

London, Ontario
Dominion Public Building
457 Richmond Street

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Dominion Public Building in London, Ontario, an impressive example of modern classicism, was built in 1935-36 to the designs of the London architectural firm of Watt and Blackwell in association with Roy O. Moore. The building provided office space for federal government departments, with the major public space given over to the Post Office. In 1983 the building underwent renovations and internal reorganization, but it continues to serve its original function as a federal facility. The custodial department is Public Works Canada. See FHBRO Building Report 89-90.

Reasons for Designation

The Dominion Public Building has been designated a Classified heritage property because of its historical associations, its impressive architectural design, and its importance within its urban setting.

Historically, the building represents the increasing federal presence in cities and towns across Canada and is one of the largest investments in public buildings financed under the Public Works Construction Act of 1934. It heralded an era of exceptional growth for the city of London.

Architecturally, it marks a high point in the career of the three principal architects involved - Watt, Blackwell, and Moore. During the Depression years, the federal government hired prominent local architects in addition to their in-house staff, and the result in this case was one of the more important examples of classical moderne architecture in Canada, a departure from the Beaux-Arts classicism previously favoured for large official structures.

Within its urban setting, it is prominent because of its size, its function, and its design quality. The open green space across from the building reinforces its public image.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of the Dominion Public Building is defined by its principal façades and its major public interiors.

The entrance façade is the narrow Richmond Street front, where a strong vertical thrust is achieved by the stepped-back side walls, the extra two storeys of the central tower, and the deeply incised vertical window recesses.

.../2

-2-

London, Ontario
Dominion Public Building (Continued)

The façade is a smooth ashlar limestone with polished black granite as a plinth course

and around the entry doors. It is highlighted by decorative carvings in the masonry, carried out in the stylized Art Deco mode typical of classical moderne architecture. Some of the carvings are notable for their consciously Canadian content, reflecting the campaign at the time by architect John Lyle and others for a suitable national expression. The side façades carry over the strong massing, vertical emphasis, and stylized decorative features of the Richmond Street elevation, but in a more subdued fashion.

It is important that these façades be carefully maintained as integrated expressions of classical moderne architecture, with the characteristic interrelationship of massing, proportion, materials and decorative devices. The masonry should be subject to an ongoing preventive maintenance program, with appropriate conservation expertise involved for any programs of major repair or restoration. Decorative elements in bronze and other materials typical of the period should also be conserved and restored as required. Some inappropriate replacement of windows and doors has occurred in the past; in general, replacement should maintain the colour, materials, and profile of the originals, in order to maintain the integrity of the façade.

The interior post office lobby was a striking example of classical moderne principles applied to interior design, with careful massing and proportion, simple stylized decorative detailing, and elegant materials. There are polished marble walls, coordinated terrazzo floors, carefully detailed coffered ceilings, and brass and bronze doors and fittings. Much of the quality of the original interior space has survived through more recent alterations. Every attempt should be made to preserve and restore the quality of the public interiors. The continuity between exterior and interior is particularly important for an institutional building of this kind.

The setting is virtually unchanged, other than minor modifications for accessibility. It should be preserved as is. Some modifications to the site might occur to the rear of the building; any changes should not detract from the dominant massing of the main building.

1991.07.23