

# FHBRO HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT PUBLIC ARCHIVES AND NATIONAL LIBRARY BUILDING OTTAWA (ONTARIO)

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FHBRO number: **04-027**  
DFRP number: **08839**  
Resource name: **Public Archives and National Library Building**  
Address: **395 Wellington Street, Ottawa (Ontario)**  
FHBRO status: **“Classified” Federal Heritage Building**  
Construction: **1963-1967**  
Designer: **Mathers and Haldenby, Architects (1953)**  
Original function: **Public Archives and National Library of Canada**  
Current function: **Unchanged**  
Modifications: **Infill of auditorium windows with stone panels (1999)**  
Custodian: **Public Works and Government Services Canada**

## **Description of Historic Place**

The Public Archives and National Library Building is a prominent structure, comprised of two symmetrical four-storey wings, which wrap around a central nine-storey tower block. It is clad in grey granite stone, accented with polished granite panels and brushed aluminum railings. The generously glazed lower four storeys of the building form a raised forecourt plaza at the front. The solid tower above them, containing the stacks, is perforated with small square openings. An auditorium projects out from the west side of the building. Located at the Western extremity of Ottawa’s Parliamentary Precinct on a site overlooking the Ottawa River, it is highly visible from many vantage points. The designation is confined to the footprint of the building.

## **Heritage Value**

The Public Archives and National Library Building is a “Classified” Federal Heritage Building because of its historical associations, and its architectural and environmental values.

### Historical value:

The home of two of the Nation’s pre-eminent cultural institutions and a manifestation of their union, the Public Archives and National Library Building constitutes one of the best examples of the development and recognition of Canada’s cultural and intellectual identity. The building represents the preservation of the national collective memory, which both institutions gather and disseminate. With the site set aside and building plans prepared by 1952, the building was in continuity with the aim of the 1912 expropriation of Wellington Street’s north side for use by federal institutions. It is a very good example of the realization of the Gréber plan’s intent to form “an appropriate and stately western end of Wellington”, which was seen as the “focus of government activities.” The Public Archives and National Library Building is also associated with a person of national importance, William Kaye Lamb, who was the dominant figure in the establishment of the National Library as an institution and in the creation of its official quarters. A Dominion Archivist and the first National Librarian, Lamb was a well-rounded scholar and respected member of the international community of librarians.

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## Architectural value:

A well known work by the important architectural firm of Mathers and Haldenby, and which also benefited from the contribution of famous artists Hutton, Comfort and Pellan, the Public Archives and National Library Building is a high quality achievement in both its aesthetic and functional design. Aesthetically, it is a hybrid of two tendencies, balancing remnants of federal classical modernism with Modernism's new trends, both of which it handles with sophistication and refinement, resulting in a modern, functionalist, rational appearance, which has retained a remarkably high level of integrity. Functionally, the complex range of the building's uses is well served and the arrangement of public areas and that of services and stacks is reflected in the composition of the building. The functional hierarchy of spaces and circulation paths is made clear to visitors due their scale, materials and lighting. This confers a welcoming quality to the building. High quality materials and close attention given to all details and assemblies also contribute to the building's aesthetic expression and create interest and diversity throughout it.

## Environmental value:

By its prominent location and design, the Public Archives and National Library Building reinforces the federal presence and prestigious institutional character of the west end of Wellington Street and the federal precinct. Its broad, sloped site has retained its character and strong relationship to the building. Thanks to these characteristics, to its role as an anchor of the ceremonial route along Wellington Street, to its symbolic importance as a national institution and to its function as a widely used public venue for Ottawans, the building acts as a familiar landmark in the region.

## **Character-Defining Elements**

The following character-defining elements of the Public Archives and National Library Building should be respected:

Its aesthetic design, which achieves a sophisticated balance between federal classical modernism and new modernist trends, as manifested in:

- The rhythm of solid and voids and overall massing of the building, which combines a central monolith, modern in character due to the abstract, restrained and dramatic quality of its multitude of small punched windows, around which are wrapped four generously glazed stories of a contrasting architectural character. This composition reflects the functional division of the building between stacks and public spaces;
- Its integration and adaptation to the sloping site and respectful response to the East and West Memorial Buildings facing it, which give the building a sense of repose;
- The completeness of its planning and the good handling of all elevations, which make it as striking seen from many angles;
- The use of natural and artificial light in the definition of the spaces: abundantly lit public spaces, as can be seen in the transparency of the ground floor, and contrasting, darker, service areas, due to their more introspective fenestration;
- The stripped-down simplicity of the design, which relies on the attentive treatment of details, sophistication in proportions and assemblies, and elements such as the coving of the exterior masonry pilasters, refined simplicity of the fenestration, coping stone of the

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- handrails, hardware, etc. This illustrates a “total design” which was conscious of and attentive to all scales of perception;
- The high quality artwork designed specifically for the building, responsive to its purpose and illustrative of important thematic aspects of the two institutions. Playing both functional and symbolic roles, the artwork is an integral part of the composition of spaces and thus contributes to the overall excellent quality of the design;

Its successful functional design, which accommodates a multiplicity of various uses and is expressed in the rational aesthetics of the building, as demonstrated in:

- The asymmetry of the eccentric plan, as can be seen in the off-center location of the main staircase and auditorium, which belies the stronger symmetry of the exterior and creates a factor of surprise;
- The clarity and division of public and service spaces, and their hierarchy as translated by a richness of nuances in their treatment and in the sense of progression in the user’s path;
- The quality and generosity of interior public spaces, such as the reading rooms and lobby, in their proportions and handling of materials, and in the quality of their natural and artificial lighting;

The excellent choice and handling of materials, which are closely linked to the building’s aesthetic expression, as can be seen in:

- The wide range of high quality, noble materials, such as marble, brass, gold mosaic, and more traditional materials such as wood and aluminum, which are very artfully handled and unusually combined and contrasted. These have been used throughout the building, creating interest and diversity;
- The specific palettes of materials and colors in the public areas, which also play into defining the hierarchy of spaces;

The manner in which the building reinforces the federal presence and prestigious institutional character of its setting and acts as a familiar regional landmark, as evidenced in:

- The site, defined by Wellington Street, the bottom of the escarpment, the parking lot and park to the east and pathways to the west, which has remained unchanged in its character;
- The plinths, plazas and retaining walls around the building, all of which contribute to establishing its strong relationship with the site;
- The building’s prominence, due to its size, striking design, and position at the end of Wellington, overlooking the river;
- The symbolic importance of the Public Archives and National Library Building as the home of two national institutions and as an important public venue in Ottawa.

For guidance on interventions, please refer to the *FHBRO Code of Practice* and to the *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada*. For further information contact FHBRO.

January 2005