

BULLETIN — VOL. 9, NO. 3

Architectural Conservation

*A Presentation given by Carlos A. Venton at the
1984 S.S.A.C. Annual Meeting, Guelph, Ontario
6 June 1984*

We are meeting together this morning to discuss the influence of non-Canadian architects on the 19th and 20th C. architecture of the city of Guelph. Of all the architects whose work is represented today, I appear to be the only one who has survived long enough to be speaking to you in person!

A little then about my background and how I came to Canada and came to the business of restoring and recycling 19th C. Ontario buildings.

My basic architectural education was completed in my home country of Argentina from where I travelled to Brazil and then to India to work in the office of B.V. Doshi, chief architect for Le Corbusier at Ahmedabad. My initial experience and my Indian experience working on projects done by Kenzo Tange and Louis Kahn, was entirely concerned with the design and technical problems related to contemporary architecture.

With the hot, dry climate of India, buildings survived and continued in use; the challenge to our group was not to restore and recycle buildings but to design new structures, which met the needs of the people of Ahmedabad. Concern for the users was a fundamental prerequisite of my earliest professional training and experience and has continued to play a prominent roll in my ongoing career.

And now to Canada where my first few years were pre-occupied with learning Canadian construction techniques and, more importantly, honing my use of the English language!

The late 1960s were full of new construction in Ontario—schools, churches, firehalls, police stations, etc. Only after 1967, did I observe that Canadians were beginning to take a second look at their 19th C. architecture—often as it was being demolished.

It was in 1972, that my first opportunity came to deal with a historic building. The Norfolk Arts Association was looking for a permanent home. The 1851, Duncan Campbell house was empty and for sale. Rumors persisted that it and its acre of land would be bought for redevelopment purposes and the house would be demolished to permit required parking.

A small group of citizens recognized that the building had the capacity and the potential to serve as an art gallery and arts centre. With imaginative support from the Ivey Foundation of London and particularly from Larry Ryan, Executive Director of the original Ontario

Heritage Foundation (O.H.F.) Board, funding began to fall into place from public and private sources.

With the exception of the removal of several non-bearing partitions on the second floor of the house, the architectural fabric of the building was left intact. The challenge was then to renew electrical, heating and ventilating systems without detracting from the architectural features of the building and to complete the entire project, including exterior renovations and the reconstruction of an original treillaged porch for \$100,000.00.

This first project was successful in many ways. A close and congenial relationship between the members of the local art community, the building committee, the contractors and ourselves saw the work finished on budget and on time. The financial support of the O.H.F. and the Ministry of Colleges and Universities was essential to the completion and success of this project.

In 1976, our firm was hired by the Town of Simcoe to demolish the former Norfolk County Court House and to build a new municipal complex on the site. Council had decided to demolish as the result of a previously prepared feasibility study which indicated that to retain and recycle the Court House would cost \$100,000 more than demolition and a new structure. Public opinion ran high in town and a verbal battle ensued with strong pro and con arguments. Such a controversial project always adds to the excitement of small town living, and it appealed to my fighting instinct.

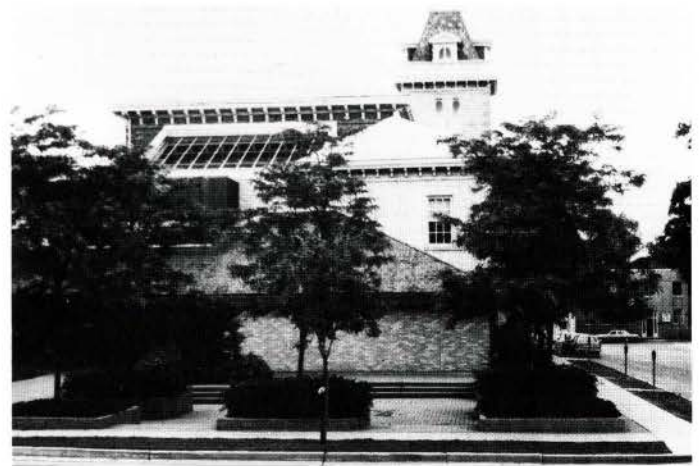
I presented a new scheme to Council which retained and reused the Court House building and incorporated a new addition. The estimated cost was \$796,000 as compared to a new building cost of \$920,000. In February of 1977 Council authorized me to proceed with my recycling proposal.

Simcoe Councillors like any other Councillors in Ontario, were concerned about: initial cost, maintenance costs, energy, extras (due to unknown factors) and the sacrifice of function for historical integrity.

Tenders came in at \$794,000, \$2,000 below the budget. Total extras during construction amounted to less than \$2,000.



Simcoe Municipal Building, West elevation before.



Simcoe Municipal Building west elevation after renovation.

