

Halifax, Nova Scotia  
**Dominion Public Building**  
1713 Bedford Row

## **HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT**

The Dominion Public Building was constructed in 1935. It was designed by a team under Supervising Architect Eric Temple of the Chief Architect's Branch of the Department of Public Works. A four storey addition was constructed in 1962. Public Works Canada is the custodian. See FHBRO Building Report 89-42.

### **Reasons For Designation**

The Dominion Public Building was designated Recognized because of its historical associations, its importance as a work of architecture, and its local and environmental significance.

Built under the Public Works Construction Act, the Dominion Public Building is a significant example of projects undertaken by the federal government to stimulate local economies during the Great Depression.

The building is a very good example of a large Art Deco office building, and one of the first such designs to be produced by the Chief Architect's office. Executed in the Classical Moderne style, the building exhibits characteristics of classicism in its basic composition, which is divided into three sections suggesting the base, shaft and capital of a classical column; and modernity in the Art Deco elements of its design: stepped massing, smooth stone finish and bands of abstract decoration. The vertically oriented stepped facade is also characteristic of Art Deco and gives the building a significant presence on Bedford Row.

The craftsmanship and materials of the Dominion Public Building are of high quality, with dressed sandstone and granite at the exterior and marble, terrazzo, mosaic and bronze fittings in the principal public spaces. The exterior and interior decorations are notable for their explicitly Canadian subject matter which reflects the desire of several Canadian designers for truly Canadian forms of expression.

The Dominion Public Building was the first sky-scraper to be constructed in Halifax, and it continued to dominate the skyline until the 1960s. It is a familiar landmark in the city.

### **Character Defining Features**

The heritage value of the Dominion Public Building resides in all aspects of its Classical Moderne design as found particularly on the exterior and the ground floor interior. The design of the building is notable for its carefully proportioned, stepped-back form, smooth wall surfaces of Wallace sandstone with polished granite at the base and main

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entrance, vertically-oriented window recesses, decorative detail, and architectural metals and fittings, as well as for the plan, finish and details of the principal public spaces.

The exterior of the building exhibits the massing and strong vertical orientation which is typical of the "stepped, set-back" Art Deco skyscraper of the 1920s and 30s. The main Bedford Row elevation of the Dominion Public Building is made up of a recessed central tower which is flanked by lower office blocks which project to the sidewalk on either side. The building's strong vertical orientation is further strengthened by narrow, double-hung and casement windows which, singly and in pairs, are set in vertical recesses which extend the height of the building. Slit windows in the central tower further emphasize its height.

The other facades of the building continue the stepped massing and strong verticality of the Bedford Row facade. This arrangement of the building masses is highly characteristic of the period and is an important feature of the building.

The impact of the 1962 addition to the building was minimized by limiting its height to four storeys, and by using similar materials, compatible massing and a simplified facade with "punched" windows. This approach resulted in a compatible neighbour.

The facades are highlighted by simplified, but characteristic decorative carvings in the masonry, carried out in the stylized Art Deco mode, an approach to decoration which is typical of Classical Moderne architecture. At the Dominion Public Building these include abstract geometric friezes and marine motifs such as waves, dolphins and sea horses. Typical of many Art Deco buildings, this decoration is concentrated at the street level, the roof-line and around the main entrance, the intervening space being without decoration. These features of the exterior are characteristic of classical Moderne architecture and should be carefully protected and maintained. The masonry should be the subject of an ongoing maintenance program and appropriate conservation expertise involved in any programs of repair or restoration. Precedents of colour, proportion and material should be respected.

The exterior elevations have survived virtually intact except for the introduction of an intrusive doorway and out-of-scale light fixtures which flank the entrance. These elevations should be maintained with all their verticality, articulation, plainness or detail. The existing aluminum door and frame units are incompatible with the design of the facade of the building. When it becomes necessary to replace these doors, new units which are more compatible with the design intent and precedent would considerably enhance the building.

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The alteration of any element of the exterior elevations would have a negative impact on the heritage character of the building. Any signage installed on the building should be designed using compatible forms and materials.

The main lobby and post office lobby is a striking example of Classical Moderne architecture as applied to interior design. Despite some alterations the plan of the postal services area is intact and in excellent condition. The plan, massing and proportions are carefully handled and the use of decoration is as stylized as it is on the exterior. The materials are of high quality throughout. These include the use of bronze doors, birch woodwork, polished marble walls in two shades of grey, coordinated terrazzo floors, carefully detailed coffered plaster ceilings, hexagon-motif light fixtures and elevator doors and hardware in bronze and stainless steel or nickel. The figures in mosaic and terrazzo, the bronze wicket screens and particularly the "Edward VIII" sign board give special interest to the space. The spaces, design and materials of the main lobby area have survived virtually intact to the present day; every effort should be made to preserve and protect the design integrity and the individual elements of this quality interior and to incorporate these features in any future use of the space.

The building lightwell is intact in all respects. As the major plan element of the building it should be retained to function as a source of light for the interior office spaces.

The quality of finishes and detailing on the upper floors is standard and unexceptional. Features of interest in these areas are the elevator lobbies and fire-separating doors. This configuration and the doors themselves should be protected and incorporated in any future development scheme. The remainder of the floor areas of the building could be managed with some flexibility.

Aside from minor modifications for accessibility, the setting of the building is virtually unchanged. Although minor modifications to the secondary elevations could be considered, modifications which would detract from the dominant massing of the building and its clean uncluttered lines must be resisted.

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