

Toronto Courthouse (former Metropolitan Toronto Courthouse)

Description

The property at 361 University Avenue is worthy of inclusion on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties. Located on the southeast corner of University Avenue and Armoury Street, the first phase of the Toronto Courthouse (originally known as the Metropolitan Toronto Courthouse) was completed in 1966, with the addition of two stories on the Courthouse in 1987 and the completion of the South Wing in 1985. The history and significance of the complex were documented by Unterman McPhail Cuming Associates, heritage conservation and planning consultants, in a study for the Ontario Realty Corporation dated September 1998.

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

Design Value

The Toronto Courthouse has design value as an important example of late 20th century Modern design, which reflected the size and prominence of the site and its intended use. According to Ronald A. Dick, the project architect, the design was based on “dignity and convenience” (Unterman, et. al., 1998, 19). The largest of its type built in Ontario, the Courthouse was among the last complexes in the province clad with local Queenston limestone. The imposing and formal presence of the Courthouse with its use of fin walls was balanced by the visually interesting 12-sided form and open passageway of the adjoining South Wing. The design for the Toronto Courthouse allowed for the construction of additional stories, and included a below grade tunnel connecting the complex to neighbouring Osgoode Hall.

Associative Value

Historically, the Toronto Courthouse is linked to the development of University Avenue as a major ceremonial corridor in the city and the location of landmark buildings. During the World War I era, proponents of the City Beautiful Movement redesigned University Avenue as a ceremonial boulevard separated by a median with statuary. The thoroughfare was lined with commercial and institutional buildings that followed City guidelines controlling height, colour and materials. After the Second World War, many of the earlier buildings were replaced by new structures, including the Toronto Courthouse.

The Toronto Courthouse was planned after Metropolitan Toronto was created in 1953 as an upper tier government with specific responsibilities, including the provision and maintenance of court facilities. After the completion of a needs assessment and the awarding of the architectural contracts, the first phase of the complex opened in 1966 and contained courtrooms and offices. The addition of two floors to the Courthouse in 1987

was preceded by the completion of the South Wing in 1985 to house the library of the County of York Law Association, as well as robing, committee and lounge rooms.

The Toronto Courthouse is associated with the practice of notable design firms of the era. The local architectural office of Marani, Morris and Allan (1960-1965) and its successor, Marani Rounthwaite and Dick (1966-1971) were known for their large-scale commissions for a range of commercial and institutional buildings, including the Better Living Centre (1964) at Exhibition Place and the 1961 addition to the McClelland and Stewart Building at 481 University Avenue (north of the Toronto Courthouse), which are recognized on the City's heritage inventory. The landscape plans for the Courthouse were prepared by Michael Hough of Hough Woodland Naylor Dance Limited. Recognized as the founding program head in landscape architecture at the University of Toronto and as a professor in the environmental studies program at York University, Hough worked as a consultant on numerous commissions in Canada and abroad, including the original landscape designs for Ontario Place in Toronto.

Contextual Value

Contextually, the Toronto Courthouse is a landmark on University Avenue where it contributes to the character of the street as the setting for important institutions. Among the properties of note in the vicinity are Osgoode Hall, directly south, and the Canada Life Building, opposite. The Toronto Courthouse forms part of an institutional enclave with its proximity to New City Hall (east), which was constructed during the same period and is complementary in its application of Modern styling, use of contemporary design motifs and materials, and placement in an open plaza.

Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes of the Toronto Courthouse related to its value as an important example of Modern design associated with the institutional and contextual development of University Avenue are found on the exterior walls, roofs and interiors described below.

Exterior Attributes

Occupying a large site at the southeast corner of University Avenue and Armoury Street, the design features an eight-storey Courthouse with courtrooms and offices that is connected via a glazed link to the three-storey South Wing. The scale, form and massing of the complex is significant. The Courthouse features a long rectangular plan under a flat roof. The corners are cut back where strip windows extend vertically from the ground floor to the top of the structure. Above a poured concrete foundation, the Courthouse is clad with ribbed ashlar Queenston limestone and trimmed with metal, stone, and glass. The top two floors of the Courthouse are faced with Indiana limestone. The principal (west) façade on University Avenue places eight bays with openings in the centre of the wall. In the lower storey, metal-framed doors, sidelights and transoms are flanked by full-height glazed window openings. A crest and carved letters and numbers

reading “Courthouse” and “361 University Avenue” are found on the right (south) side of the entry. The upper floors have narrow rectangular window openings that rise two stories in the centre of the wall and contain multi-paned windows. Patterned spandrels are placed beneath the second-floor windows, and a three-part window opening marks the upper left (north) corner of this wall. The north and south elevations feature fin walls that organize the horizontal grid of metal-framed window openings and limestone spandrels with beveled edges. The ramp to the basement level is located beside the north elevation with access to Armoury Street. The rear (east) wall has four door openings flanked by pairs of narrow rectangular window openings, as well as a crest and a carved nameplate. The upper portion of the east wall is devoid of openings.

The three-storey South Wing features a 12-sided plan with an open passageway in the lower level. Covered by a copper-clad sloped roof, the structure is faced with Indiana limestone. Three bays on the east and west facades contain tripartite window openings with spandrels. The open passageway is decorated with vertical marble strips and, on the north side, an entrance incorporates metal-framed doors, sidelights and transoms similar to those found on the Courthouse.

Interior Attributes

On the interior of the Courthouse, the west entrance vestibule with a dedication panel and the lobby with an open escalator and a bank of elevators display marble walls, terrazzo floors, and stainless-steel detailing. In the South Wing, the third-floor library with a 12-sided umbrella-shaped ceiling is identified as a heritage feature.

Landscape Attributes

The Toronto Courthouse and South Wing are set in a plaza that features a geometric layout where multiple levels are defined by raised planter boxes and feature flagpoles, light standards (not original), limestone benches, shallow pools with fountains, commemorative plaques and statuary, and decorative paving (some of which has been replaced). The focus of the landscape design is the ceremonial pedestrian walkway from University Avenue to Nathan Phillips Square that extends beneath the South Wing. On the west side along University Avenue, the complex shares its setback with Osgoode Hall. Screens of trees are positioned along the south plaza adjoining Osgoode Hall and at the southeast corner of University Avenue and Armoury Street. A stone monument recognizing the former University Avenue Armouries anchors the southwest corner of the property, while a modern sculpture commemorating human rights advocate Frederick G. Gans is found along the walkway to Nathan Phillips Square. More recently, the McMurtry Gardens of Justice were unveiled as a tribute to the former Chief Justice of Ontario who retired in 2007. Placed west of the main entrance, “The Pillars of Justice” by British artist Edwina Sandys is the first in a planned series of sculptures designed to contribute to the public space around the Toronto Courthouse.