

Feature

A Landmark Renewed

by Katherine McIntyre

The Old North Toronto Station

Heritage Canada was delighted to bestow the first ever Corporate Prize on the Woodcliffe Corporation of Toronto for its restoration and rehabilitation of the former North Toronto Station. This award is presented to any incorporated business, sole proprietorship or partnership that demonstrates outstanding stewardship of its built heritage.

There is plenty of foot traffic into the North Toronto Station these days, but it is not to catch a train. Revitalized to its glory days, it has become the flagship outlet for the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO). According to Mitchell Cohen, Executive Vice-President of Woodcliffe Corporation of Toronto, the fifteen years it took to put this project together became a labour of love before it was completed. "Finally, we got it done. We wanted something that would honour the history of the station, animate the space and become a focal point for the area." In recognition of a job well done, Woodcliffe Corporation has become the first ever winner of the Heritage Canada Foundation Corporate Prize.

The landmark building at the corner of Yonge Street and Scrivener Square, close to the affluent Rosedale district, was once described by the late historian William Dendy as "one of Toronto's great lost buildings." It has had a stormy history since the warm June evening in 1916, when bands played and Union Jacks flew at its opening. At that time officials of the Canadian Pacific Railway, frustrated by delays in the construction of the proposed Union Station on Front Street, elected to build their own grandiose station to replace an existing but much smaller station located just blocks away on Marlborough Avenue. It was designed by the well-known architects Darling and Pearson, who were famous for their lavish buildings, and despite the austerity of the First World War, they lived up to their reputation.

No expense was spared in the construction of one of North America's great railway stations. The exterior of the symmetrically shaped building, with its classical ornamentation and clad in beige limestone blocks from quarries in Tyndall, Manitoba, displayed many of the elements of the Beaux Arts style popular in the early 20th century. A wide, steel canopy, edged with an iron frieze etched in a Greek key design, sheltered the building's entrance and west side. Above the canopy three arched windows, replicas of windows in the Grand Central Station in New York, were flanked by tall pilasters. Carved railway motifs and elegant swags ornamented their stone medallions. A pronounced dentil cornice just below the roof line echoed the key design. The 42.7-metre-tall clock tower, with its copper roof and illuminated four-sided dial, shone out as the station's landmark. Fashioned after the Campanile in St. Mark's Square in Venice, its workings were controlled by railway telegraph signals from the pulse of a master railway clock in Montréal.

Within the station, light flooded through the interior great hall from the three south-facing, two-storey arched and leaded windows. Marble panels in shades of taupe, brown and deep green from quarries in Quebec and Pennsylvania lined the walls. A magnificent dentil cornice repeating the Greek key design framed the Doric architrave cathedral ceiling and integrated the south-facing windows with three semi-circular ones on the north side. Passengers walked on a porcelain tile floor patterned in an intricate herringbone design and bought their tickets from brass wickets. At night, tall brass portières lit the hall.

Flanking the great hall on the east side, opposite the ticket windows, were the women's lavatory and waiting area and the men's smoking room, each with their own distinctive flooring materials and plastered cornices and ceilings.

But the station's days of grandeur were short-lived. Competition from the new, larger and more opulent Union Station on Front Street drove it out of business. In 1930 the doors closed. Subsequently, the former

baggage area was leased to a Brewers Retail Store and finally, in 1940, the LCBO became the building's principal tenant.

Over the years the LCBO concealed most of the embellishments that contributed to the station's interior grandeur. Rubber tiles hid the decorative tiled floor, a dropped ceiling turned the great hall into a dreary one-storey space, and wood panelling covered the marble. When the clock stopped working, it was boarded over. Because the exterior remained relatively untouched, the City of Toronto included the Beaux Arts station on its inventory of heritage properties. It was subsequently designated as a heritage building under the Ontario Heritage Act in 1975. With this designation, the succeeding Master Plan for the area, approved in 1997, included a Heritage Easement Agreement on the property.

Prior to the approval of the Master Plan for the Yonge-Summerhill area, Marathon Realty, the real estate subsidiary of Canadian Pacific Limited, had proposed the development of an infill housing project, which required a zoning change from industrial to mixed-use residential and commercial, affecting the station and the adjacent vacant land on the east side. Disputes with ratepayers and City planners over problems related to height, density, access and setbacks followed. In 1996, when the Ontario Municipal Board finally ruled on the by-laws and zoning changes, Woodcliffe Corporation bought the property from Marathon Realty. Subsequently the company sold the piece zoned residential, but kept the railway station and enough land for parking and a landscaped entrance.

