

It's hard to imagine a grand new public building today that would be used for only a few weeks each summer. Yet, that was exactly what architects a century ago were commissioned to do when they designed the massive exhibition halls gracing many of Canada's urban fairgrounds.

These halls were built as grand public showplaces that celebrated architectural design. In many cases, the fairground buildings defined the skylines of the cities around them. Unheated and uninsulated, they were opened for summer fairs where—long before television and the Internet—people saw the latest innovations in everything from agricultural implements to labour-saving household appliances.

They were also community spaces where local craftspeople gathered to display their handiwork and where friendly rivalry was encouraged in baking and preserves competitions and quilt shows.

People still flock to summer fairs, but in many places the old exhibition halls are being targeted for redevelopment. They're architectural landmarks with maintenance costs too high to be left dormant most of the year.

As a result of neglect or lack of financial support, some are now candidates for landfill. Heritage designation is not always enough to save them. Their continued existence often depends on adapting to new uses.

Upgrades Bear Fruit

Exhibition halls are typically on prime real estate close to downtowns, so a number are being converted into special event venues, museums, dinner theatres or office space. The goal is to make them economically viable, year-round public spaces.

"In the old days, fairgrounds built structures that could sit empty for long periods of time (and open once a year for the fair," says Mark Allan, president and CEO of Regina's Evraz Place. "Those days are gone. If you have a structure, the idea is to have it busy all the time."

Evraz Place is two years into a \$180-million revitalization to be completed by 2016. The master plan includes a new six-arena, multi-use facility and the renovation of the Brandt Centre.

The plan is already bearing fruit. Regina partnered with Saskatoon to win the bid to host the 2010 World Junior Hockey Championship, which is expected to inject about \$25 million into the Saskatchewan economy.

Horticulture Building ca. 1927
Horticulture Building ca. 1927



by Angela Kryhul

Best in Show

Celebrating Exhibition Architecture

From Car Barn to Ballroom

In Toronto, the 80-year-old Automotive Building, on the grounds of Exhibition Place, is receiving a \$47-million makeover to restore the exterior to architect Douglas Kertland's original design. The 15,000-square-metre building will be converted from flat-floor exhibition space to two ballrooms and as many as 20 meeting rooms.

As its name suggests, the Automotive Building initially showcased automobiles and is an excellent example of Modern Classicism with Art Deco detailing. Over the years it was also an event and exhibit space and, like a number of fairground buildings across the country, was used during the Second World War by the Canadian Armed Forces.

A full masonry upgrade is planned for the exterior. The opaque panels fitted into the window openings during the 1960s will be removed. The main north and south porticos, which were enclosed as lobby areas, will be reinstated as open entrance spaces. Inside, the original terrazzo floors, ceiling and wall finishes, and Art Deco ceiling fixtures and railings will be retained.

Bob Gallant, project executive for Toronto-based architectural firm NORR Ltd., admits that not all original architectural elements will be preserved. For example, the original roof with its twin gable skylights that spanned its full length will be removed in order to accommodate the large column-free ballroom.

"We looked at quite a number of different opportunities to retain the existing roof structure," says Mr. Gallant. "Eventually we came to the conclusion that the most practical way of approaching it was to restructure the entire roof."

Work on the building began in April and is scheduled to be completed in May 2009. It has been a long time in the works. Exhibition Place CEO Dianne Young says Exhibition Place has been looking for private sector partners for the rehabilitation since 1998.

A number of buildings on site have already been converted to new uses, among them the 1926 Beaux Arts-style Liberty Grand events venue (formerly the Ontario Government Building); the Medieval Times dinner theatre (the Government Building when built in 1912); the Beaux Arts-style Muzik Clubs building (in 1907 named the Horticulture Building); the 1907 Music Building; and the Ricoh Coliseum (built in 1922 to house the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair).

As with other renovation projects supported by private sponsors, the Automotive Building will get a new name—the Allstream Centre—to reflect the financial support of MTS Allstream Inc.

