

O’Keefe Centre

Description

The property at 1 Front Street East is worthy of designation under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act, and meets the criteria prescribed for municipal designation by the Province of Ontario under the three categories of design, associative and contextual value. Located on the southeast corner of Yonge Street and Front Street East, the O’Keefe Centre opened in 1960. The site was recognized on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties in 1990, and is more recently known as the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts.

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

The O’Keefe Centre has design value as an innovative example of Modern design that was inspired by the International style introduced to Toronto in the 1950s. Its design, which recalls Modern concert halls including Royal Festival Hall in London, England, is particularly distinguished by the monumental cantilevered canopy that faces Front Street East.

The O’Keefe Centre is associated with Toronto’s cultural development after World War II. With funding provided by the O’Keefe Brewing Company under the leadership of entrepreneur E. P. Taylor, the land was donated by the City of Toronto. While the project was conceived as a multi-building complex recalling the Rockefeller Centre, it was scaled down to a single theatre with a seating capacity of 3250. Offering a staging area that was expansive for the time, the O’Keefe Centre opened as the largest theatre in Toronto. After showcasing the inaugural performance of the musical “Camelot,” its stage welcomed a variety of entertainers, from international dance companies and opera stars to rock concerts and award shows. It served for over forty years as the performance venue of the National Ballet of Canada and the Canadian Opera Company.

The O’Keefe Centre is associated with the practice of the leading Toronto architects, interior decorators, landscape designers and artists of the period. Toronto architect Earle C. Morgan prepared the plans in association with the architectural practice of Page and Steele and its chief designer, Peter Dickinson. Page and Steele were among Toronto’s most prolific architectural firms of the post-World War II era, and projects such as the Benvenuto Place Apartments (1955), the Queen Elizabeth Theatre (1956-1957) at Exhibition Place, and Commerce Court (completed in 1972 in association with American architect I. M. Pei) are recognized on the City’s heritage inventory. The interiors at the O’Keefe Centre were conceived by the important local interior designer Herbert Irvine, who worked with associates from the Robert Simpson Company and T. Eaton Company department stores. Also on the interior, the Toronto-born artist R. York Wilson created the lobby mural entitled “The Seven Lively Arts.” The landscape design firm of

Dunnington Grubb incorporated rare plant species in its plans for the gardens and landscaped elements.

Contextually, the O’Keefe Centre is a local landmark. It occupies a prominent location on Front Street East between Yonge Street and Scott Street where the site slopes southward to The Esplanade. It introduced contemporary design and materials to a neighbourhood formerly marked by late 19th century commercial warehouses, and began the transformation of the area into a cultural destination.

Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes of the O’Keefe Centre associated with its design, associative and contextual value as an important example of Modern architecture that is linked to the cultural development of Toronto where it is a local landmark are:

Exterior Attributes

- The form, scale and massing
- The materials, with pre-cast, cast and reinforced concrete, steel, limestone, black granite, and bronze
- The three-part plan, with the entrance block, auditorium and fly tower, which is anchored by a large base
- The base, which is multi-storied at the south end to take advantage of the change in grade of the site as it slopes southward toward The Esplanade
- At the north end, the single-storey entrance block with the monumental cantilevered canopy that covers the passenger drop-off area and shelters the principal entrance to the complex
- On the north façade and portions of the east and west elevations of the entrance block, the mixture of large glazed sections with black granite detailing
- The bronze door and window frames
- Behind the entrance block, the auditorium under an angled roof
- South of the auditorium, the fly tower with a flat roof and a wing containing the ‘stage door’ entry
- Along the east and west elevations, the flat-roofed canopies that connect to terraces with stairs leading to the lower levels and side entries
- The landscape along the east side of the property, including the composition and materials used to define the open space and planted areas

Interior Attributes

- The north entrance foyer with the Carrara marble cladding
- South of the foyer, the double-height lobby with the Carrara marble cladding, the mezzanine, the mural portraying “The Seven Lively Arts” that extends over 30 metres (100 feet) along the north wall, and the pair of bronze staircases on the south wall
- The fan-shaped auditorium with the large structural steel thrust balcony, the suspended acoustic ceilings, and the cherry plywood acoustic panels