The financial, as well as the architectural success, of this project was due to the following factors:

- we made use of a Canada Works Program to clean the building, under supervision;
- technical knowledge coupled with a very complete set of working drawings avoided any loop holes or unknowns;
- professional supervision by experienced staff dealt with construction problems quickly and effectively.

Again, a grant of \$250,000 from the Ontario Heritage Foundation was a key factor in the political and financial success of the Town Hall project. Deducting this grant from the total cost of construction meant that twenty-two thousand square feet of useable space was provided at a cost of \$16.00 per square foot.

The approach which I developed for this controversial project proved successful in many ways. Councillors were delighted with the cost, staff were happy with their efficient, attractive working environment and the public was enthusiastic in their approval of their old-new Town Hall—history, architecture and municipal accommodation had formed a successful union—everyone was a winner.

It was during the Town Hall project that an awareness began which developed into the philosophy which I have used on all my subsequent historic building projects.

Most large, prestigious 19th C. buildings were built for public use and most have remained in public ownership. At the same time, the original design and useage of these buildings has become dated and they are no longer regarded as functional—at least by many elected officials and their senior staff.

It is not only necessary to educate these owners to the historic value of their buildings, it is necessary to convince them, as I did in Simcoe, that these buildings should be retained and reused not only for historic reasons but for sound economic ones.

The retention and preservation of the Norfolk County Court House was particularly difficult because the Council had to trust our construction cost estimates and hope for the best. After the completion of the Simcoe Town Hall, our task became easier. We had results to show and figures to demonstrate the construction cost benefits of a recycled building as well as the operating cost benefits achieved by new heating and air conditioning systems using heat pumps and passive solar design techniques. The die was cast.

The Wellington County Administration Building project soon followed. This was another complicated commission—both politically and architecturally. We began the project with a feasibility study to determine if the county should retain its administrative headquarters in the historic 1843, castellated limestone Court House building in Guelph or move to a new building centrally located in the County.

A certain amount of anti-Guelph location feeling existed among the County Councillors so comparative costs became a critical factor in convincing County Council to retain their Court House location and to add a large addition to meet their additional spatial requirements.

As part of the feasibility study we developed a preliminary design which could be further developed to working drawings and a building project. We costed this design and guaranteed that our estimated price would be within 10% of the tender price. Because of the complicated and restricted site, the estimated recycling cost exceeded the cost of a new building; however the County, anticipating a substantial grant from the O.H.F. decided to proceed. They vacated the building so the structure could be stripped and examined in detail while working drawings were in preparation. Based on this detailed examination, our final price estimate was guaranteed within 6% of the tender price. The estimated cost was \$2,075,000; the tender price was \$1,998,000. An O.H.F. grant of \$210,000 brought the final building cost to \$49.00 per square foot. Using the same energy-conserving techniques to heat and cool the building, it was possible to operate the 36,000 sq. ft. facility for the same price as the 11,000 sq. ft. original administration building.

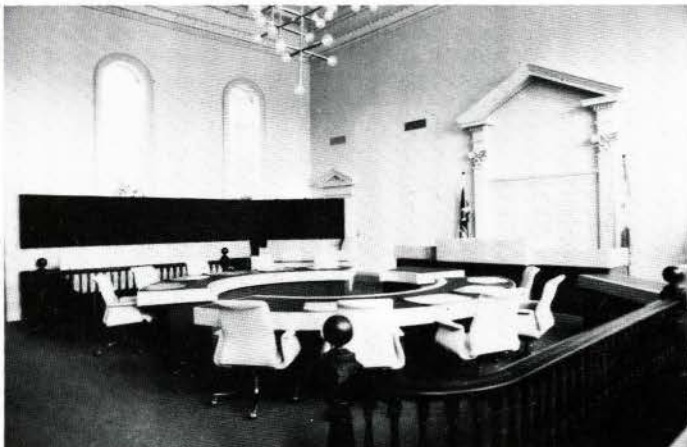
By 1980, my rented office space in Simcoe was crowded and inefficient. At the same time, the Town was anxious to dispose of its former Town Hall building which had been built in 1907 as a Post Office and Customs House. Negotiations followed and I was soon the owner of an obsolete historic building! Now I really had a chance to test my historic building theories—the owner was willing but the bank was not so sure!

Respecting the simple column and beam system and the “sturdy” steel framework, I decided to open the basement to the ground floor via a central sky-lighted atrium. Lower drafting room space is bright and attractive and well-related to the ground floor entrance, office and meeting room areas. The office occupies a third of the building, rented offices and a dance studio occupy the remainder—providing a commercial income to subsidize building and operating costs.