Western Exposure

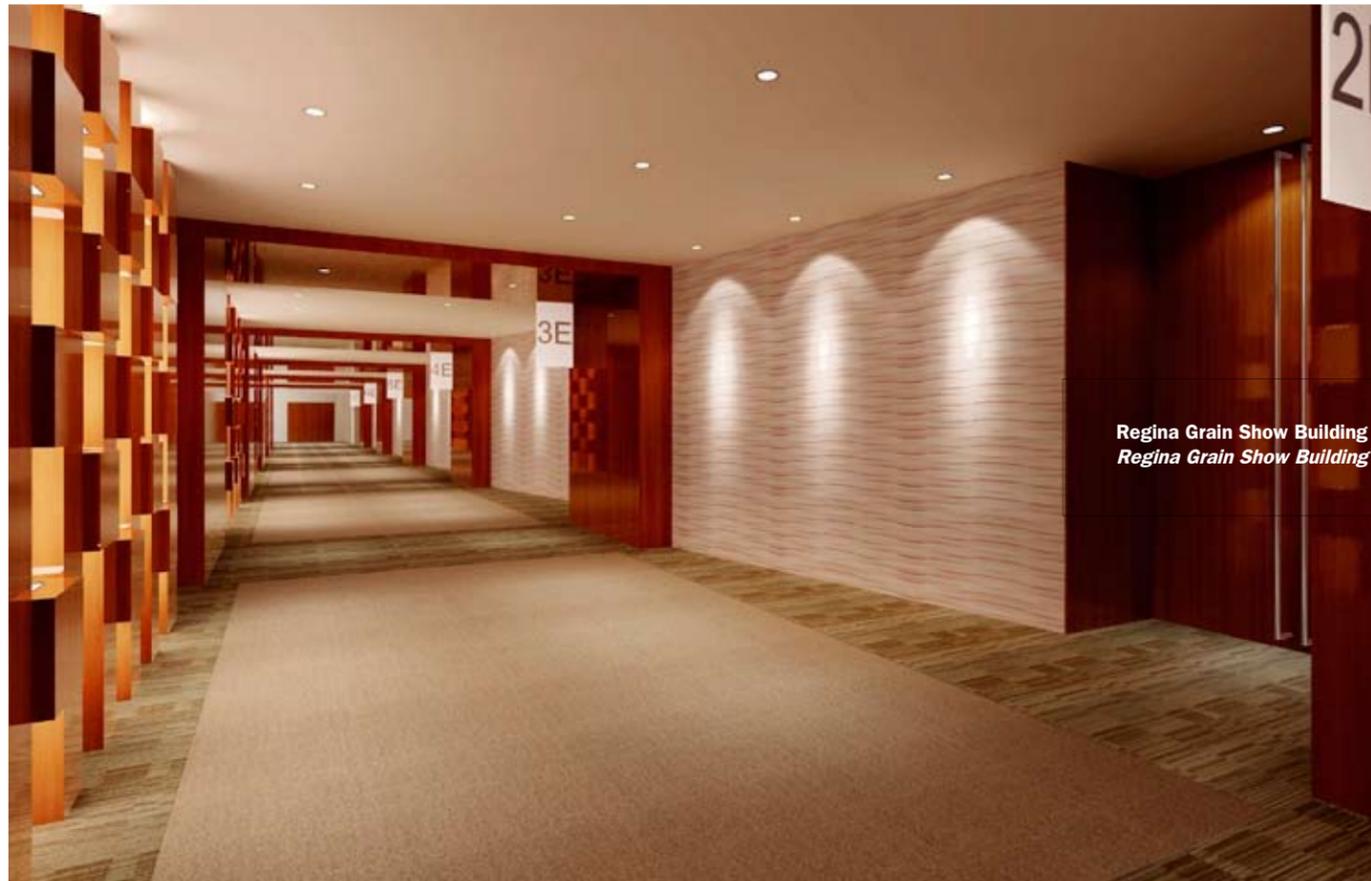
Calgary and Vancouver are also investing in fairgrounds. Calgary's plan is to redevelop Stampede Park, home of the 96-year-old Calgary Stampede, to celebrate the area's unique ranching and farming heritage while offering a world-class, year-round gathering place.

The project includes the \$14-million conversion of the 1920s-era Weston Bakery Building into a downtown campus for Olds College. This project involves refurbishing 930 square metres of heritage-designated space and adding 1,600 square metres of new space, says Jordan Cleland, vice-president of advancement for Olds College. Construction begins next summer, and it is expected to open in September 2011.

