

PROTECTING OUR RECENT ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE? REQUIEM FOR THE FORMER OTTAWA POLICE STATION

B Y E D G A R A . C . T U M A K

Spandrel by spandrel, Canada is losing its recent architectural heritage. Many important early examples of “Modernistic” architecture, such as the Varscona Theatre on Whyte Avenue, Edmonton (Rule, Wynn & Rule, 1940) and the William H. Wright (Globe and Mail) Building on King Street West, Toronto (Mathers & Haldenby, 1937), have fallen to the wrecker’s ball. Now the country’s early International Style icons—some only a generation old—are succumbing with unfortunate regularity. The Marwell Building on West Georgia Street, Vancouver (Semmens & Simpson, 1952), which was awarded the first Massey Gold Medal for Architecture, was demolished less than a quarter-century after it was built. Vancouver—which appears to be losing a disproportionate share of its mature essays in modernism—has also lost the Customs Building on Burrard Street, (C.B.K. Van Norman, 1950-54), an early International Style building which was demolished in 1992.

This phenomenon is endemic in many of Canada’s major cities. Edmonton’s City Hall, for example (Dewar, Stevenson & Stanley, Hugh W. Seaton, principal designer, 1955-57), another notable International Style building, was demolished in the 1990s. And in Québec City, La Solidarité Insurance Building (Robert Blatter, 1959), the city’s second curtain wall building, was extensively altered in 1990. Architects as a group seem to have abandoned the ship of modernism: the headquarters of the Ontario Association of Architects on Park Road in Toronto (John B. Parkin Associates, 1953-54), a “showpiece of International Style design” in Harold Kalman’s words, was abandoned (though not demolished) by the OAA two years ago for a new Post-Modern building in Don Mills.

In Ottawa, the demolition this year of the former Police Station on Waller Street (Peter Dickinson, 1954-57) illustrates the difficulty of protecting our recent architectural heritage. The Police Station was the product of a national design competition, and was Ottawa’s earliest mature expression of the International Style. Although it was a sound structure and there were no plans to re-use the site (and it is unlikely there will be any plans for a very long time), it was razed by its owner, the City of Ottawa.



Figure 1. The former Police Station, 60 Waller Street, Ottawa, Peter Dickinson, architect, 1954-57; demolished in 1994. (Dan Grant, *Image* [Sandy Hill], 1994)

This building admittedly was not a *tour-de-force* of International Style design: for most casual viewers, the former Police Station's subtle design qualities deflected an immediate appreciation of its qualities. Nevertheless, it was a fine example of its type. The east (front) and west elevations consisted of curtain walls organized in a series of horizontals and verticals of decreasing scale. The wide alternating bands of windows and opaque light-blue glass spandrels were divided vertically by stone-clad beams and narrower steel window mullions, while modest glazing bars provided a final horizontal subdivision. These walls contrasted with the masonry cladding of the south and north elevations (granite on the ground/basement level and limestone above), which offered a solidity of appearance that was emphasized by small square windows. While the different façade treatments provided variety, there was a deft linkage between the different façade treatments: a recurring square module governed the organization of the windows, spandrels, and handrail (where a recessed balcony receded from the main façade wall plane in an elegant concave bow); and the large windows on the south and north elevations were aligned with the recessed balcony.¹

The steel- and concrete-framed building was organized around a raceway plan featuring of a central core with principal spaces and services, separated by a hallway from the perimeter offices. The interior consisted of parking spaces in the sub-basement, parking and offices on the ground level, store rooms on the second floor, two courtrooms and offices on the third, locker rooms and cells on the fourth, and a gymnasium and cafeteria on the fifth. The building was not intended to be lavishly finished, but it retained almost all of its interior components into the 1990s, including the mechanical systems, sturdy terra cotta room partitions, distinctive door and window hardware, and oak courtroom furniture.

The architect of the Police Station, Peter Dickinson, was responsible for designing a remarkable number of structures in the period between his arrival from Britain in 1950 to his death in 1961 at the age of 36. In all, Dickinson designed more than 50 major projects, primarily commercial buildings, apartment buildings, religious and educational institutions, and banks, most located in Toronto, Ottawa, and Montréal.

¹ Less successful were the main entrance canopy, which was awkwardly joined to the building and highlighted the diminutive quality of the door, and the penthouse, which was rather overbearing in its poorly finished state.

He is now recognized as a leading designer in the International Style, his work noted for its imaginative flair, economy, and durability. Dickinson's first major apartment building in Toronto, Benvenuto Place, off Avenue Road (1955), was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act in 1990. Dickinson opened a branch office in Ottawa in the late 1950s, and from there his office designed, among other projects, Ottawa's first high-rise apartment block, The Juliana, at the north end of Bronson Avenue.

The Ottawa police department vacated its building in 1983, and a decade later the empty building was torn down. The demolition raises not only serious cultural concerns, but also fiscal, environmental, and social issues of equal significance. The Ottawa Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee (LACAC), authorized by the Ontario Heritage Act to advise the city on its built heritage, collected expressions of support for the retention of the structure from across the country, and attempted to address the fiscal, environmental, and social issues when it recommended the heritage designation of the building.

At nearly \$300,000 the demolition of the Police Station was costly, and for this expenditure the City of Ottawa got nothing. In a time of severe fiscal restraint it was not necessary to spend this money, or the annual maintenance cost of \$80,000 to keep the building standing empty, since several organizations had offered viable options to reuse of the structure. But the city's administration did not act on these options.

