first floor/Lobby: John Hooper's welded bronze sculpture representing New Brunswick's history, with a central panel depicting the fathers of Confederation (fig. 12);
- second floor: Claude Roussel's welded metal rod sculpture representing the logging industry (fig. 13);
- third floor: Bruno Bobak's plywood gauged relief with black paint portraying three miners (fig. 14);
- fourth floor: Jack Humphrey's coloured glass mosaic tile mural depicting fishermen;
- fifth floor: Tom Forrestall's welded and buffed sheet metal construction of farm elements;
- sixth floor: Fred Ross's semi-abstract circular painted mural inspired by the literary history of New Brunswick.¹⁰

The murals range from figurative to abstract, and from flat-painted panels to three-dimensional sculptures; emblematic of the diversity of the artistic practice in New Brunswick at the time. The murals were a result of an arrangement between the provincial Department of Public Works and the federal government who funded public art in such buildings at the time. Stuart Smith of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery was the coordinator assigned to select the qualified artists, who were given free reign with regards to the works' form and medium, although some aspects were fixed, such as their location, general size, and overall subject matter—the latter of which related to the specific government department on their given floor.¹¹

In 1967, provincial Premier Louis Robichaud stated:

New Brunswick's CENTENNIAL BUILDING stands as a monument to the honour of achievements past; a symbol of our future aspirations. More than that, it epitomizes



FIG. 12. 1967 VIEW OF THE MAIN LOBBY SHOWING JOHN HOOPER'S FIBERGLASS RELIEF MURAL UNDER A FULLY ILLUMINATED CEILING. | PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN.



FIG. 13. CLAUDE ROUSSEL'S 1967 WELDED METAL ROD SCULPTURE REPRESENTING THE LOGGING INDUSTRY, SET AT THE SECOND FLOOR ELEVATOR LOBBY. | JOHN LEROUX.

the progressive spirit of our people and indicates our confidence in our own bright future [...] New Brunswick can have no finer memorial to Confederation than one that is in daily use by those who have chosen to serve the people of our province, and the great country we are.¹²

The building soon became an accepted part of its surroundings. In the early 1970s, summer tours were even offered through the building by the government; a far cry from today's situation as new security barriers prevent the public from getting past the main lobby. However, beyond the post-9/11 stainless steel/glass wall and central security desk in the lobby, the building has seen almost no interior renovations to its architectural fabric and material character, and beyond the expected weathering, the exterior is the same as it was in 1967.

THE CENTENNIAL BUILDING IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN HERITAGE

As the Centennial Building approached its fortieth anniversary in 2007, its age was starting to show. A number of voices within both the community and government initiated debate as to whether

the structure should be refurbished, restored, or simply demolished. Seeing the potential risks of a judgment that could easily be swayed by an anti-modern aesthetic bias,¹³ an attempt was made by a small group of concerned architects and historians to have the building designated as a Provincial Heritage Site. While a number of high-level government staff supported and acknowledged its worth as a critical example of architectural and cultural heritage, the nomination was ultimately shelved for a number of reasons related to perceived restrictions on the future of the building.

In 2007, after a meeting with Premier Shawn Graham in which the value and economic benefits of retaining the Centennial Building were discussed, the government at the time made a commitment to maintaining the building and renovating it where required. This was pursued in conjunction with a professional architectural/heritage analysis of the entire building (interior and exterior), undertaken by the author. The provincial Department of Supply and Services supported and sponsored the exercise, asking for a formal analysis, cataloguing and description of the Centennial Building's significant historical elements.

The assignment was completed in the manner of similar historic building evaluations prepared for the Provincial Heritage Department to describe structures designated for the Canadian Register of Historic Places. The process is based on universally recognized conservation principles inspired by international heritage conservation charters. These include a *Statement of Heritage Value* (the aesthetic, historic, scientific, cultural, social or spiritual importance or significance for past, present, or future generations), and the listing of *Character-Defining Elements* (the materials, forms, location, spatial configurations, uses, and cultural associations or meanings that contribute to the heritage value of the building, which must be retained in order to preserve its heritage value).

The author examined virtually all of the areas within the building in order to (a) catalogue elements throughout the structure that should be carefully maintained and/or restored and (b) gauge the course of possible restoration and retrofitting through the analysis of successful precedents and best practice guidelines that have been recently undertaken in Canada with respect to the conservation of postwar modern heritage.



FIG. 14. BRUNO BOBAK'S 1967 PAINTED GOUGED PLYWOOD RELIEF DEPICTING THREE MINERS, SET AT THE THIRD FLOOR ELEVATOR LOBBY. | PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN.




Exterior (15) 'A'		Maintain: the exterior design, material, and dimensional grid of the sandstone end walls. If repair work is required within the wall cavity, careful removal of the stones, their storage, and eventual move back in place with proper masonry anchors is of the utmost importance.
Exterior (16) 'A' (stone) 'B' (glazing)		See note (15) Maintain: The façade design of the rear sandstone wall with its narrow ribbon of three vertical curtain wall bands in the center, separated by a continuous stone course.
Exterior (17) 'B'		Maintain: the exterior design and visible material palette of the stainless steel-clad rear entry canopy. Re-roofing materials do not apply and may be whatever works best. Repair of the underside surface is required and should be a stucco-like material.

