

Feature

Magnificent Anachronisms: Heritage of Culture

by Martha Plaine

While a grand civic auditorium, modest community hall, two ornate vaudeville/movie theatres and a dance pavilion do not have much in common architecturally, they share a similar spirit and function. These five buildings, constructed for community social and cultural gatherings, are remarkable survivors when we've experienced significant loss of built Canadian heritage as a result of fire, demolition and urban renewal.

Toronto's St. Lawrence Hall

St. Lawrence Hall (1849) is a survivor from pre-Confederation Canada, when Toronto was emerging as the commercial hub of Western Canada. It is a grand civic building with offices, retail space and a luxurious ballroom.

In the 1840s Toronto could boast conveniences such as gaslights, wooden sidewalks, and sewers along the main streets. The population was swelling with new immigrants from England and Ireland, and by mid-century had grown to 30,000. In April 1849 a terrible fire ravaged the city core and damaged the market building, prompting the city to build a grand social hall at the fashionable corner of King Street East and Jarvis.

Architect William Thomas employed a modified Renaissance Revival style for the massive brick and sandstone building. The arches, towering Corinthian columns and lavish sculptural details are references to classical forms. Decorative gargoyle-like wings and sculpted heads are new Canadian deities representing Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. The slate mansard roof, a French influence, supports a grand Corinthian colonnade crowned with a large cupola. Rare exotic woods, marble and crystal conveyed a sense of old-world grandeur in interior public spaces.

St. Lawrence Hall gave Toronto's elite a fine place to convene for galas and receptions. A rapt audience of 1,000 attended concerts by Jenny Lind. Curious crowds packed the house for Tom Thumb, of P.T. Barnum fame.

The hall hosted defining episodes in Canada's history such as the Convention of 1859, when George Brown and 500 Reformers debated a new federal union for the two Canadas. John A. Macdonald, D'Arcy McGee and abolitionist Frederick Douglass drew large crowds when they spoke.

For more than 20 years St. Lawrence Hall was the centre of Toronto's social life, but by the 1870s newer, more convenient halls were vying for attention. As the focus of civic and cultural life shifted westward, St. Lawrence Hall was neglected and forgotten. In the 1950s the Salvation Army used it as a men's hostel in the winter.

Then the National Ballet of Canada moved in. Celia France, the ballet's founder, wrote:

We would arrive for our summer tenure to find the disassembled iron bunks of the winter tenants stacked at one end of the girls' dressing room. Sometimes too the winter tenants did not realize that there was a change of proprietorship during the summer. We often had callers turning up during our classes who were not in the least interested in doing a barre or assuming the five positions.

In 1960 St. Lawrence Hall faced demolition when a developer proposed a high rise and parking garage for the site. The fledgling Toronto Historical Board and community groups convinced the city to act and Toronto purchased the hall and undertook restoration as a centennial project. Today St. Lawrence Hall operates successfully as a venue for special events and a permanent home to Heritage Toronto and Opera Atelier.

Victoria Community Hall

On the Atlantic coast, Victoria Community Hall, in the village of Victoria-by-the-Sea, is one of the few remaining social halls of rural Prince Edward Island. The hall was built from 1912-1914, just before Canada entered the Great War.

In the early 20th century, Victoria-by-the-Sea was a bustling harbour and business centre. Members of a local men's club financed a hall to reflect their village's prosperity. They hired Win Bradley to design a traditional two-storey structure, with wood shingle siding, gambrel roof, decorative bargeboard and a rose window. Its honest simplicity and fine workmanship bring to mind similar structures in Atlantic Canada and New England.

For 70 years the hall hosted turkey and bean suppers, basket socials and quilting bees. Residents wrote in their diaries of wartime recruiting activities, plays, concerts, and community council meetings. Lucy Maud Montgomery entertained with a reading.

Now the hall is home to a professional theatre company and its original fine sightlines and acoustics serve the community well.

Vaudeville, Movies and Vancouver's Orpheum Theatre

In the 1890s vaudeville, an American phenomenon with roots in minstrel, circus and variety shows, swept North America. Its popularity fuelled a theatre building spree and a growth of theatre circuits.

Vancouver's Orpheum Theatre, on Granville Street, was the largest and grandest theatre in the Pacific Northwest when it opened in 1927. With an orchestra pit, Wurlitzer organ and projection booth, the 2800-seat Orpheum was designed for vaudeville and movies.

Architect Marcus Priteca was a master of theatre design. The theatre's brilliant marquee and canopy were typical of vaudeville design. In the interior, Priteca described his style as "Spanish Renaissance" for its flamboyant arches, tiered columns and intricate mouldings of marble, stone and plaster. He borrowed from many sources: Mogul India for the ornate lobby ceiling, North Africa for organ screens and European baroque for the auditorium's dome, ceiling and crystal chandelier.

