

Automotive Building

Description

The property at 2 Strachan Avenue (Automotive Building) is worthy of designation under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act for its cultural heritage value, and meets the criteria for municipal designation prescribed by the Province of Ontario under the three categories of design, associative and contextual value. Located at the east end of Exhibition Place, the Automotive Building was completed in 1929 as an exhibition hall for the display of automobiles and automotive products. The property was listed on the inaugural City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties in 1973.

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

The Automotive Building at Exhibition Place has design value as an excellent example of Modern Classicism with Art Deco detailing from the era between World Wars I and II. Its design was described in contemporary periodicals as a harmonization of Classical principles with Modernity (*RAIC Journal*, November 1929, 405). The Automotive Building represented the transition from the Beaux-Arts inspired structures at the west and east ends of the site (including the adjoining Princes' Gates) to those of the next decade with their application of Art Moderne and Art Deco stylistic features (Horse Palace, 1931 and Bandshell, 1936).

The Automotive Building is associated historically with the evolution of Exhibition Place during the early 20th century. The property overlooking Lake Ontario was acquired for the exhibition grounds in 1878 after the provincial agricultural fair (later known as the Canadian National Exhibition or CNE) was permanently established in Toronto. With the gradual expansion of the site eastward to Strachan Avenue and the loss of numerous structures to fire, the grounds were reorganized and new edifices introduced during successive decades. The 1920s marked the unveiling of a ceremonial entrance on Strachan Avenue where the Princes' Gates (1927) opened onto a wide plaza flanked by the Electrical and Engineering Building (1928 and later demolished) on the north and the Automotive Building (1929) to the south. These buildings anchored the east end of the exhibition grounds and showcased the innovative technologies of the period.

The Automotive Building purportedly opened as the largest structure in North America designed exclusively to display passenger vehicles. While the development of the automobile was chronicled in exhibits at the CNE, by the early 1920s its popularity resulted in the opening of a separate structure for automotive products. During the later 20th century, the Automotive Building was upgraded and its purpose expanded from vehicular exhibits to other uses (including a recruitment centre for the Canadian Navy during World War II).

Toronto architect Douglas Kertland won the architectural competition to design the Automotive Building. Kertland received his architectural training in England and worked in the office of the important Canadian architect John M. Lyle before opening a solo practice in Toronto in the 1920s. While he received numerous commissions for churches, hospitals and bank branches, Kertland specialized in residential designs for clients in Forest Hill and other upscale Toronto neighbourhoods. Kertland received an “honourable mention” in the 1931 Toronto Chapter of the Exhibition of Architecture and Applied Arts for the exterior detailing of the Automotive Building, which remains his best-known project in the city.

Contextually, the Automotive Building is a highly visible feature at Exhibition Place where it is placed inside the Princes’ Gates. Its scale and orientation on the site allow it to be viewed from inside the exhibition grounds and from the parkland along Lake Ontario, which it was designed to overlook across landscaped open space. With its location on the west side of Strachan Avenue where it terminates the vista looking west along Lake Shore Boulevard West, the Automotive Building is a local landmark.

Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes of the Automotive Building related to its design, associative and contextual value as an excellent example of Modern Classical design with Art Deco detailing that is associated with the evolution of Exhibition Place where it is a local landmark are:

Exterior attributes

- The scale, form and massing
- The large rectangular plan rising two stories with bevelled corners
- Above the base of Queenston limestone, the artificial stone cladding with stone and metal detailing
- The cornice marking the roofline
- On the principal (south) and north facades, the organization of the walls with central and end pavilions elaborated with frontispieces, piers, cornice mouldings and Classical detailing
- On the latter elevations, placement of the main entrances in the centre where trios of two-storey round-arched door openings have Classical detailing
- The treatment of the principal (south) entrance, which is elevated and reached by a stone staircase
- Flanking the north and south entries, the oversized piers with narrow rectangular window openings and reliefs with Art Deco detailing
- Above the south and north entrances, the name bands labelled “AUTOMOTIVE BUILDING” in Roman letters
- On the end pavilions, the trios of round-arched window openings beneath blind balconies with decorative metal screens
- The bevelled corners, where secondary entrances are placed inside monumental round-arched openings with stone carvings

- On all the elevations, the organization by stone piers of the two-storey flat-headed window openings with decorative metal spandrels
- Flanking the south end of the Automotive Building, the landscaped open space

Interior attributes

- The continuation of the Classical and Art Deco detailing from the exterior to the interior foyers and lobbies described below
- In the south and north foyers (found inside the south and north entrances), the terrazzo floors, the wall surfaces with niches on the east and west sides, the flat-headed openings with Classical detailing leading into the lobbies, and the Art Deco ceiling fixtures
- In the south and north entrance lobbies (between the foyers and the auditorium), the coffered ceilings, the Classical detailing on the walls with columns, friezes and cornices, the terrazzo floors, the flat-headed openings with Classical detailing separating the lobbies from the auditorium, the staircases with balustrades and railings, the Art Deco ceiling fixtures and, at the mezzanine level overlooking the foyers, the balconies with decorative metalwork