FIG. 15. SAMPLE PAGE FROM THE AUTHOR'S 2010 ARCHITECTURAL/HERITAGE ANALYSIS OF THE ENTIRE BUILDING (INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR), SHOWING THE LISTED CHARACTER DEFINING ELEMENTS, A PHOTOGRAPH AND DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EACH, AND A GRADED RECOMMENDATION OF THEIR MAINTENANCE.

The report was arranged as a three column chart beginning with (1) the general area of the building/building element in question, (2) a colour photograph depicting the element, and (3) a short description of the recommended path to take with respect to that element. Three categories were established, 'A', 'B', and 'C.' 'A' designated that the item/element or series of items/elements is of a critical value to the integrity of the building and should be maintained or fully restored if at all possible. 'B' designated areas or items/elements that are very meaningful to the heritage and architectural character of the building, but it is understood that these may need replacement and/or repair. If so, these should resemble as close a visual match to the original as possible with respect to colour, design, rhythm, proportion, and size. 'C' represented items/elements that are meaningful to the heritage and architectural character of the building,

but it is understood that maintaining items in this category may be difficult due to code/feasibility/operational issues and cost. Reasonable attempts at maintaining these should be made.

It was understood that these recommendations entailed a large number of items, however the vast majority of the building (most of the office areas, mechanical, and service rooms) is unencumbered by significant character-defining elements that need to be maintained, and therefore, is an open slate for new ideas.

In brief, most of the exterior stonework and entry glazing was listed as 'A,' the curtainwall and office glazing as 'B.' Within the interior, the entire entry lobby was listed as 'A,' as were the ground floor elevator lobby, most of the ground floor corridors, the mural artworks throughout the building, a number of the original furniture and

fittings, the elevators themselves, the main conference room, and the Premier's office. The stairwells and washrooms were listed as 'C,' while the rest of the overall office floorplates was not designated at all, being expected to be fully altered to accommodate contemporary government working practices. The report was completed and given to the Department of Supply and Services in March 2010 (fig. 15).

With the recent change in provincial government in late 2010, the status of the building is once again uncertain. It is hoped that through continuing dialogue, profiles in the media, public tours (akin to the DOCOMOMO [International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement] Fredericton tour in October 2009 that concluded at the Centennial Building lobby), and efforts to enlighten

politicians about the building's tremendous value, it will remain a key example of the heritage of modern architecture of Canada.

CONCLUSION

Until very recently, modernism has been viewed by the New Brunswick public as a flawed experiment, and has been essentially left out of the architectural narrative. Nevertheless, sensitivity to the period's architectural legacy is rapidly evolving. While distinguished modernist buildings are not abundant by any means across New Brunswick, those holding the reins of power are beginning to recognize that the decades following the Second World War contributed buildings of craftsmanship and expressive spaces of light and colour that should be appreciated as central to the cultural heritage and development of the Maritime region of Canada. The scarcity of modern buildings is in fact the major reason they must be protected for future generations. These works epitomize the often tentative nature of architecture in Eastern Canada during the 1950s and 1960s, a situation largely resulting from economic conditions, yet one that was also torn between maintaining a traditional perspective and embracing a wider international movement.

The Centennial Building speaks to the postwar spirit and the ideals of "progress" within our province, as well as to the era's technical advances in building design. It should unquestionably be regarded as an important heritage property in our provincial capital, and should rightfully be seen as one of the most significant twentieth-century buildings in New Brunswick. It is most certainly deserving of re-examination, preservation, and long overdue praise.

NOTES

1. Lyle, John M., 1929, "Address by John M. Lyle, February 22, at the Art Gallery of Toronto," *RAIC Journal* (April 1929), p. 135.
2. Le Corbusier, 1931, *Towards a New Architecture*, London, John Rodker, p. 27-31.
3. See Conrad, Margaret, 1993, "The 1950s: The Decade of Development," In Ernest R. Forbes and Delphin A. Muise (eds.), *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, p. 382-420.
4. Leroux, John, 2007, "New Brunswick's Most Beautiful Bridge," *The Telegraph-Journal "Salon"*, April 28.
5. *Id.*
6. Within several years the ballooning staff hiring practices of the early 1970s made it too small for this capacity.
7. Pamphlet, *New Brunswick Centennial Building. Official Opening. Tuesday, March 7, 1967*. Legislative Library of New Brunswick pamphlet file – "Centennial Building" folder.
8. Interview with Robert Pichette, January 8, 2010.
9. Unsigned, "The Centennial Building Has a Large Mural on Each Floor," *The Daily Gleaner*, March 13, 1967.
10. Unfortunately, Ross's circular painted mural on the uppermost floor was misplaced in the early 1990s during a careless interior renovation and its present whereabouts are unknown; yet another warning that we should respect this building and its contents much more. It is the only original Centennial Building artwork that is no longer *in situ*.
11. Interviews with Bruno Bobak and Stuart Smith, December 4, 2005.
12. Pamphlet, *New Brunswick Centennial Building. Official Opening, op. cit.*
13. To a number of older citizens of the city, this most visible of Fredericton's provincial administrative buildings still holds a difficult place, as its construction required the demolition of an entire district of historic homes during the site preparation in the mid-1960s.