The Orpheum's magnificence became the gold standard by which some people experienced architecture. Critic Denny Boyd described the wonder he felt as an adult viewing the Taj Mahal in India and compared it to his first glimpse of the Orpheum.

"...I felt a hammer blow of awe [at seeing the Taj Mahal] as when I was seven and approached the box office of the Orpheum Theatre for the first time... If you grew up in Vancouver through the mean, bleak 30s, movies were the common escape and a dime was the key... That dime took you up the lushly carpeted stairway of the massive foyer into the world of imagination..."

The Orpheum transitioned from vaudeville to movies and for 30 years thrived under manager Ivan Ackery, a marketing genius. The triumph of movies as the supreme form of popular entertainment owed a lot to marketers who understood that they were selling an experience. Marcus Loew said: "We sell tickets to theatres, not to movies."

In the mid-1970s the owners of the Orpheum planned to sell it or gut it for a multiplex. Citizens rallied and the city purchased the building, adapting it to a concert hall. Today the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, the Vancouver Cantata Singers, Chamber Choir and Bach Choir are permanent residents.

Granada Theatre, Sherbrooke, Quebec

A sub-genre of the extravagant movie palace was the "atmospheric" theatre, decorated to give audiences the feeling that they were sitting outdoors in an exotic Mediterranean courtyard or walled garden, under a starry sky. The Granada Theatre in Sherbrooke, Quebec is a rare example of the type.

Built in 1928-29, the Granada was a collaboration between architect Daniel John Crighton and Emmanuel

Briffa, Montréal's most successful theatre decorator. The Granada was pure fantasy, from the Spanish revival facade through the hallway of painted plaster griffins and surreal stone fountains. The painted auditorium gave the illusion of an open courtyard surrounded by villas with tiled roofs. The overhead painted dome looked like a deep blue sky with stars. A magic lantern machine projected images of birds and clouds floating across the sky.

Soon after it opened in downtown Sherbrooke the Granada became the premier gathering place in town. Before television news, audiences rushed to the theatre to watch documentaries and newsreels of the birth of the Dionne Quintuplets, the Hindenburg explosion and news from the front. The theatre catered to all cultural tastes with movies, theatre, pop, opera, symphonies and jazz. Louis Armstrong, Maurice Chevalier, the von Trapp family and, in recent years, Gilles Vigneault performed here.

In the 1960s downtown Sherbrooke experienced hard times but the Granada carried on. When university performing arts centres and suburban movie houses eroded its audiences, the once grand theatre was reduced to showing Hollywood blockbusters and the occasional porn flick. A local heritage group took up the cause of revitalizing the downtown and in 1997 the city of Sherbrooke purchased and restored the theatre.

The Granada continues to be used for its original purpose, as a cultural centre for film, music and theatre.

Saskatchewan's Danceland

Manitou Beach, an hour's drive from Saskatoon, seems an unlikely location for an extravagant dance pavilion that has been operating continuously for nearly 80 years. The pavilion is called Danceland, and overlooks Manitou Lake, with salty waters heavier than the Dead Sea. Legend has it that the Cree people discovered the water's miraculous healing properties. Entrepreneurs turned the town into a busy spa resort and brought summer tourists in by rail from Winnipeg and Edmonton.

When Danceland opened in 1928, it was one of three local dance halls operating seven days a week. This was the big band era, when dances like the fox trot, swing and two-step were the rage. While dancing was the main attraction, patrons also came to listen to the house bands or hear stars like Guy Lombardo, Duke Ellington and Mart Kenney.

Danceland is locally renowned for its architecture. The hall has an elegant symmetry, a large central vault flanked by narrow wings. Its construction was a major undertaking that took three years and 100 men to complete. The intricate trussed roof of B.C. Douglas fir was built to withstand the weight of snow in winter.

More than anything it's the dance floor that made Danceland special. The floor is tongue-and-groove maple, literally floating on a layer of coiled horsehair. The horsehair gives the floor a natural bounce that seems to energize dancers and even soothe their tired limbs.

From the day it opened in 1928, Danceland has run as a profitable business. It is a near miracle that such an extravagant building has survived not merely as a curiosity, but functioning all the while as its original developers intended. Now the future of Danceland is uncertain because current owners, Millie and Arnold Strueby, are too old to keep up the hard work.

Conclusion

All these buildings continue to live as important elements of Canadian architectural heritage. They are not mere facades, but thriving parts of their cultural communities. St. Lawrence Hall, Victoria Community Hall, the Orpheum, and the Granada had to be rescued by citizens and governments, or they surely would have been lost. The four have been recognized as National Historic Sites. Uniquely, Danceland survives in the marketplace, with its future far from guaranteed.

Martha Plaine is an Ottawa writer with an interest in travel, tourism, architecture and the arts. She has had the pleasure of visiting Danceland and trying out its dance floor.