As Mitchell Cohen commented, "It was the jewel in the crown, we couldn't let it go." Although, he added, "It's a rule in our business not to fall in love with a property. Fortunately we broke the rule."

Heritage architect Philip Goldsmith, of Goldsmith Borgal & Company Ltd., already familiar with the property from Marathon Realty days, guided Woodcliffe Corporation through the myriad approvals for restoring and stabilizing a historic building. This involved:

- Reviewing the building's condition;
- Working with Heritage Toronto on preservation strategies and site easement;
- Collaborating with the owners and prime tenant (LCBO) on a new interior layout;
- Designing a building addition to expand the former baggage area under the railway bridge and extend it to the east of the building; and
- Preparing a site plan to include landscape design, public art, park and parking areas that would be sensitive to the historic site and would complement the project.

Goldsmith, in describing the restoration and rehabilitation of the station for commercial uses, stated, "It was the most difficult yet most satisfying project I have ever worked on." He noted that this particularly complex task included negotiations about the air rights with CP Rail on the property above the roof of the station, and with the TTC about the subway property below the parking lot. Then he had to integrate the needs of the retail client (the LCBO) to make this a functionally commercial building, as well as the rights of the adjacent condominium landowners. All these requirements were to coincide with the development

of a civic square, a landscaped parking area and the installation of a piece of civic art within a timeline of three years.

When all City approvals for the reuse of the North Toronto Station and baggage area were in place, work began in January 2000 on the restoration and the 468 square metres of new construction. “Our objective was to refurbish all the heritage elements, even if it was twice as difficult to complete.”

The exterior of the station, cleaned and patched where needed with similar limestone from the Tyndall quarry in Manitoba, sparkles. A small remaining piece of the original Greek key frieze that encircled the edge of the canopy was duplicated for a new surround. Pigeons—and nine tons of their droppings—were removed from the clock tower, and the tower made bird proof. The rusted metalwork on the face of the old clock, which had been found in a pile of debris at the top of the tower, was cleaned. The new clock mechanism, instead of taking a pulse from a telegraph, takes its pulse from the Global Positioning System (GPS)—a network of 24 satellites orbiting the Earth. This system guarantees that the clock is always accurate and that the four faces are always synchronized. It also allows it to automatically change the time from standard to daylight saving.

The interior required more extensive restoration. The removal of the false ceiling in the great hall uncovered the fine coffered ceiling and exposed the room once again to natural light from the arched windows. The marble walls, badly damaged by the wood panelling and shelving, were restored with marble from the original sources. Mitchell Cohen explained that most of the porcelain tiled floor, the terra cotta floor in the waiting room, and a small portion of hardwood floor had been protected by three layers of flooring and remained relatively undamaged. Original doors, window frames, the five brass ticket windows and skylights were refurbished, and the finely detailed mouldings, and cornices surrounding ceilings, windows and skylights carefully restored. Any heritage elements not reused, such as pieces of railing, bricks, marble and doors, have not been dumpster casualties but are stored on-site for future use. The tenant, respecting the history of the building, has assured the owners that in the future no heritage element will be covered or mutilated.

The new construction blends seamlessly with the old. Vibration from the trains over the new addition has been held to a minimum by muted springs in the ceiling and an eight-inch rubber base under the floor. An effective landscape co-ordinating the new urban square, designed by Toronto architect Stephen Teeple as a contemplative piazza (now called Margaret Scrivener Square after the late MPP who represented the area for years), a small park, a welcoming entrance from Yonge Street and alluring piece of timed public art enhances the entire property. Called the “tipping fountain,” the artwork is designed by Robert Fones to echo the motion of both the steam locomotives once associated with the site and the clock in the nearby tower.

Has the project worked? If a fistful of awards is the answer, then yes. If a tenant boasts their business is beyond expectations and has become a destination site in the city, it has. If a neighbourhood business association is happy with its increased traffic flow, it has. If the owners say “We have proved we can successfully mix retailing with heritage restoration,” it has. Will historians refer to it as a lost building? The answer is definitely no. Polished and perfect, it remains a landmark on Toronto’s Yonge Street that can continue to shine for the next one hundred years.

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