

FHBRO Number 89-20

Québec, Québec

**Customs and Excise Building**

130 Dalhousie Street

The Customs and Excise Building at Québec was constructed between 1856 and 1860 as the city's third Customs House. The structure was designed by prominent architect William Thomas. Alterations to the structure resulted from two fires, one in 1864, when the roof was rebuilt and the profile of the drum was increased. The second fire in 1909 resulted in the most significant alterations and included rebuilding in steel and concrete the interior framing and the shallow dome, the addition of a third storey, which is treated as an attic storey, the insertion of oculus windows into each of the pediments, the conversion of doors on the rear into windows, and conversion of an end facade entrance into a doorway while the reverse occurred at the other end facade. The interior was re-planned at this time, following Beaux-Arts principles. Alterations in the 1970s included replacement of the elevator, adding a conference room under the dome, and raising the third floor for mechanical services. Site modifications in 1984 obscured the historic relationship to the waterfront. The building currently maintains its customs house functions. Public Works and Government Services Canada is the custodian. See FHBRO Building Report 89-20.

**Reasons For Designation**

The Customs and Excise Building was designated Classified for its architectural importance and its historical associations as well its environmental significance.

The superb Neo-Classical structure features a symmetrical design and a pedimented Doric portico on the principal facade. The structure is surmounted by a shallow dome which contributes to the drama of the design. Pilasters, pediments, and window treatments are carried around the building reflecting classical inspiration.

The construction of the structure affirms the important role of the port of Québec as a major customs port. It reflects the exceptional growth of Québec in the 1850s as the great centre of the St. Lawrence valley timber trade and wooden ship construction. It is also associated with the development of Québec as an important maritime centre and its evolution as a shipping centre for Lower and Upper Canada.

The scale and silhouette of the building, at the juncture of the St. Charles and the St. Lawrence Rivers, are compatible with the urban surroundings. Well known in the city, its location and function further contributes to its importance in this waterfront setting.

**Character Defining Elements**

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The heritage character of the Customs and Excise Building resides in its overall massing, profile, Neo-Classical features and construction materials, Beaux-Arts interiors, and site relationships.

The Customs and Excise Building consists of an elongated, cruciform-shaped structure with symmetrical pediments at the ends of the wings. The flat roof profile features a central octagonal drum and shallow dome. The projecting front portico and stairway are a prominent feature contributing to the Neo-Classical style of the building. The substantial, symmetrical massing and profile are characteristic features of the style.

The stone facades of the building are vermiculated, smooth-faced, and carved in certain areas, such as the keystones. Two-storey pilasters and a grand, free-standing colonnade, are linked by a continuous entablature with triglyphs and modillions, which supports the pediments on each wing and unifies the design. The pilaster locations define the symmetrical window placements. There are circular headed window units at ground floor, shallow-arched units at the second floor, and small, flat-headed units at the upper floor. The detailing throughout the structure follows Neo-Classical precedents and the pleasing scale and proportions contribute greatly to the design of the building.

The fine-scale subdivision of the windows, the entrance doors and the transom appears to be sympathetic to the 1909 alterations. The materials, scale, and proportions of the multi-paned windows and doors contribute to the Neo-Classical character.

Beaux-Arts planning principles feature the use of symmetry, hierarchy and axial order as well as extended corridor vistas: these are characteristic features of the interior of this building. The Beaux-Arts treatment is also reflected in the use of high-quality materials like marble wall panelling. Simple classical motifs are used for the door and window architraves, picture rail and cornice mouldings, and for the ornate plaster ceilings which are characteristic of Beaux-Arts interiors.

The contemporary landscape treatment, reflected in hard surfaces and site elements, competes with the prominence of the building. The scale of the deciduous tree plantings obscures the primary facade and does not reflect the traditional setting.

On replacement, plantings should respect the symmetry and clarity of this facade. The ground plane treatment and site elements should also respect the traditional character of this building's setting.

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

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