

Ottawa, Ontario
RCMP Headquarters Building
1200 Alta Vista Drive

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The RCMP Headquarters Building was built in 1951-52 to the designs of Auguste Martineau. Erected to accommodate a Roman Catholic seminary, it was instead leased and later sold to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The building continues to serve as the RCMP national headquarters. See FHBRO Building Report 92-13.

Reasons for Designation

The RCMP Headquarters building was designated Recognized because of its architectural significance, and also for environmental and historical reasons.

The building's monumental scale and restrained classical detailing impart an air of formality and authority in keeping with its intended ecclesiastical use, and with its actual role as the headquarters for a national police force. Architecturally, it is in the monumental classical tradition, with classical detailing reduced and flattened to a bare minimum, and modernist characteristics expressed in stepped massing and smooth finishes. The architect was a graduate of the École des Beaux Arts, Québec, and received this and other commissions from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Ottawa after the pope personally selected him for design work related to a papal visit to Ottawa.

Historically, the sprawling multi-winged complex illustrates the RCMP's rapid expansion after World War II, and their acknowledged penchant for acquiring and modifying existing buildings to suit their own purposes.

The building's formal setting and orientation to the Rideau River have been undervalued through significant changes in transportation routes and site access. The complex now has its back to adjacent roadways and to the point of entry to the site, but nevertheless has a high local profile by virtue of its large scale and prominent location.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of the RCMP Headquarters building resides in its grand, austere presence on the site, in its rigorous, complex massing, and in the quality of its materials and detailing.

The building's presence is due in large part to its very long flat-roofed form and its formal composition. The overall effect is one of linearity and balance, with the long, low central block and flanking wings arranged along a north-south axis. At the same time, the design's complex interrelationship of stepped massing and subtle asymmetry add visual interest and a strong note of modernity.

Ottawa, Ontario

RCMP Headquarters Building (Continued)

These qualities must be respected by preserving the building's profile and footprint, particularly at the west, north and south faces of the building. Portions of the east (rear) side are currently obscured by nondescript wings added in the 1960s.

The original wings are relatively intact in their composition and materials and should not be altered. Classicism is subtly expressed in the high plinth or base defined by a double band of masonry. Masonry piers between the rows of narrow, slightly recessed windows suggest pilasters, and support the flat entablature with its modest cornice of dentils and metopes. The air of monumentality is heightened by the vertical emphasis of the central entrance pavilion, and by the wide steps leading up to it. The entrance appears to have been remodeled, with brown metal panels above oak-and-glass entrance doors. A return to the original configuration based on historic photographs would enhance the principal facade.

The building derives much of its character from the quality of its materials and workmanship. The limestone veneer blocks have a subtle colour variation that adds texture to the smooth facade, as do Art Deco bas relief panels and latin crosses. The windows are divided horizontally into three lights. The metal finish and horizontal configuration are typical of the building's era and should be retained or replaced in kind.

The interior has been extensively remodeled, but retains the overall axial layout suggested by the exterior composition. The original configuration of wide north-south corridors leading off the main lobby should be respected, and original volumes restored by removing dropped ceilings where possible. The solid, curving balustrades capped with terrazzo are sleek, "modern" features that identify the interior with a 1950s design aesthetic and should be retained.

The setting of the RCMP headquarters building has been affected by the construction of the Queensway and associated interchanges, and by closure of the access from the river side for security reasons. It is the rear of the complex that now faces transportation routes and the point of entry to the site. Two new structures to the west, together with trees planted in the courtyard between them, partially block the view of the principal facade and interrupt the building's orientation to the river. Any development should be designed to restore the intended sense of entry to the site and permit an uncluttered appreciation of the monumental principal facade. The current curvilinear landscaping between the building and the river competes with the precise lines and symmetry of the composition. A formal, axial approach to the site's landscaping such as that shown on the Gréber Plan model (Figure 13, FHBRO Report 92-13) would be more in keeping with the character of the building.