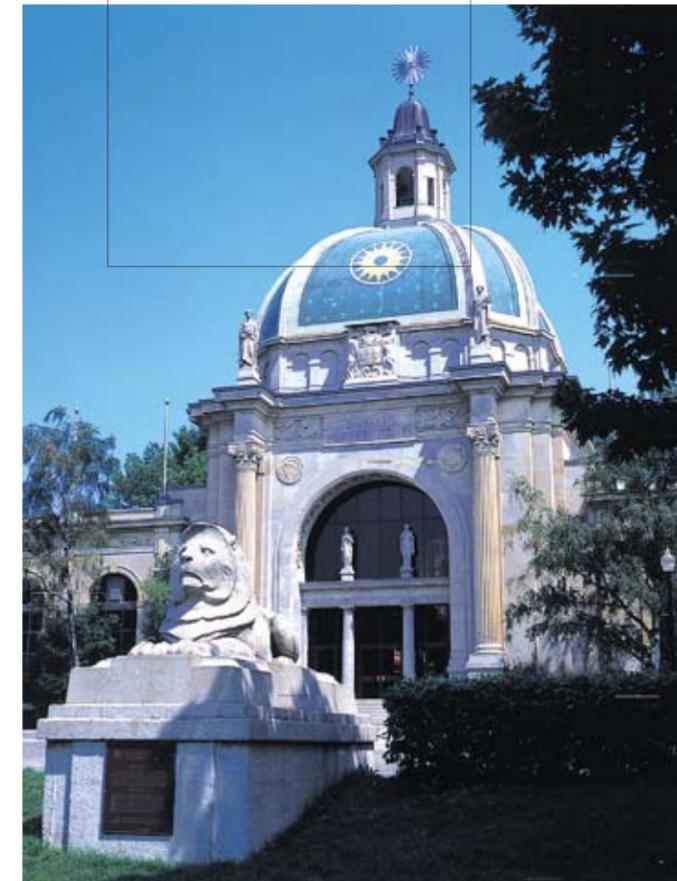
Vancouver's Hastings Park, meanwhile, is restoring its green spaces and recently upgraded the 40-year-old Pacific Coliseum to host figure skating and short-track speed skating during the 2010 Winter Olympics.

For years Vancouver debated how to redevelop the Hastings Park/Pacific National Exhibition site. The 1997 Hastings Park Restoration Plan called for removing many structures, including the Livestock Building, dating from the 1920s. An example of Streamline Moderne architecture, the Livestock Building (originally designed by Vancouver firm McCarter Nairne) has a unique place in Canadian history as the marshalling facility for the internment of Japanese-Canadians in 1942.

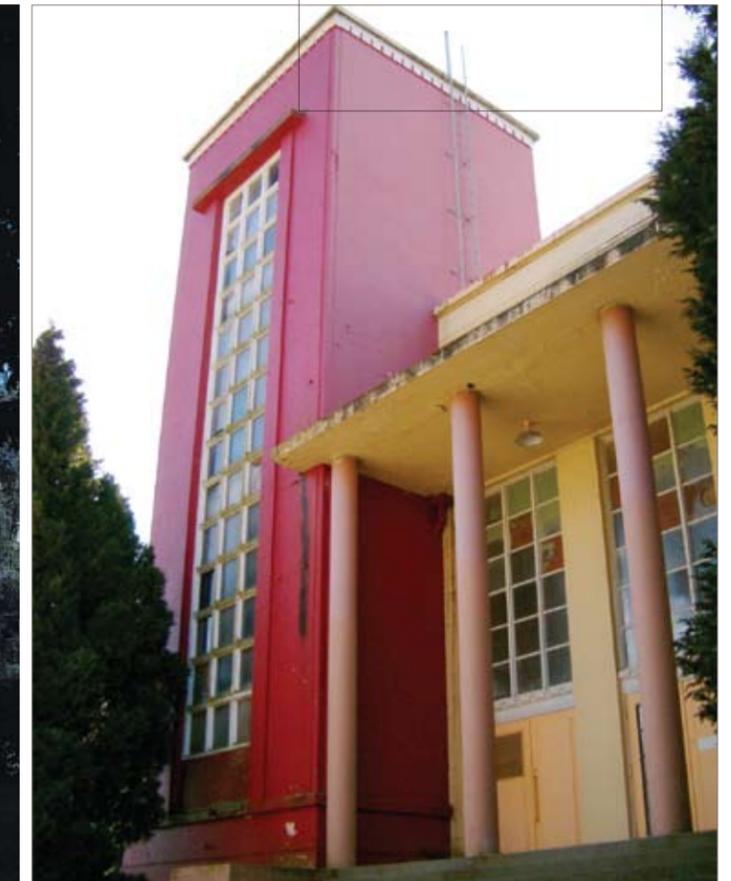
The Livestock Building never was demolished, although lack of maintenance has resulted in structural problems and a leaking roof. It's not clear whether it will be redeveloped. Last summer, Hastings Park issued a request for proposals for a major evaluation of the site, including a heritage assessment of the Livestock Building.



