

Historic Yukon Commerce Bank on the Ropes

by Sheila Ascroft

When heritage properties are ignored, today's work of art can become tomorrow's eyesore. Residents of Dawson City discovered this the hard way.

The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in Dawson City was once noted for its elaborate Renaissance-style façade. According to a Parks Canada commemorative integrity statement, the edifice presented “. . . an image of stability and permanence in the context of Dawson's Gold Rush days” (see sidebar, An Image of Stability).

But residents don't describe it that way now.

“It is an eyesore that generates comments any time the subject of community standards or public presentation is mentioned,” says Dan Davidson, editor of *The Klondike Sun in Dawson*.

“It is in a prominent location, on the corner of Front and Queen Streets, right next to Parks Canada's beautifully restored S.S. *Keno*.”

Mr. Davidson notes with disgust that the building's distinctive and rare pressed-metal exterior façade is in sad shape. The second-floor access stairs on the north end have been torn off, some of the metal siding has peeled away and paint is peeling off the rest of the building.

WORKING WITH THE OWNER

Although the Bank of Commerce was designated by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as nationally significant in 1967, it is privately owned.

“Essentially, Parks Canada cannot tell the owner what to do,” says Michael Gates, Cultural Resource Management Specialist for the Parks Canada Yukon field unit.

“Parks Canada already owns a representative example of a bank for its commemorative complex: the Bank of British North America. When the opportunity arose to acquire the Bank of Commerce, Parks was undertaking long-term stabilization of dozens of other structures. The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) gave explicit instructions not to buy the CIBC.”

Instead, the HSMBC recommended that it be commemorated by means of a plaque. Parks Canada also encouraged the preservation of the building by making technical and design assistance available to its owners.

Mr. Gates says that Parks Canada has made efforts to encourage the owner to move in the right direction. Parks Canada staff have approached the owner several times over the years to make him aware of various federal funding programs such as the National Historic Sites (NHS) Cost-Sharing Program and the Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund (CHPIF).

“We have offered to provide advice and assistance regarding restoration techniques, materials, suppliers, historic photographs and building history research. Owners of national historic sites as well as owners of dozens of other heritage buildings have all benefited from our assistance. With the owner of the CIBC building, it was to no avail.”

SEEKING WORLD HERITAGE STATUS

According to Mr. Gates, Parks staff has also pitched plans to purchase and restore the building to the CIBC and other interested parties. Aside from that, the agency has relied on municipal heritage legislation to protect the building.

Doug Olynyk, historic sites manager in the Yukon Ministry of Tourism and Culture, explains that while Parks Canada had previously invested tens of millions of dollars in its Dawson Historical Complex, the agency is now hard pressed to maintain its holdings.

“The town and others who want to preserve and rehabilitate the bank are leery of the costs. I am working with the town to seek World Heritage nomination. The Klondike is on Canada’s tentative list and the building will be a huge issue. Its prominent waterfront location makes it a prime commercial property,” says Mr. Olynyk.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Paula Hassard, Parks Canada curator at the Dawson Historical Complex, stresses that since 2002 Parks Canada staff has worked with the local planning board to help strengthen the historic guidelines, historic zoning and bylaws.

“We continue to be engaged in the development of the heritage management plan in collaboration with the city and the Yukon heritage unit. This plan will provide processes and incentives to protect and maintain all the remaining heritage buildings in Dawson,” she says.

Mr. Davidson thinks the bank could be developed as a commercial property or for instructional use as part of the Klondike Institute of Art and Culture School of Visual Arts initiative.

“The people behind this operation have shown a great aptitude for restoring failing buildings and making them useful again, buildings such as the Oddfellows’ Hall and the old territorial liquor store, which were condemned and derelict when they took them over,” he says.

References: *Yukon Heritage Character Reports* (www.yukonheritage.com/); *Parks Canada* (www.parkscanada.gc.ca); *Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce* (<https://www.cibc.com/ca/inside-cibc/history/story-cibc.html>); *Dawson Historical Complex National Historic Site Management Plan* (http://www.pc.gc.ca/lhnhhs/yt/dawson/plan/index_e.asp); *A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles* by Shannon Ricketts, Leslie Maitland, Jacqueline Hucker. Broadview Press, Peterborough, Ont.