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Mr. Stephen S. Poloz
Governor
Bank of Canada
234 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, ON
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3 December 2013

Dear Mr. Poloz,

I am writing out of deep concern about the nefarious changes planned to the Bank of Canada building at 234 Wellington Street, Ottawa. Our buildings represent our history, the social, institutional, economic and artistic concepts of our society. The Bank of Canada, facing Parliament Hill, is a deeply affecting work of art that in allying forms and materials new and old, tells of the history and meaning of the bank in society, the state of technology of two eras, and the ambitions of the two eras.

When Arthur Erickson, Canada's greatest architect, undertook the addition to the 1930s bank building, he arrived at a brilliant solution by placing two 12-storey copper and reflecting glass towers symmetrically about the original five-storey masonry bank headquarters. An eighty meter high glass-enclosed garden court links the old and new buildings. In this way the new building embraces the old, by being located partly inside and partly outside the glass-enclosed court. The modern glass towers of the late twentieth century are respectfully pulled back from the traditional early twentieth century masonry structure, preserving the importance of the latter on the street. For Erickson it was of special importance to achieve an architectural expression that would reflect and complement the architectural style of the Parliament Buildings, to maintain the spatial sequence of the surrounding streets, and to integrate the old bank building with the new.

In his 2012 annual report message, your predecessor, Governor Mark Carney, wrote, “the renewed head office facility will provide a more resilient, secure, modern and efficient work environment. The Bank is committed to carrying out this major project ... in a way that preserves the architectural heritage and integrity of the original buildings.”

Governor Poloz, the plans for the Bank do not preserve the architectural heritage and integrity of the building. They desecrate it.

The bank plans to remove the garden and close public access to the courtyard. Landscape was a key feature of Erickson’s work, which was deeply connected to the land in a way that is particularly Canadian. Erickson’s culture lay in the vast forests of ancient firs and cedars, the rivers and ocean of the mountainous Pacific Northwest. This was the context that grounded him in the profound communion between building and site. Others have written to you to express how deeply involved Erickson was. To remove the garden would be to remove the soul of the building. It is not only a major piece of Erickson’s design, it is a major aspect of the building. It has a great and important function. It is how he connected the new building to the old and is a very brilliant way of doing so. It also connects to the other public space around it.

Closing public access to the atrium courtyard is unacceptable. Others have written to you about Erickson’s careful design of this atrium garden: it is a joy to people and “a welcome relief to the vicissitudes of the harsh Ottawa winter.” As in all great buildings, the ground floor is public. It cannot be privatized. Privatizing this wonderful space is being done in the name of security. There are many other solutions possible in achieving security. In itself it has become such a mantra for ruining so many amenities, and contributing to hardening the hard edge of city life. Furthermore, privatizing public space is an abrogation. Normally privatisation of the public realm would not be permitted. Unfortunately, as a Crown corporation, the Bank of Canada is not subject to review by the Federal Heritage Building Review Office or the National Capital Commission (NCC).

Furthermore, the addition of three glass pyramidal structures on the East Plaza at Wellington and Bank streets is an incongruity, intruding on the design. These structures will occupy about 12,000 square feet on the Plaza which will then lose its green slate pavement. Such intrusions kill the goose that laid the golden egg. The Bank of Canada is not a building designed anonymously by a commercial architect. The proposed changes are like adding something to a work by Michael Snow, Picasso, or Michelangelo.

A third layer of glass, termed an “addition of a dynamic buffer zone” is to be installed inside the curtain wall to save energy. Your present architect affirms that the extra glass will not be visible from outside. I do not see how it can be done without affecting the appearance of the curtain wall. This must be shown. A mock-up must be made and tested by conservation architects. This is a key point because the curtain wall is much-admired for its elegance: the finely-divided glass panels have a strong vertical proportion.

Inside the building, custom-designed office furniture is to be replaced. I recognize a particular problem since offices are different now because of contemporary technology. However, these offices were designed by a great architect. It is essential to try to maintain the furniture by making necessary adaptations. If this proves not to be feasible, furnishings should be documented, and the Bank should keep a special suite of the original furnishing, and donate a representative group to the collection of a museum such as the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, which holds suites of furniture by Mies van der Rohe from the Seagram Building in New York. In addition, the new interior furnishings and layout should be equal to the spirit of Arthur Erickson’s design, and not office furniture as usual.

I am sending you under separate cover my recent publication, *Building Seagram*, where I have discussed sustaining architectural culture. After disastrous losses, New York City instituted landmark legislation in 1965 that was applicable to the Seagram building in 1979. The New York City Landmark Law was enacted “to protect historic landmarks and neighborhoods from precipitate decisions to destroy or fundamentally alter their character....

The owner of the designated landmark is legally required to maintain the building's exterior 'in good repair,' and to secure Commission approval before any exterior alterations are made." Landmark legislation protected the outside of the Seagram building, the ground floor public space and major rooms on the ground floor accessible by the public. Before the building was eligible for landmarking (which can only be considered thirty years after construction), the owner established stringent rules in order to protect it from unwanted change. Such stewardship, voluntary at Seagram, is legislated in major cities in Europe and many in North America. It is considered a public good. Otherwise how can we have a culture, and see ourselves reflected in that culture if every time there is a work of genuine character by one of our great artists, and which expresses the best of the society we live in, we inflict disfiguring changes and lack respect? We end up not having any history. We lose it. We lose our pride in our society, in our country.

As noted above, the Bank of Canada as a Crown corporation is immune to all public oversight. The Heritage Canada Foundation has noted that Canada is the only G-8 country without laws to protect historic places owned by its national government. Considered one of the finest Canadian buildings of the twentieth century, the Bank's head office was chosen in 2011 for a prestigious award that recognized enduring excellence and national significance. The Bank, however, declined to accept the Prix du XXe siècle, an honor granted by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC) and the Heritage Canada Foundation.

Mr. Poloz, I urge you to engage one of the very fine conservation architects who enrich our society giving him or her the mandate to make a conservation plan for the building and atrium and garden and all public spaces, searching out and proposing alternate routes to solving the problems, such as security, that the Bank perceives. The Bank of Canada cannot desecrate this building: it must be a model for Canadians, working with conservationists, Heritage Canada and the National Capital Commission, in order to enrich our National patrimony.

I write to you as a Canadian citizen, and in the name of the Arthur Erickson Foundation, which I chair, and of the Canadian Centre for Architecture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phyllis Lambert". The script is cursive and fluid, with a small horizontal line at the end of the word "Lambert".

Phyllis Lambert, CC, GOQ, CAL, FRAIC
Founding Director and Chair of the Board of Trustees