Regina Grain Show Building
Regina Grain Show Building



Regina Grain Show Building
Regina Grain Show Building



Regina Grain Show Building
Regina Grain Show Building

Good Looks Aren't Everything

Many cities struggle with developing public buildings beyond their intended purpose. Among them is Montréal, host of Expo 67. The fair, held from April to October, drew more than 50 million visitors. Many participants donated their pavilions to the city, and for 13 years Montréal ran a summer exhibition called Man and His World.

Today the most iconic of the surviving structures is the geodesic dome designed by Richard Buckminster Fuller. Formerly the United States pavilion, it's now called the Biosphère and houses a water and environment museum operated by Environment Canada. Other buildings being put to new uses are the French and Quebec pavilions, now part of the Casino de Montréal.

With their skylights, domes and courtyards, historic exhibition structures that have been sensitively rehabilitated have a "wow" factor that appeals to potential occupants. Mark Sparrow, general manager of ExpoCité, Québec City's 96-year-old fairground, says its buildings have always been kept in good repair. Photos of gems like the 1913 Pavillon des arts are used in marketing materials.

"It's not very complicated to 'sell' the building once people have seen it because there is a nostalgic look to it ... that's a selling point on its own," Mr. Sparrow says.

Yet he finds that organizations looking to rent the space for events or conventions want the amenities—like a modern kitchen and Internet access—offered by newer venues.

Time to Modernize

Just as in Montréal, urban fairgrounds are being modernized and redeveloped in many cities to attract new business and help build tourism.

Mark Allan says there was concern in Regina that Evraz Place would lose corporate and consumer business—including existing clients—unless the facilities were modernized.

That means taking a hard look at buildings like the site's 89-year-old Exhibition Stadium, which is being used but is he reports in "very, very rough shape." These kinds of changes don't come without cost. About 20 barns and storage buildings will be gone by 2010, perhaps even the unique U-shaped Grain Show Building, built in 1933.

Regina Grain Show Building
Regina Grain Show Building



It Takes a Village

Local support is crucial for fairground redevelopment.

Grassroots involvement saved Ottawa's Aberdeen Pavilion in the early 1990s. Located on Lansdowne Park and affectionately known as the Cattle Castle, the Aberdeen Pavilion opened in 1898 on the 10th anniversary of the Central Canada Exhibition.

For many decades the building hosted agricultural and manufacturing exhibitions. The Ottawa Senators won the Stanley Cup there in 1904. Thousands of Canadian troops were processed there before shipping overseas during the First and Second World Wars. Although designated a national historic site in 1983, it was left to deteriorate for many years, coming very close to being demolished.

In 1992, after years of debate, the City of Ottawa decided to restore the Aberdeen to its original glory. It is now used for exhibitions, festivals and shows.

Karen Oliver, general manager of the Brandon-based Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba (PEM), hopes to generate similar enthusiasm to save Display Building Number Two, also called the Dome Building. It served primarily as an exhibit building for PEM's three annual events: the Royal Manitoba Winter Fair, the Manitoba Summer Fair and the Manitoba Livestock Expo.

The 95-year-old structure, designed in the Beaux Arts style by Brandon architects Walter Shillinglaw and David Marshall for the Dominion Fair, is in pretty bad shape and few consider it worth saving, states Ms. Oliver.

"We certainly hope we don't have to (demolish), but if we aren't able to begin to restore it in the very near future we won't have to worry about demolishing it because it will fall down," she says.

At a cost of about \$5 million, the organization wants to see the building adapted as a multi-purpose facility to house PEM offices, an interactive agricultural learning centre, day camps and community educational programs.

The problem is funding. The province supports restoring the building, and there is preliminary interest from a potential corporate sponsor. But the City doesn't seem keen on keeping it, according to Ms. Oliver.

"Unfortunately, many people don't see it as a huge asset. It's just that old building that's always been there . . . it's seen as an old eyesore by some people," she continues. "You know, they say it takes a village to raise a child. Well, it's going to take a city to raise this building. Perhaps it's going to take a country."