Although we say we live in an age of environmental concern, very little of the building was recycled. Ottawa City Hall proclaims itself a "waste free zone," publishes waste reduction newsletters, and places increasingly strict restrictions for waste collection on its citizens, all while throwing away hundreds of tonnes of a structure described as sound by the demolition firm. Did the proponents of demolition know that approximately one-quarter of the debris sent to landfill sites in the Ottawa-Carleton region is building waste? By not reusing buildings, existing resources were squandered, as well as the energy required to extract the raw materials, to manufacture and transport the components, and to construct the building. Examined in holistic terms, it takes about one litre of oil-energy to make two bricks.

Razing the former Police Station was an indulgence in the dated and harmful concept of the disposable society. By contrast, the conservation of buildings is the embodiment of sustainable development. The heritage movement emphasizes the most environmentally-friendly of the "3 R's"—reduce and reuse—and recognizes that recycling is the least desirable option, because additional energy is needed to manufacture recycled products.

The demolition of the former Police Station was also inconsistent with highly publicized urban planning and environmental protection procedures in the municipality of Ottawa. Demolition (or leaving buildings vacant) shows no attempt by the City to set an example under its own Official Plan. The possibility of a temporary parking lot on the site also contradicted the plan, which seeks to reduce carbon emissions and to promote a vibrant pedestrian environment. Additionally, demolition was outside the spirit of the City's Municipal Environmental Evaluation Process, which requires an assessment for any development project which may affect the environment, including socio-economic concerns such as heritage, archaeology, aesthetics, recreation, land-use or employment and economic base.

Although revitalizing older buildings has repeatedly proven to be a positive contribution to the economic and social life of communities, the negative effect of demolition without development plans only further marginalizes an area suffering from long-term economic stress. The location of the Police Station, in the shadow of the Rideau Centre, the city's largest inner-core shopping mall, is already blighted by so-called "temporary" parking lots. The detrimental impact of such underutilized land is demonstrated by the neighbouring site of the former Convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart—more commonly known as the Rideau Street Convent—which was demolished in 1972. (The interior of its chapel of 1887-88 is now reassembled in the National Gallery of Canada.) Since then, the majority of the site has remained a parking lot, the commercial building which replaced it has perennial vacancies, and numerous other buildings in the vicinity have been razed for parking lots in anticipation of unrealized high-density development.

Dickinson's Ottawa Police Station on Waller Street shared a compact city block with two other buildings: Arts Court (the former Carleton County Court House, 1871 with several later additions), and the Youth Hostel (the former Carleton County Gaol, 1862), both designated in 1978 under the Ontario Heritage Act. Although these

three structures were of different architectural styles, the three formed an identifiable ensemble through their association with Ottawa's traditional juridical precinct, their imposing formality, and their extensive use of grey-coloured masonry.

While these fiscal, environmental, and social issues were important, ultimately they were not accorded sufficient worth because, based on the vagaries of changing styles, people generally found the former Police Station unappealing. This is hardly an enlightened analysis of a major civic structure that accommodated an essential service of the municipality and, hence, played a significant role in Ottawa's history over a forty-year period. For the Ottawa of the 1950s and 1960s, the building was a symbol of progress and the object of great civic pride. Hundreds helped create the building, including Charlotte Whitton, who was one of the city's—and country's—most prominent mayors.

An appreciation of recent architecture is part of an evolving heritage sensibility. At present, the analysis and evaluation of the heritage of the Modern Movement is well under way at the international level. Organizations such as UNESCO and DoCoMoMo (International working-party for **D**ocumentation and **C**onservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the **M**odern **M**ovement), some ancient centres in Europe and Israel, and a few North American municipalities such as New York and Chicago have begun to address the architectural legacy of their recent past. In contrast, most Canadian cities, including Ottawa, have been slow to appreciate their recent history and the buildings associated with an important period in their development.

In Ottawa and elsewhere, there are two options: to plan for the retention of architectural resources which are mostly intact; or to leave the preservation of this generation's built heritage to happenstance. In past decades, the ad hoc approach in Ottawa resulted in the loss of some of the city's best architecture, and it is unlikely that its *recent* heritage will fare better—as the demolition of the former Police Station demonstrates. Indeed, there are few structures in the city that feature well-developed expressions of the International Style, and a number of these, such as the Massey Medal-winning Ottawa City Hall (Rother, Bland, Trudeau, 1958) and the Commonwealth Building (Abra, Balharrie & Shore, 1955), the city's first glass curtain wall building, have been fundamentally altered, the latter beyond recognition.

To promote a better appreciation of Ottawa's architecture and landscapes of the Modern Movement (1945-1975), the Ottawa LACAC is developing an exhibit on the topic. Part of the exhibit was presented at the Ontario Association of Architects convention in Ottawa in May 1994, and at Ottawa City Hall in June 1994. The LACAC plans to present the exhibit at other events and locations, and to continue developing the project through public consultation. Perhaps with research and education there will be greater responsibility in dealing with our recent heritage than occurred with the former Police Station, of which only the cornerstone and accompanying time capsule were saved by the demolition firm.

WHILE THERE IS NOW WIDESPREAD RESPECT for 19th-century buildings—even if some were considered crude at the time of their construction—there is a general failure to safeguard significant structures of the mid and late 20th century such as the former Ottawa Police Station. By protecting our recent heritage we can ensure a rich historical continuity, show society's phases of development, acknowledge the spiritual and tangible assets of earlier resources, and enrich contemporary creativity. To do this we must break the cycle of vilifying the architectural aspirations of the previous generation—a process which not so long ago led to the destruction of whole chapters of our Victorian heritage.

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