

The character of adaptive reuse



"“The building which, of no great artistic merit, is either of great antiquity or a composition of fragmentary beauties welded together in the course of time.”"

Sir John Summerson

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Photo: Gun port in the basement crypt of the Bank

In his 1947 essay titled “The Past in the Future,” architectural historian John Summerson (1904-92) offered this description of an old building. He was speaking of ancient European monuments – deserving protection because of their age value alone. But, he also included modest buildings, transformed over their lifetime by a process of

addition, subtraction, alteration and overlay. In his last passage, linking “fragmentary beauty” and “the course of time,” Summerson hinted at the unique character of old buildings that have found new uses.

In today’s society, old buildings are rarely protected on account of their age or character. Rather, architectural preservation is increasingly linked to adaptive reuse. It relies on arguments based on economics or linked to the contribution of reused buildings to environmental sustainability. Eager to save old buildings by any means, the conservation community has adopted economic viability and utility as pivotal values, particularly because those who tend to own such buildings often must favour such arguments. But it’s the esthetic character of these places that is their core heritage value.

With new construction, the design goal is clarity of planned use accompanied by controlled articulation of the architectural experience. In adaptive reuse, it is the reverse. Complexity, contradiction, nuance and overlay of meaning are the defining architectural qualities of adaptive reuse. From an esthetic perspective, the success of an adaptive reuse project is often dependent on how individual building features are retained and recombined to perform new functions, while retaining an evocative memory of their past life.

A fine example of this enduring architecture is the block at Adelaide Street East and George Street in Toronto. This property – comprised of five intertwined buildings, two of which are National Historic Sites – is protected by a Trust conservation easement. At one corner of the block, there is a neoclassical Bank of Upper Canada, built in 1827 – the power-base of the family compact and the establishment target of William Lyon McKenzie’s reform rebels. This two-storey, three-bay Georgian block, constructed of limestone, was likely designed by bank director and amateur architect William W. Baldwin, in collaboration with architect-contractor Francis Hall. The Doric-columned portico, added by architect John Howard in 1843, bespeaks the stature of this institution that, between 1822 and 1832, was Upper Canada’s only bank. The basement walls incorporate a vaulted arcade from an unconfirmed pre-1820 structure – an archaeological fragment of Toronto’s antiquity. The west side of this crypt retains a gun port chiselled through a thick masonry wall. Four classical iron

columns support the span above the main banking room floor. Massive steel-studded wooden security doors rest neatly tucked between the pilasters of the entry to the main hall, framing a refined Georgian door with a round-headed fanlight subdivided by delicate mullions. Today, these spaces are occupied by a high-tech media firm. But they retain the memory of the original Bank of Upper Canada – a balance of a sense of refinement, confidence and social status of the political elite with the needs for security and defence in early Toronto.



Photo: Security doors at the front entrance of the Bank



Photo: Fragments of earlier construction



Photo: Bank of Upper Canada, Toronto

At the other corner of the same block is the 1833 Georgian house of James Scott Howard – Toronto’s first postmaster. It amazingly continues to function as a post office, but with an added museological and interpretive overlay. Between them stands the De La Salle Institute, a Victorian block built in 1870 that eventually expanded to absorb the two adjacent properties by extending its third storey and mansard roof over the bank and post office.

Throughout the following century, this unified complex served as a residential Catholic school, the offices of the Toronto Separate School Board, a speculative office building under the ownership of Christie Brown Biscuit Company and finally the headquarters and processing plant of the United Farmers of Ontario Co-operative Company Ltd. In the 1970s, the complex was narrowly saved from demolition and rehabilitated as an office complex.

The archaeological and architectural complexity of the Bank of Upper Canada block imparts a unique quality to its architecture. It is a structure that was once imagined, designed, constructed and then used, misused, sometimes abused, neglected, rediscovered and used again. It has taken on different associative and symbolic meanings at different periods of its existence. With the protection of the Trust’s heritage conservation easement, it will continue to evolve its complex architectural character composed of fragmentary beauties.