

**"Jewel Of The West"
Tops Demolition List**
by Brian Anthony

Heritage Canada's 2003 Report Card Lists The Former Eaton's Department Store As The Number One Loss Of 2003



Winnipeg's old Eaton's building has the dubious distinction of being rated Heritage Canada's number one worst demolition on its 2003 Report Card. The 1904 landmark was destroyed last year to make way for the True North Project Group's new sports and entertainment complex.

Last February, the Portage Avenue site was completely cleared of any remaining evidence of the former "jewel of the West," despite exhaustive opposition from a citizens' group, the Save the Eaton's Building Coalition (SEBC).

This group of residents, heritage advocates, architects, urban planners and others attended nearly every relevant meeting of City zoning, licensing and appeal committees to voice their opposition to the project. SEBC went to court, alleging Winnipeg's City Council did not follow proper procedure when it gave its approval to the project; it questioned the legality of rezoning the area under the City's own by-law, and argued that a proper environmental assessment had not been done. The battle finally went to the country's highest court, but the Supreme Court of

Canada refused to hear the case, exhausting the Coalition's legal options.

By the turn of the 20th century Winnipeg, known as "Chicago of the North," had grown into Canada's third largest city. The Eaton family recognized a ready market and the decision to expand the department store westward was made. When it opened in 1905, the T. Eaton Company department store was the largest building in downtown Winnipeg. Its merchandise selection was also the largest in Western Canada and kept growing. The building, with its elegant Louis XV-style restaurant and Grill Room—and the company behind it—played a prominent social as well as commercial role in both Winnipeg and the West for generations. But with the closure of the Eaton's retail chain in 1999, the future of the Winnipeg building was in question. Debate raged for months over whether the empty building should be completely demolished to make way for the True North project or preserved for its heritage value and adapted to a new use.

Architect John Woodman designed the store in the distinctive Chicago School of Architecture style. The 5.5-acre, five-storey building was expanded further in 1907, 1908 and 1912.

Like many other buildings of the early 20th century, Eaton's was constructed around a steel structure with a red brick façade and horizontal bands of white Bedford stone. Exterior details on the modular design included an elaborate cornice, decorative carving on the shop front, and fine bronze window frames. Forty-two large plate-glass show windows, one-bay width each, lined the ground floor.

Inside the steel frame, cast-iron columns supported 5.5-metre spans of 45-cm-square wood beams. This retail store and



Built in 1904, Eaton's department store was a landmark on Portage Avenue until it was torn down last year.

warehouse was designed to withstand significant stress, and a 1987 laser analysis showed it was still structurally sound.

According to David Lettner, an SEBC member and public policy consultant, these construction details should have been considered when the viability of the Eaton's building was being considered in 2001. Because of its modular construction, the building could have been scaled up or down, "as if it were made of building blocks, with minimal disruption to the downtown," he stated on the Web site for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Manitoba.

Mr. Lettner lamented, "Why an arena and not the kind of adaptive reuse project that other cities have developed so successfully?" He said that no structural evaluations, feasibility studies, market assessments or cost-benefit analyses were ever done. "No documented evidence to support the arena proponents' position regarding the economic viability of the Eaton's building has been entered into the public record," he added.

Mr. Lettner also stated that no serious efforts were made to find new tenants interested in reusing the building. Furthermore, only six months elapsed between Osmington Inc. purchasing the site in October 1999 and flipping it to True North in April 2000 for one dollar and the rights to develop commercial space within the proposed arena.

Mr. Lettner argued that there was increasing demand for downtown commercial space at the time, and he believed other investment companies would have been interested in a historically significant and structurally sound building like Eaton's—especially if they were to receive the same level of financial assistance from the public sector as True North was promised. To develop the \$125-million entertainment complex, True North has secured \$86.5 million from the private sector and \$38.5 million in public funding, including \$12 million from the federal government.

