HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Dominion Observatory was built in 1902-04 to the designs of David Ewart, Chief Architect of the Department of Public Works from 1896 to 1914. The South Azimuth building (1912) and the Photo Equatorial building (1914) are related structures. The observatory is now occupied by the Geological Survey of Canada. Energy, Mines and Resources is the custodial department. See FHBRO Building Report 92-35, 92-41 and 92-42.

Reasons for Designation

The Dominion Observatory and its associated structures were designated Classified because of the architectural and historical significance of the ensemble, and also for environmental reasons.

One of four major public buildings constructed in Ottawa during the expansionist years of the Wilfrid Laurier government, the Dominion Observatory possesses a vibrancy not found in other Ottawa federal buildings of this period. Because it was intended to stand on Parliament Hill, the building was personally designed by Chief Architect Ewart. A masterful blend of Romanesque Revival and Edwardian Classicism, the design combines references to institutes of higher learning with a contemporary taste for grandiloquent classical buildings with interesting domes. The South Azimuth building and the Photo Equatorial building, which played supporting roles in the observatory's scientific endeavours, were given the same elaborate exterior treatment.

Historically, the observatory embodies the theme of pure and applied research at the national level, recalling the role of astronomy in the survey of western Canada and world class work in astronomy and geophysics, as well as a national profile as the source of Dominion Observatory Official Time. Scientists of national standing directly associated with the observatory include William Frederick King, Otto Julius Klotz and John Stanley Plaskett.

The intrinsic value of the three buildings is enhanced by the integrity of their campus-like setting and the harmonious relationship with the surrounding Central Experimental Farm.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of the Dominion Observatory resides in the building's masterful

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marriage of aesthetics and functional requirements, and in the robust materials, colours and textures that distinguish its exterior. Smooth red Sackville sandstone provides a strong contrast to the rock-faced variegated Nepean sandstone walls, boldly outlining the windows and doors and running in uninterrupted string courses around the building. Copper and decorative ironwork provide additional visual interest.
The four-storey tower is the architectural and scientific focus of the building, accommodating the main entrance as well as the 13 foot diameter pier which once supported the telescope. It possesses the lion's share of the building's ornamentation: foliated capitals flank the Romanesque entrance and separate the windows of the drum; incised lettering and a carved royal coat of arms surmount the entrance; a tightly packed line of brackets supports the drum balcony, which is encircled by a balustrade designed to match the ironwork of the Parliament buildings; and the large clock face at the center of drum recalls the observatory's former timekeeping function. The tower culminates in the retractable copper dome, which is still in good working order.

The tower anchors two flat-roofed wings with identical facades, creating a strong impression of symmetry and order that should not be compromised.

The observatory is relatively intact in its overall appearance, major interventions notwithstanding: an elevator shaft added in the 1960s projects through the roof behind the dome, two large chimney stacks have been removed, and windows and doors have been replaced with inappropriate metal units. Because the facade was so carefully designed, all of its features merit maintenance and preservation. The stone and copper work in particular require careful conservation. Consideration should be given to returning to windows matching the configuration seen in early photographs, and to alleviating the visual impact of the elevator shaft.

The interior is in excellent condition. The original layout, as well as features that define its early government office character - yellow brick walls, ceramic tile floors, moulded baseboards, original light fixtures and paneled office doors with transom lights - are intact and merit preservation. The removal of wrought iron railings from the curved staircase to accommodate the elevator shaft is unfortunate. The extant section of rail at top of stairs must be retained as a record of the original configuration.

The South Azimuth building and the Photo Equatorial building are constructed of the same materials as the observatory, and suffer from neglect. The buildings should be stabilized and features that recall their earlier scientific role preserved, such as the South Azimuth building's slate louvers and the stairs leading to the dome of the Photo Equatorial building.

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The three buildings form a picturesque ensemble that harmonizes with the natural setting of the Experimental Farm. A 1946 aerial photograph illustrates the original sinuous circulation pattern, which is largely intact, as well as whimsical star-shaped flower beds that no longer exist. Management of the landscape should be in keeping with early patterns.

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