

Bell Telephone Company Building

Description

The property at 80 Birmingham Street is worthy of designation under Part IV of the *Ontario Heritage Act* for its cultural heritage value or interest, and meets the criteria for municipal designation prescribed by the Province of Ontario under the three categories of design, historical and contextual value. Located on the northeast corner of Birmingham Street and Sixth Street, one block east of Islington Avenue, the two-storey building was completed in 1926 as a switching station for the Bell Telephone Company of Canada. The structure has been converted to an office building known as the Birmingham Business Centre.

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

Design of Physical Value

The Bell Telephone Company Building has design value as a carefully detailed example of an industrial building highlighted with elements of Edwardian Classicism. Developed during the first decade of the 20th century when Edward VII reigned as the King of England, the style features brick surfaces with stone trim, restrained Classical details, and symmetrically-placed fenestration.

Historical or Associative Value

The Bell Telephone Company Building is associated with the historical development of the Etobicoke community of New Toronto. In 1889, Toronto industrialist Thomas McDonald formed a real estate company and purchased over 500 acres of farmland in Etobicoke Township. McDonald subdivided the tract into commercial, residential and industrial sectors, with industrial lands reserved on Seventh Street (now Islington Avenue) and Eighth Street to the west. The first phase of development in New Toronto welcomed ten factories, including McDonald's own stamping works that produced pressed metal products. While workers were housed in the designated residential area east of Islington Avenue, additional labourers arrived via the steam railways and the electric streetcar line along Lake Shore Road. The permanent population of the area grew dramatically after 1906, when the Grand Trunk Railway (later absorbed by Canadian National Railways) opened a large marshalling yard at Mimico.

The Bell Telephone Company of Canada (chartered in 1880 and later known as Bell Canada) provided telephone service to New Toronto following its incorporation as a town in 1913. While service was initially limited to daytime hours and party lines, the number of subscribers in New Toronto and the neighbouring communities of Mimico and Long Branch exceeded 1500 by 1925. At this time, the Bell Telephone Company authorized the construction of a building to house switchboard operators, service technicians and equipment. It engaged Montreal architect W. J. Carmichael to prepare the plans for the switching station. Carmichael had previously designed the Parkdale Telephone

Exchange Building (1899) at 207 Cowan Avenue, which is recognized on the City's heritage inventory. His other commissions for the Bell Telephone Company in Toronto included an exchange on Adelaide Street near Yonge dating to 1909, and the Elgin Exchange (1924) on the corner of Temperance Street and Sheppard Street, both of which were demolished. Toronto architect Frank A. Williams designed the east addition, which was completed in 1946. The Bell Telephone Company retained the property until 1981. The following year, the site was acquired by the current owners who have converted the former switching station into an office building while retaining the historical ambiance and the surviving original architectural features.

Contextual Value

The Bell Telephone Company Building is a landmark in New Toronto where it anchors a corner lot near the intersection of Islington Avenue and Birmingham Street. In the neighbourhood, the Boxer Building (circa 1908) at 222 Islington Avenue is designated under Part IV of the *Ontario Heritage Act*. It incorporates the façade of the McDonald Stamping Works Building (1891), completed for one of the first industries in New Toronto. With the Boxer Building and the adjoining Hydro Substation (1917) at 124 Birmingham Street, the Bell Telephone Company Building is part of a series of industrial complexes associated with the development of New Toronto.

Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes of the Bell Telephone Company Building related to its design value as a representative example of an industrial building with Edwardian Classical detailing are found on the exterior walls, the flat roof, and the interior, consisting of:

- Extending two stories above a raised base with window openings, the L-shaped plan with a rear (east) wing
- The red brick cladding with brick and stone detailing
- The flat roof with a brick chimney near the intersection of the main body (west) and the east wing (the flag pole has been removed from the west end of the roof)
- On the south and west elevations facing Birmingham Street and Sixth Street, respectively, the stone band courses along the walls above the basement openings and beneath the flat roof
- The treatment of the principal (west) façade facing Sixth Street, where the south three bays are stepped forward under a parapet with stone cornices and a name plate
- On the west façade, the placement of the main entrance in the left (north) bay in a stone surround with pilasters and an entablature (the name plate over the door, shown on the plans for the building, has been covered over)
- Above the west entry, the single stair hall window opening
- On the west façade and south elevation, the symmetrical placement of flat-headed window openings with brick voussoirs and banding, stone sills, and six-over-one wood sash windows

- The treatment of some of the window openings on the west façade and south elevation with stone keystones, stone corbels on the sills, and brick piers with stone caps
- The north elevation and rear (east) wall, which have less decorative detailing, with the segmental-arched window openings with brick and stone trim and wood sash windows
- On the interior, the original staircase inside the west entrance with white carrera marble steps and terrazzo-clad landings

The single-storey addition on the north wall, dating to 1974, is not identified as a heritage attribute.

The historical value of the Bell Telephone Company Building as an institution of importance in the development of the community of New Toronto is illustrated by the name plate reading “BELL TELEPHONE COMPANY OF CANADA” on the principal (west) façade.

The building’s contextual value as a landmark in New Toronto is illustrated by the placement of the Bell Telephone Company Building on a corner lot near the prominent intersection of Islington Avenue and Birmingham Street.