

Durant Motors Office Building

Description

The property at 150 Laird Drive is worthy of inclusion on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties for its cultural heritage value or interest. According to the book Leaside, the two-storey office building was constructed in 1928 for Durant Motors of Canada and located on the west side of Laird Drive in the first block south of McRae Drive (Pitfield, 1999, 44). The property was later acquired by the Imperial Oil Company, which constructed a separate building on the south end of the site (the latter structure is not included in the Reasons for Listing).

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

Design or Physical Value

The Durant Motors Office Building has design value as a well-crafted example of an office building with Neo-Gothic features. The style, dating to the early 20th century and exemplified by Hart House (completed 1919) at the University of Toronto, was especially popular for religious and educational buildings. However, its application of medieval-inspired elements was found on other building types, including the buttresses, cross motifs, and the treatment of the main entrance on the Durant Motors Office Building.

Historical or Associative Value

The Durant Motors Office Building is identified with the historical development of Leaside as a planned community. Its origins date to the early 19th century when members of the Lea family acquired farmland in the area southeast of present-day Bayview Avenue and Eglinton Avenue East. After the Canadian Pacific Railway purchased part of the Lea acreage as the site of its repair facility and train station, the family allowed the company to name the junction “Leaside.” In 1912, the Canadian Northern Railway commissioned the famed Montreal landscape architect Frederick G. Todd to lay out a model town on the 1000-acre tract of land it had assembled in Leaside. Todd drew up a plan that created separate industrial and residential sectors for the community, which was incorporated as the Town of Leaside in 1913. While the anticipated development of the municipality was delayed by World War I, during the conflict the Canadian government established the Leaside Airfield on Laird Drive as the training ground for Royal Flying Corps pilots. In 1918, the site gained fame as the terminus for the first airmail flight in Canada. After the war, the air field and the adjoining Leaside Munitions Company became the locations of the town’s first post-war industries: the Canadian Wire and Cable Company and Durant Motors of Canada.

Durant Motors of Canada was founded in 1921 as the Canadian subsidiary of the American company, Durant Motors Incorporated. Durant Motors acquired the former site of the Leaside Munitions Company on Laird Drive where it expanded the property to include 20 acres of land with 11 buildings. By 1924, the company was the third largest

producer of automobiles in Canada, and an impressive office building was completed on the west side of Laird Drive, opposite the plant, in 1928 (a building permit naming an architect was not found). Two years later, the American parent company faced financial failure and passed control of the venture to its Canadian branch. In 1931, the Durant Motor Company was taken over by Dominion Motors Limited, a new enterprise headed by Durant's Canadian president and based in Leaside. With the impact of the Great Depression, Dominion Motors closed in 1935. The Durant Motors Office Building was subsequently acquired by the Imperial Oil Company for its Ontario sales division. The site is an important reminder of one of Leaside's earliest and most successful industries.

Contextual Value

The Durant Motors Office Building has contextual value as it supports the character of Laird Drive, which developed as the major corridor through the industrial sector of Leaside. With its placement on the property and decorative appearance, the building is an important presence on the street and in the community.

Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes of the Durant Motors Office Building related to its design value as a good example of the Neo-Gothic style highlighting an office building are found on the exterior walls and roof. The structure is clad with red brick and trimmed with brick and stone. The building is covered by a flat roof with a stone cornice, a decorative parapet in the centre of the east façade, and a brick chimney on the south end. Rising two stories above a raised base with window openings, the rectangular plan is orientated with the long east wall flanking Laird Drive. The principal (east) façade is organized into 11 bays by large brick buttresses with stone caps that provide bases for stone cross motifs. Each bay contains a two-storey stone surround with cornices and dentils. The main entrance is placed at the base of the centre bay in a stone surround under a parapet with cartouches. Double doors are surmounted by a Tudor-arched transom and a moulded hood (the doors and transom light have been replaced). On either side of the entry, the bays contain a double flat-headed window opening in each floor, brick and stone panels under the first-floor openings, and decorative brickwork on the spandrels beneath the second-storey openings. The pattern and detailing of the fenestration continue on the side elevations (north and south) and the rear (west) wall.