

Heritage experts object to Bank of Canada's plans to change "iconic" building

BY MARIA COOK, OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 1, 2013



The public garden in the central atrium of the Bank of Canada building will be closed the public under a planned renovation of the iconic Ottawa building.

Photograph by: Chris Mikula, Ottawa Citizen

Completed in 1979, the Bank of Canada head office was immediately hailed as an architectural gem. Symmetrical glass towers flank the grey-granite building which had established the Bank's presence on Wellington Street since the 1930s. Where the original building communicates permanence and weight, the 1970s structure by architect Arthur Erickson is light and welcoming. The towers set back to reveal the vault-like older building, preserving its visibility as a federal institution among others along Wellington. A glass-enclosed courtyard connects the three buildings on the Sparks Street side. It is a subtle composition that balances the ceremonial aspect of Wellington with the dense and commercial downtown on its south side.

In 2000, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada named it one of the top 500 buildings produced in Canada in the last millennium.

Today, as the Bank embarks on a major \$610-million renovation, some of Canada's most prominent architecture and heritage experts are afraid that a masterpiece will be compromised.

GARDEN COURT

The Bank's employee newsletter this summer noted that when the 1970s addition was built "the glass buildings and public garden underscored a new spirit in central bank design — one of modernity, transparency and accessibility."

Three decades later, the Bank plans to remove the plants and pool, level the gently sloping floor, and eliminate the green-slate paving. The 12,749-square-foot space will become private, serving as informal meeting space for bank employees.

The garden court provided access to the Currency Museum from the Bank lobby, which links Sparks and Wellington. People could walk through, or sit and enjoy the garden. It was popular for wedding photography.

"The soaring atrium filled with lush vegetation and a large reflecting pool is a key feature of the complex and provides an oasis of greenery to the general public, especially during the harshness of an Ottawa winter," says a 2007 bank publication, *More Than Money: Architecture and Art at the Bank of Canada*.

A threat-risk assessment suggested "being able to walk in and leave a backpack and walk out was a significant issue," says architect Fred Vermeulen.

The garden court encloses part of the Centre Building, where executives work, including the Governor. Though there hasn't an incident in 34 years, "you have no control of who comes and goes in that public space," says project manager Dale Fleck.

The Bank also wants to use the area to encourage collaboration among staff, says Vermeulen. "The atrium becomes a big part of meetings which don't have to be booked or structured."

Phyllis Lambert, founder of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, objects to destruction of the garden, observing that landscape was a key feature of Erickson's work.

"To remove that would be to remove the soul of that building," says Lambert. "It's not only a major piece of his design, it's a major aspect of that building. It has a great important function. It's how he connected the new building to the old and that's a very brilliant way of doing this. It connects to the other public space around it."

Denying public access is "unacceptable," says Lambert. "Security you can do all sorts of things about. That's become such a mantra for ruining everything. As in all great buildings, the ground floor has to be public. It cannot be privatized."

Cornelia Oberlander, one of Canada's best-known landscape architects, calls changes to the garden "crazy" and says "the garden was the most important part."

She also questions the Bank's idea to introduce Canadian plants to the atrium. "You can't have Canadian things inside. They don't want to grow."

EAST PLAZA

Early architectural drawings show three glass pyramidal structures on the East Plaza at Wellington and Bank streets — a proposal that according to Lambert is “completely killing” the design. They will occupy about 12,000 square feet on the Plaza, which will lose its green slate pavement. “It should not be done,” she says. “It’s not a building designed anonymously by some commercial architect. It’s like adding something to a work by (artists) Michael Snow or Picasso. It’s totally ridiculous.”

The largest of the three structures, which Vermeulen calls “a very simple glass pop-up”, will become a main entry with lobby. It will lead to the Currency Museum and new conference centre in the East Tower basement, which extends under the plaza. Two smaller pyramids are to contain mechanical works and an exit stair.

The one-storey forms will be arranged to create an outdoor performance space and will provide built-in seating for events such as Canada Day or Winterlude, says Vermeulen. “People sit on the steps on the corner, but nobody really uses the space.”

The museum will move from the Centre building as a security precaution. It will be bigger “to showcase more of the currency collection and also reach out to the public a little more effectively,” says Jill Vardy, the Bank’s chief of communications.

FURNITURE

During the 1970s design, the architectural team examined every office system available and, finding them lacking, designed custom furnishings tailored to the Bank’s needs. They studied how employees worked, tested mock-ups and demonstrated 60 different layouts.

Though gradually phased out, about 220 settings remain. They consist of generous oak desks, oak storage units that also functioned as partitions, and round glass tables on chrome pedestals.

These will be replaced with new office-systems furniture. While the original has “legacy character,” it’s not suited to computers or keyboards and lacks ergonomic features, says Vermeulen.

“It’s just too bulky,” adds Fleck, noting that offices and workspaces will shrink. There will be “less personal workspace but more shared space,” explains Vermeulen. Some furniture will be reused in the temporary location; some stored for later use in the Centre Building; some will be removed by the new furniture supplier.

“Offices are different now because of the computer,” agrees Lambert. “However, these were offices designed by a great architect. If something is going to be done now, then the people who make the new interior would have to be equal to Arthur Erickson and not a large commercial firm.”

Lambert says the furnishings should be documented, the Bank should keep a representative suite, and they should donate pieces to the furniture collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

“It is a tragedy when specially-commissioned furniture from leading architects and designers such as Arthur Erickson are discarded,” says Rachel Gotlieb, co-author of *Design in Canada*, and founding

curator of the Design Exchange in Toronto. "There are few government interiors designed by such important architects as Erickson so why destroy them?"

HERITAGE

The Bank buildings are not protected by heritage designation. And, 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).

This is a problem, says Natalie Bull, executive director of the Heritage Canada Foundation. "Canada is the only G-8 country without laws to protect historic places owned by its national government," she says. "If this building were in the United States third-party scrutiny and public consultation would be required before any changes to the design."

The Bank voluntarily presented its plans to the NCC, which is responsible for Confederation Boulevard. The NCC board gave preliminary design approval last April, and the advisory committee on planning, design and realty offered comments on changes to the plaza on Wellington Street.

"The bank and its design team are to be commended for working with the NCC to enhance the use of public space in their proposal," said NCC spokesman Mario Tremblay.

However, André Audette, the Bank's retired facility and security advisory, says greater scrutiny is needed to protect the building's architectural and historical value. He says the Bank should seek independent advice from heritage experts and participate in the same reviews as any project in the Parliamentary Precinct.

"Failing that, we run the risk that the project will not enhance this modern jewel of the Confederation Boulevard."

INTERIOR

Arthur Erickson's original open-concept office is being restored, says Vermeulen. "Erickson's concept for these floors was basically a panoramic view when you come off the elevator."

New walls to reinforce the building against earthquake will go in the core of the building, where stairs and elevators are located. This strategy protects the open-concept office landscape, with its treelike columns and coffered ceiling. Offices on the perimeter will move to the centre. Walls built over the years will come down.

"We're making a much more open, collaborative transparent environment," says Fleck.

As part of an effort to make technical upgrades unobtrusive, a new raised floor, unusual for being only a few inches thick, will be used as a space for data and electrical wiring.

A third layer of glass will be installed inside the curtain wall, to save energy. Vermeulen assures the extra glass will not be visible from outside. It is a key point because the curtain wall is much-admired

for its elegance. The finely-divided glass panels have a strong vertical proportion. Window mullions are patinated to match the green copper of roofs on Parliament Hill.

Lambert is skeptical. "I don't see how it can really be done without affecting the appearance of the curtain wall," she says. "That has to be really shown to everybody."

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