

FHBRO HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT VAN STEENBURGH AND POLARIS BUILDING, DARTMOUTH, NOVA SCOTIA

FHBRO number: **03-081**
DFRP number: **03017**
Resource name: **Van Steenburgh and Polaris Building**
Address: **Bedford Institute of Oceanography, Baffin Boulevard,
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia**
FHBRO status: **“Recognized” Federal Heritage Building**
Construction: **1962**
Designer: **Duffus, Romans, Kundzins, Rounsefell, Ltd. Architects**
Original function: **Research laboratories and offices**
Current function: **Research laboratories and offices**
Modifications: **Addition of two stories to the Polaris wing (1968), extension of the
Van Steenburgh wing (1968), and replacement of the windows and
spandrel panels of the Polaris wing (1999)**
Custodian: **Department of Fisheries and Oceans**

Description of Historic Place

The Van Steenburgh and Polaris Building is a large, simple and unadorned structure, which features regular elevations characterized by a rationalized grid pattern of windows and spandrel panels. It is composed of two parallel 6-stories rectangular wings, set into a slope and linked by a central vertical entrance and vertical circulation tower. The Van Steenburgh and Polaris Building forms one edge of an interior courtyard and the core of the Bedford Center of Oceanography. Overlooking the waterfront, the building is located on a rise of ground between the Bedford Basin and the MacKay Bridge, at the entrance to the narrows of Halifax Harbour. The designation is confined to the footprint of the building.

Heritage Value

The Van Steenburgh and Polaris Building is a “Recognized” Federal Heritage Building because of its historical associations, and its architectural and environmental values.

Historical value:

Located at the core of the world-renowned Bedford Institute for Oceanography, the Van Steenburgh and Polaris Building is the best example of federal involvement in oceanography and marine resource research in Canada. The Institute’s first facility, the building witnessed its expansion and its increasing leadership in the field. Built in the early 1960s, it also illustrates the growth of Dartmouth’s north end at a time when the area was undergoing major industrial, institutional and residential development.

Architectural value:

A good example of a standard research building dating from the early 1960s, the Van Steenburgh and Polaris Building consists of a simple unadorned design typical of the federal government’s post-war aesthetics for its institutional buildings. The building also constitutes a very good example of the work of the renowned architectural partnership of Duffus, Romans, Kundzins, Rounsefell, Ltd. No doubt a prestigious commission, it would have helped launch the firm’s career. Its good standard layout allowed for the separation of office and laboratories and has proven adaptable and flexible over time.

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Environmental value:

As the imposing centerpiece of the Bedford Institute of Oceanography, the Van Steenburgh and Polaris building reinforces the homogenous institutional character of the campus. Aside from the international reputation enjoyed by the institution, and because of its prominence on site and high visibility from the water, the Van Steenburgh and Polaris building acts as a familiar visual landmark at a local level.

Character-Defining Elements

The following character-defining elements of the Van Steenburgh and Polaris Building should be respected:

Its simple and conservative modern design, good functional design, and good quality craftsmanship and materials, as demonstrated in:

- the orthogonal massing and strong horizontality of the building, modulated by the vertical link between both wings;
- the spare, unadorned quality of the exterior, which reflects the building's pragmatic design approach and clean-lined modern aesthetic ideal;
- the regular pattern of the exterior elevations, composed of a band of horizontal windows including one large fixed window flanked by an operable one-over-one sash, horizontal spandrel panels and vertical sandstone pilasters which frame every bay;
- the use of a simple and straightforward combination of traditional and modern materials, which have endured well;
- later additions and modifications to the building, including the top two stories of the Polaris wing and extension of the Van Steenburgh wing, which attest to its adaptability;

The manner in which the building reinforces the homogenous institutional character of the Bedford Institute campus:

- the relationship of the building to the remainder of the Bedford Institute complex, as its tallest and most prominent component; and,
- the building's relatively open relationship to the waterfront, which contributes to its significance as a visual landmark.

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