

Ottawa, Ontario
Government Conference Center
2 Rideau Street

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Government Conference Centre, a prominent landmark on Confederation Square in Ottawa, was originally built as Union Station. It was constructed in 1909-12 to the designs of architects Ross and MacFarlane, based on original plans by architect Bradford Lee Gilbert. The building served as the central railway station for the City of Ottawa until the 1960's. With the removal of railway lines from the city center, the building became vacant and was eventually converted to a conference center by the Federal government. The custodial department is Public Works Canada. See FHBRO Building Report 88-28.

Reason for Designation

The Government Conference Center has been designated Classified because of its important historic associations and its architectural design and prominence.

As a central railway station, it is tangible evidence of the great railway-building era in pre-war Canada. This activity was central to the aspirations of the young country for national unity and prosperity, and the Ottawa station was one of a number that were erected on prominent urban sites across Canada. Since its conversion to house the Government Conference Center, it has taken on new significance as the locale for major national and international conferences that continue to shape the country's political and cultural identity.

Its architectural design is within the Beaux-Arts tradition, firmly established at the time as the favored mode of expression for this building type. Although the building's function and much of the adjacent land-use have undergone radical change, the main building continues to be an important and substantial landmark within the nationally-significant Confederation Square environment.

Character Defining Elements

The significance of this building lies in the ordering of both the exterior and interior as related expressions of the principles of Beaux-Arts design.

The exterior, in carefully-dressed ashlar masonry of Indiana limestone, is marked by a formal entrance façade on Rideau Street and a secondary façade facing the Rideau Canal and Confederation Square. The entrance façade is of symmetrical tripartite design, with a projecting central bay. Four-storey columns set in antis support a substantial but simple cornice and an entablature pierced by windows. The façade

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Government Conference Center (Continued)

facing the canal is linear; it expresses the progression of spaces on the interior with colonnades and arches at a massive scale.

The interior retains the general layout and decorative treatment of the original station, although extensively obscured by recent alterations and additions. The axial progression from the entrance through the lobby, the waiting room, the ticket office and into the concourse, is still intact physically but difficult to experience because of the subdivision of the space. The decorative treatments such as the coffered barrel vaults in the major spaces and the marble fireplaces in the front offices are also still in place for the most part, even if hidden from general view.

Because of the architectural significance of the building and the importance of its historical associations as both a railway station and a conference center, great care must be taken in the preservation of both the spatial and physical qualities of the building. On the exterior, this implies a program of careful maintenance, and the involvement of appropriate conservation specialists for any repair or restoration. The two original façades should be maintained as is, including the patterns of fenestration and access, and also those portions of the other façades which are evidence of original design. The other façades should be maintained as integral parts of the building fabric, but changes may occur as part of the continuing evolution of the building's use. Any such changes should respect the original design intent and not interfere with the balance of the two primary façades. The fire stair on the east wall is a successful exercise in contemporary design within this historic context and could well be maintained.

The interior is a somewhat uncomfortable and ad hoc adaptation of the original plan and the layout and fittings have been adapted to new use. Any redesign should take as a starting point the importance of respecting the original axial symmetry and the progression of spaces of varying heights and proportions. It should also recognize that the finishes such as the coffered barrel vaults and the marble detailing are integral parts of the original design expression, and should be carefully maintained and enhanced. The tunnel connecting the station to the Chateau Laurier Hotel is a traditional feature of the building. It should be maintained.

In terms of the relationship of the building to its site, the prominence of the building must be maintained to the north and the west. The other façades have been modified considerably and are part of a new urban fabric. They are still open to change, as long as the balance of the north façade and the clear lineal progression on the west side are not disturbed or thrown off balance by new work.