

Ottawa, Ontario
West Block
Parliament Hill

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The West Block was built in 1859-65 to the designs of Thomas Stent and Augustus Laver, architects. New wings designed by the Department of Public Works were added in 1874-78 and 1906-09, and major interior renovations designed by Mathers & Haldenby of Toronto were carried out in 1961-65. Public Works and Government Services Canada is the custodian department. See FHBRO Building Report 86-52.

Reason for Designation

The West Block was designated Classified because of its exceptional importance in terms of historical associations, architectural quality and environmental impact.

Designed to accommodate the civil service, the West Block is directly associated with the substantial role played by the administrative arm of the federal government during the country's formative years.

Together with the 1859-65 wings of the East block, and the Library of Parliament, the West Block ranks with the best mid-19th century Gothic Revival buildings in the world. The product of three separate building campaigns, it presents an essay in the evolution of the Gothic Revival style from mid-19th century to the early 20th century.

In addition to being a national landmark in its own right, the West Block plays a critical role in establishing the overall character of Parliament Hill and strongly influences the character of the west end of Wellington Street.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of the West Block resides in its picturesque massing, footprint, structural ornament, finish materials, and in surviving portions of the 19th and early 20th century interior plans, features and finishes. It also resides in certain compatible 1960s interior features and finishes, and in its site, setting and landmark qualities.

The free massing of the building, organized around strongly expressed pavilions of different heights, produces the essential asymmetrical, picturesque silhouette. The varied yet unified design of projecting and receding planes, pavilions and towers culminates in a profusion of pointed gables, dormer windows, turrets,

Ottawa, Ontario
West Block
 Parliament Hill (Continued)

chimney stacks, finials and iron cresting. These features should not be compromised.

The rich interplay between materials, textures and colours is also characteristic and should not be altered. Rock-faced Nepean sandstone walls contrast with dressed Ohio, Cleveland and red Potsdam sandstone trims; mansard roofs sheathed in weathered green copper contribute to the polychromatic effect.

Any new work must be predicated on an understanding of each phase of the building.

The 1859-65 Building which includes the east wing, south wing and southern half of the west wing is in the English Decorated Style, characterized by a distinctive use of ornament which includes Gothic-pattern cut-stone trim, stained glass, Minton floor tiles, elaborate wood joinery, moulded plaster cornices with cast ornament, hand-forged hardware and ornamental wrought iron work.

The West Block's cohesive 1859-65 design and complementary relationship with the corresponding 1859-65 portion of the East Block should be safeguarded.

At the interior, the principal north-south and east-west corridors, principal entrance vestibules and principal staircases continue to control the circulation pattern, and the original openings off these corridors survive. Any addition which would interfere with this plan would undermine the surviving heritage character of the interior and should therefore be resisted. The status of the principal entrance on the east elevation should not be undermined through changes to the circulation pattern.

The 1874-78 Wing attached to the west wing of the original 1859-65 building was designed to harmonize with the existing building, but with an emphasis on greater height and rich detail. Its principal feature, the Mackenzie Tower, is the best-preserved element of this wing and should continue to be carefully maintained. The exposed iron truss work supporting the spire is a rare surviving example of complex 19th century iron truss systems, and should be preserved and protected.

The interior presents a unified, highly decorated scheme, with smooth cream-coloured stone, white plaster, a strongly veined green marble, and panelled and carved wood. These materials and finishes should be preserved. The stair arcading which screens the staircase from the elevator shaft is particularly noteworthy, being all that remains of the original elevator, one of the earliest passenger elevators in Canada. The spiral staircases, and the former office

Ottawa, Ontario
West Block
 Parliament Hill (Continued)

of Alexander Mackenzie above the entrance vestibule, with its elaborate stone, wood and plaster decoration, also merit careful preservation.

Modifications to create a two-storey committee room in the 1960s included removal of floors and interior walls and the addition of a new structural system to carry the new floors and roof. Two tiers of windows on the west facade were removed and remaining windows were modified, to the detriment of the overall composition: the heritage character of the building would be improved by a more sensitive re-working of these changes to the west elevation using compatible materials.

The lowering of the principal entrance on the south facade from the second level to grade as part of this work changed what was originally the basement level into the main floor, and eliminated the intended effect of an elevated "piano nobile". This compromised both the original ceremonial sense of space and the circulation pattern.

The 1906 Wing (running east-west between the 1859-65 and 1874-78 wings) reflects changing turn-of-the-century tastes for a simpler handling of materials and minimal decoration.

The 1960s Renovations were in some cases the result of misguided design decisions, however the workmanship and the choice of materials was generally good. Panelled oak doors, screens, panelled wainscoting, marble accents, grained Kalamein corridor doors with cast bronze hardware and bronze mail chutes are of note, as are the large Committee Room (room 200), the Men's Smoking Room and washrooms, the ladies rest room of the Divorce Committee of the Senate (rooms 212, 212a 212b,221), and the steel staircase introduced into the 1906 wing. For the sake of continuity and harmony, future interventions should make reference to the decorative scheme established in the 1960s renovation where appropriate.

The original site relationship between the West Block and its neighbours, the Centre and East Blocks, has remained virtually intact. Relationships on the east and south sides, namely driveways and lawns, continue as originally conceived.

The greatest impact to this setting has been on the west side with the removal of a crisp, turf lawn, as well as a workshop and greenhouses by 1957. These features were replaced with asphalt parking lots. The result was the loss of a foreground to the West Block's west facade and of the consciously-planned and unimpeded views from the southwest at Wellington Street. Consideration should

Ottawa, Ontario
West Block
Parliament Hill (Continued)

be given to removing the parking lots and re-introducing the crisp green lawns and integral foreground which once graced this zone.

Future interventions must respect the clear and distinct relationship of the building to its site. The building must continue to be perceived as a free-standing pavilion with every elevation a public face. Any encroachment on the elevations should be resisted.

1995.09.01
Revised