

85-58

Ottawa, Ontario  
**Geological Museum (former)**  
541 Sussex Drive

## **HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT**

The origins of the former Geological Museum building in Ottawa go back to the Ottawa Hotel of 1837, enlarged in 1851 and 1863. The only known designer who may have been associated with the building's construction was James Skead, a contractor and owner possibly responsible for the 1863 wing. In 1881 the original four-storey hotel was rebuilt as a three-storey building in a style based on the 1863 wing, to house the Geological Museum. An addition in 1917 housed a laboratory. In the 1980s, the building exterior was returned to a c.1881 appearance. Work included a new metal roof, new Italianate trim and brackets, and new windows. The building is currently used as offices and for retail purposes. The custodian is the National Capital Commission. See FHBRO Building Report 85-58.

### **Reasons for Designation**

The Former Geological Museum building was designated Recognized because of its environmental and local significance, its architectural value, and its historical associations.

The building enhances the character of the adjacent mixed commercial and institutional urban area, acting as an anchor for the market area. Its rear courtyard forms part of a series of linked courtyards largely maintaining their 19th century form. The building is one of the oldest extant buildings in the downtown and is located on a prominent corner along Sussex Drive, a high-profile thoroughfare.

The former Geological Museum building is a well-proportioned, classically inspired building with Italianate detailing, featuring bracketed eaves, elaborate cornices, symmetrically arranged openings, and classically inspired ornamentation. The modest scale and appearance of the building in its c. 1881 form attest to the continued popularity of Italianate designs for commercial structures.

The varied history of the building reflects many themes, including the important social and economic roles of hotels, such as staging cultural and political events in 19th century Bytown, and the continuing development of Sussex Drive as a primary commercial and symbolic corridor in the city. The early role as the museum and offices of the Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada, the first Canadian museum of national scope, adds to the historical value of the building. The building is also associated with James Skead (1817-1884) a prominent local businessman who

.../2

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## **Geological Museum (former) (Continued)**

became a member of the provincial legislative assembly, and Alfred Selwyn (1824-1902), noted geologist who became director of the Geological Survey of Canada.

### **Character Defining Elements**

The heritage character of the former hotel/Geological Museum building resides in its massing and footprint, in its Italianate and classically-inspired architectural details, in its construction materials and remaining interiors, and in its relationship to the site and setting.

The building is a three-storey L-shaped structure with a low pitched roof. The massing has classical proportions, a rigidly symmetrical arrangement of windows and doors, and a central shallow arched gable at the roof of the principal (Sussex Drive) facade. The L-shaped footprint, massing, and roof profile should be maintained, as should the prominence of the facades along both Sussex Drive and George Street.

Elements of the Italianate style are seen in the bracketed cornices and panelled cornice trim. The two facades have classical window detailing varying from floor to floor. The principal surface material of the building is irregularly-coursed limestone, with dressed stone window surrounds, sills, stringcoursing and corner quoins. All masonry merits appropriate conservation expertise. The wood bracketed cornices and panelled cornice trim and metal roofing were rebuilt as part of the 1980s restoration, which also included replacement in kind of the windows. The original building materials and those installed during the restoration should have a program of regular review and maintenance. Any further alteration of the facade and its components should be predicated on physical or pictorial evidence.

Various interior alterations have removed most of the original detail except for the wood framed staircase at the main entry. This should be retained, as should the original patterns of access into the building. Any surviving early finishes should be documented and preserved for incorporation into future work.

The building maintains its original L-shaped footprint and prominent corner site which gives visibility to two facades. The hard-surfaced urban site has a simple treatment which should be maintained.

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For further guidance, please refer to the *FHBRO Code of Practice*.