In May 2002, the Mayor of Winnipeg, the provincial Premier and the local federal Member of Parliament and Cabinet Minister came out in support of the new sports and entertainment complex proposal. Despite previous reassurances by Mayor Glen Murray that the Eaton's building, which is listed under the city's historical buildings by-law, would be protected, he supported City Council's approval of its demolition and replacement by the new sports and entertainment complex.

According to Coalition member Christine Common-Singh, neither Heritage Winnipeg nor the Manitoba Historical Society was prepared to fight for the preservation of the building, despite its high historical rating. She said that by opting to support the provincial position (which favoured interpreting the heritage significance of the building and what it contributed to the story of Western Canadian settlement at the site, rather than its formal designation), these organizations forced the creation of the Save the Eaton's Building Coalition (SEBC).

SEBC said the whole thing was presented to the public as a *fait accompli*. To fight the destruction of the building, the Coalition started a series of court challenges. It filed a motion with the Manitoba Court of Appeal and won an injunction preventing the City from issuing a final demolition permit to True North. Rocky Kravetsky, the SEBC lawyer, said that without the injunction, True North might have demolished the building while the Supreme Court of Canada was deliberating over hearing a final appeal by the Coalition.

The injunction did not prevent True North from proceeding with the "pre-demolition phase" of its project, which involved gutting the interior of the building. After environmental hazards were removed, Habitat for Humanity became the sole beneficiary of all recyclable materials in the building — everything from doorknobs and antique window-panes to the porcelain sink in the Eaton family's private bathroom on the sixth floor. Habitat for Humanity then sold all the recyclable materials in 2002.

In early March 2002, the Supreme Court dismissed the appeal request by the SEBC. The ruling allowed the City to issue a demolition permit to the developers of the True North sports and entertainment complex. Demolition and removal of the Eaton's building began on July 10, 2002, taking months to complete. Official ground-breaking ceremonies for the new complex were held on April 16, 2003.

Although the building was gone, Ms. Common-Singh said the Coalition would keep fighting for more accountability in city government. In May, 2002, SEBC won a small victory when Provincial Court Judge Alan MacInnes ruled that documents dealing with the project would be made part of the public record. The documents between the True North group and the City detail everything City Council examined before it voted to give True North millions in public funds.

Coalition lawyer Mr. Kravetsky said the public could finally see the extent to which governments are on the hook for the bulk of the money being spent on the complex. Most of that money is coming from the three levels of government, while only \$25 million—including \$5 million for the land—is coming from the True North Group itself. "It really requires some scrutiny of these documents to appreciate that this is public-sector financing, to a certain extent, for private-sector profits," he said.

On December 19, 2002, the True North partnership asked the City and Province for an additional \$1 million each to continue the new project. Ms. Common-Singh said she wasn't surprised by the plea for more public money. "This is the most bizarre project I think we've ever seen," she stated. "Things change all the time, the financing is unclear, you have forensic accountants looking at the whole business plan and saying this doesn't make sense — all the risk is to the public. And yet it still proceeds." A day later, the City and Province agreed to kick in the extra \$2 million.

With the Eaton's building demolished, funds for the Coalition quickly dried up. The SEBC gave up on its Federal Court case relating to the environmental assessment and finally called it a day.

Construction of the new True North Centre began in January 2003, and it is expected to open in November 2004.

From CBC Manitoba 2002 in Review online news: <http://www.winnipeg.cbc.ca/yir/4arena.html>
<http://www.cbc.ca/stories/2003/01/05/eatons030105> <http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/features/eatons/> and
<http://www.winnipeg.cbc.ca/archives/eatons/top2002.html>

Fast Facts, 03/01:

<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba/FastFactsJuly301.pdf>
http://canada.archiseek.com/manitoba/winnipeg/downtown/eatons_demolition.html

True North: <http://www.truenorthproject.mb.ca/>

Editor's Note: [HCF's 2003 Report Card](#)