

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

SUMMARY

This building (formerly the Canada Life Assurance Building) was built in 1909 to the designs of Keefer and Weekes, Ottawa architects. It was Recognized because it is a very good example of the development of the community and for its very good aesthetic and functional design.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

This building is one of 19 buildings located on the north side of Sparks Street between Elgin and Bank streets, an area which has been, since the 1880s at least, the core of Ottawa's central business district. It was erected as a speculative rental property by the Canada Life Assurance Company, founded in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1847 and the earliest Canadian-owned company of its type, on a lot purchased by the company in 1908. Its offices were located on the ground floor while the upper storeys were rented to various clients. Because speculation in office buildings was almost unheard of at the time, erecting such a building represented a major innovation in corporate policy. In local terms, the primary historical interest of the Saxe Building is as an early response to the demand for highrise office accommodation immediately south of Parliament Hill. The reliability of the government-supported rental market would appear to explain such a speculative venture.

ARCHITECTURE

This building is a seven-storey reinforced concrete structure with decoration limited to the exterior and the interior of the ground floor. As built, the entire facade was clad with English semiglazed terra cotta (which in itself is of architectural interest) and gave a rich sculptural effect to an otherwise plain structural system. The entrance hall was panelled in Missisquoi marble, with mosaic marble covering all floors. The walls of the business offices of the company were panelled in African mahogany, while cast plaster mouldings, cornice and beams graced the ceilings. The seven-storey front, only 30 feet wide, featured extensive glazing culminating in arched upper storey windows, a decorative motif derived from the buildings of Louis Sullivan and employed often along Sparks Street. Side and rear walls were of brick. Largely unaltered, the Saxe Building is an early Ottawa example of a highrise structure, completed before the 1910 building bylaw authorized this type. Its narrow facade resulted from the subdivision of Sparks Street land in the 1860s for much lower commercial premises. Its construction and scale were in keeping with office buildings of the period in other cities.

ENVIRONMENT

As one of the earliest and better-class tall buildings along Sparks Street, this building is a prominent commercial structure. Its important tenants - especially its first two owners,

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the Canada Life Assurance Company (1909-1944) and the Canadian Legion (1944-1955) - would have made it a building familiar to many local people. However, its great height compared with its width, its midblock location and the narrowness of Sparks Street combine to make it a difficult building to see in perspective.

June 6, 1986