

Quebec, Quebec
The Old Customs House
101 Champlain Street

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Old Customs House in Quebec was built in 1831-32 to the plans of Henry Musgrave Blaiklock, one of the first professional trained architects to practice in Canada.

The building functioned as a customs house until 1841. Since 1841, the building has been used for a number of different purposes but, remarkably, its original interior plan and most of its decoration remain intact. The exterior of the building has suffered some changes but its essential character remains undiminished. The building originally had a more prominent cornice and a roof covering of diagonal tin plates, both which were replaced in the late 19th century. A more detrimental change, however, was the loss of the original multi-paned casement windows. In recent years, a two story concrete garage, which is self-contained and which does not overpower the main structure, was added to one side of the building.

The building is presently owned by the Department of Transport. See FHBRO Building Report 88-1 72.

Reason for Designation

The Old Customs House in Quebec was designated Classified primarily for its historical associations and its architectural significance.

The Old Customs House stands as evidence of Quebec's traditional role as a major port on the St. Lawrence River and, by extension, of the historical economic importance of the river itself.

Architecturally, the building is an excellent and rare surviving example of an 1830s federal building in a Neoclassical style. The Old Customs House has an understated yet monumental appearance with superb woodwork and plaster decoration.

Character Defining Elements

The character of the Old Customs House lies primarily in the building's massing, the disposition of the fenestration, its exterior materials and details, its interior layout and, in its interior features and decorative details.

The building is two stories high and has a low pitched hipped roof, accentuated by broad, symmetrical end-chimney. The building material is granite. In keeping with

.../2

the tenets of the Neoclassical style, the building is clearly and rationally organized. The symmetrical disposition of the original window and door openings and, the bay rhythms should be maintained in any functional improvements. The use of a blind arcade and string course to organize and decorate the façade was a defining characteristic of the refined and understated Neoclassicism of the 1830s and this should be retained. Consideration in future improvements should be given in reinstating casement windows of the same size and configuration as the building's original windows, of reconstructing the original cornice and also of covering the roof with diagonal tin shingles. The architectural treatment of the exterior wall should also be restored.

The original interior plan should be safeguarded in any future improvements. All surviving interior features are outstanding examples of Quebec craftsmanship and these should be preserved; the exceptional double staircase, the ornamented Greek Revival motifs which adorn the doors and windows, the original doors, the plaster work of the ceiling with its ornamental modillion cornice and its decorative rosettes and, the three handsome coal-burning fireplaces.

Despite the lost of its original function, it is important to retain the visual relationship of the Old Customs House with the St. Lawrence River.

1991.11.08