Facing the Challenges

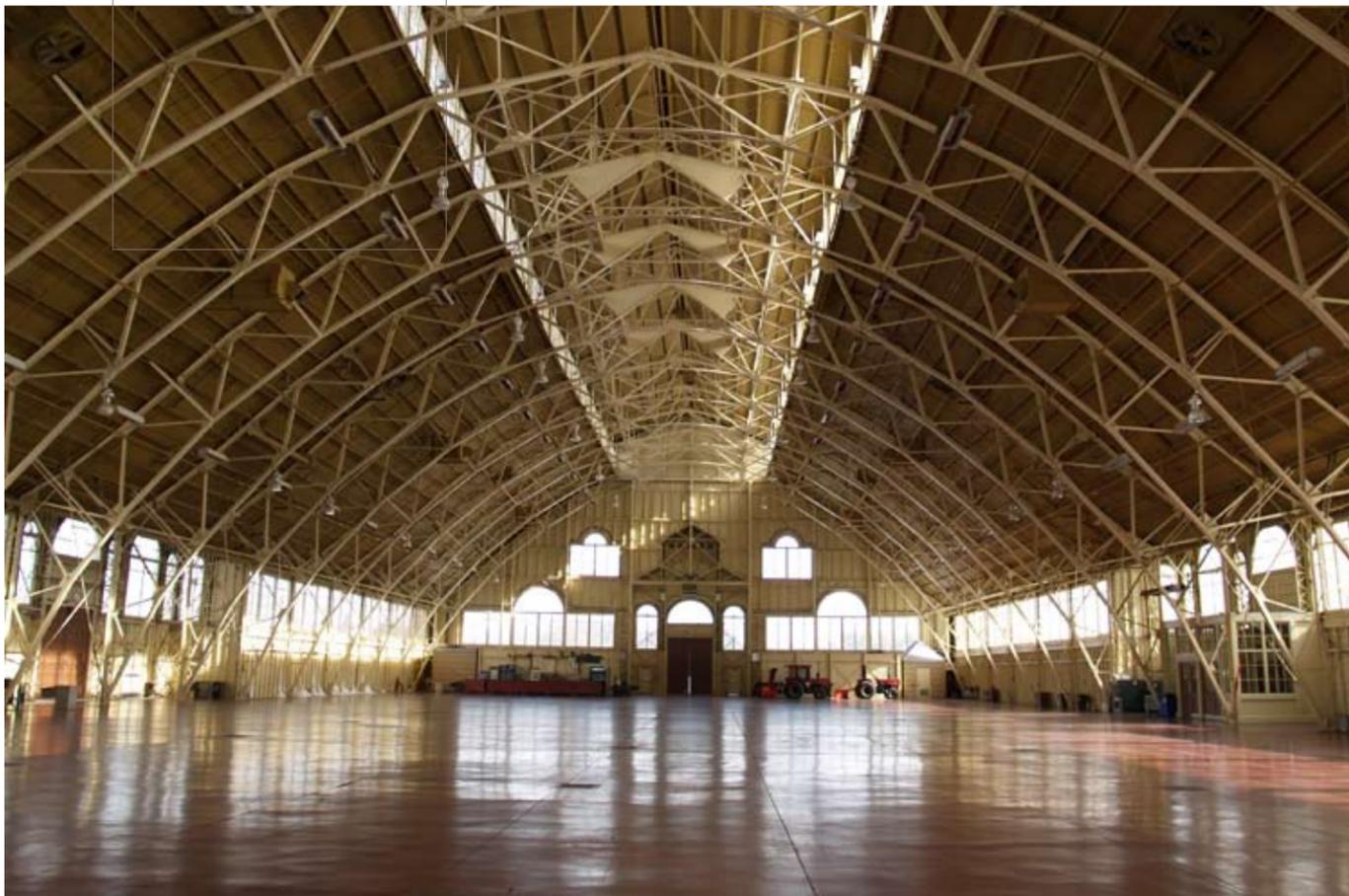
It's true that while some historic buildings can be very complicated to rehabilitate, many fairground exhibition buildings—like Toronto's Automotive Building—were actually designed as open spaces. They're not exactly the blank canvas of a new building, but still pretty flexible.

The challenge of restoring a heritage building is definitely worth the reward, concludes NORR's Bob Gallant.

"Working with a clean slate would have probably been a lot easier, but then we would have lost the heritage value and that was extremely important—to retain the historic building and to adapt it to its new use."

Angela Kryhul is an award-winning editor and writer based in Toronto. She runs Kryhul.com, which specializes in multimedia content creation and management.

Regina Grain Show Building
Regina Grain Show Building



Regina Grain Show Building
Regina Grain Show Building