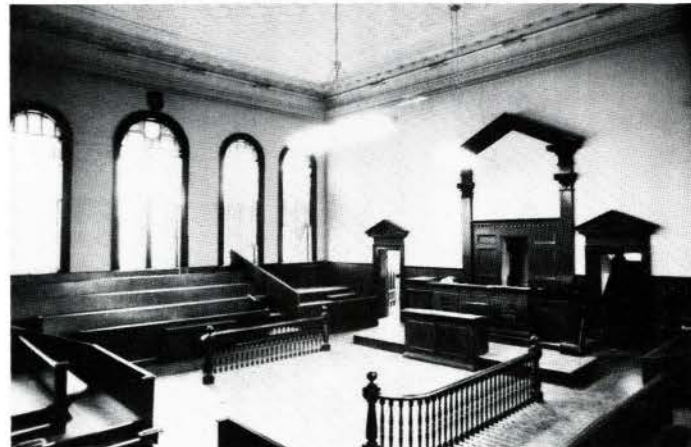
The building was renovated for \$20.00 per square foot and the project received \$8,000 from the O.H.F. in return for a municipally-held easement.

The last project which I wish to discuss with you this morning is the Galt Little Theatre building.

Like the Norfolk Arts Association, the Galt Little Theatre was in need of a permanent home designed specifically to meet its theatre and community needs. Money, as usual, was in short supply. A search began to find an adaptable building centrally located and available at an affordable price. The First Delta Baptist Church located south of Main Street on Water Street South seemed an ideal choice. We were invited to submit a proposal for a Feasibility Study and were selected as consultants.



Simcoe Courtroom after renovation.



Courtroom in original state.

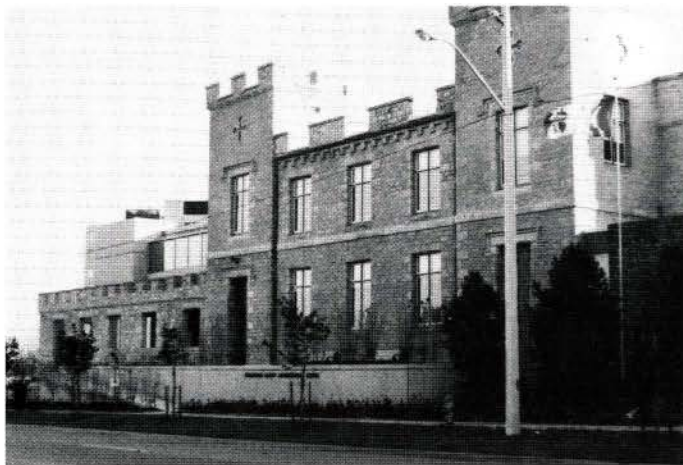


Wellington County Court House, North-East elevation—before.

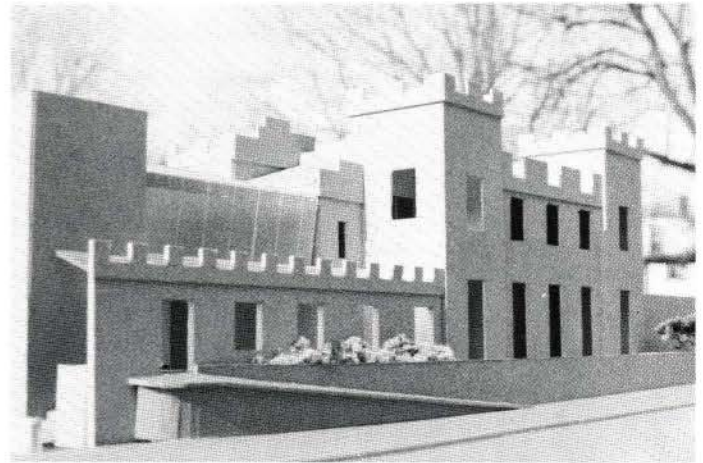
This project presented yet another collection of new and challenging problems. The choice of a church building required extensive acoustical treatment to convert the nave to a theatre auditorium; however the size and shape of the space was ideal for the Galt Little Theatre company. The entrance foyer, theatre and Green Room were designed to open on a new exterior landscaped terrace which provided an attractive public space for intermission breaks. All the other required theatre facilities were located in the former church hall attached to the rear of the church building—so in fact, the Little Theatre had found an ideal new home.

The construction cost was approximately \$5000,000 and generous funding from Wintario, O.H.F., and the Federal Government combined with municipal and public support to finalize the fund raising. This has been another example of a project which succeeded because everyone concerned saw the exciting potential of the building and worked together to make it a reality.

In conclusion let me say one more thing. The public is beginning to appreciate their 19th C. stock of historic buildings and are recognizing that these buildings were built to last; however, with years of neglect and indifference, it is exceedingly costly to undo much of the damage. Without the continuing substantial financial assistance received to date from such agencies as the O.H.F., Wintario, etc., it will be impossible to continue this important work.



North elevation of the completed renovation and new construction design.



Design model for the proposed Wellington County Administration Centre.

The evidence is in. Conservation is valid. It creates labour-intensive work at a time of high unemployment and it allows us to continue to use and enjoy our historic and architectural heritage.



Entrance detail.