

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION: 212 KING STREET WEST ATTACHMENT NO. 9
(STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE)

Union Building

Description

The property at 212 King Street West 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 on the northwest corner of King Street West and Simcoe Street, the Union Building (1908) is a six-storey warehouse that was listed on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties in 1973.

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

The Union Building is historically associated with an organization of national significance. The warehouse was commissioned by the Canadian General Electric Company, which was founded in the late 19th century to manufacture and distribute electrical equipment during the period when electrical power was first generated for commercial and residential use. Canadian General Electric grew in stature as it oversaw a series of subsidiaries, and its first general manager, Frederic Nicholls, was appointed to the Canadian Senate in recognition of his pioneering work in Ontario's energy sector. The Union Building was originally occupied by the Canada Foundry Company, a subsidiary of CGE that produced structural steel products.

The notable Toronto architects Darling and Pearson designed the Union Building for the Canadian General Electric Company during their nearly 30-year partnership. As the designers of many of the city's landmark buildings, including the Royal Ontario Museum, the Toronto General Hospital's College Street Wing, and the head offices of the Canadian Bank of Commerce and the Bank of Montreal (in Toronto), Frank Darling was recognized as the first citizen of a British Dominion to receive the Royal Institute of British Architect's Gold Medal, while his partner, John Pearson, was the inaugural Canadian architect to accept an honorary Doctorate in Architecture from the University of Toronto. The pair's plans for the Canadian General Electric Company's head office helped set the standard for the classically-embellished warehouses that appeared on King Street West in the early 20th century.

The design value of the Union Building results from its richly embellished Edwardian Classical styling in combination with its rare terra cotta finishes. The Union Building is identified in the book, Terra Cotta: artful deceivers (1990, 87) as one of a select number of surviving edifices in Toronto exhibiting terra cotta. The handsome entrance portico and monumental cornice are the highlights of the building's classical detailing.

Contextually, the property at 212 King Street West contributes to the historical character of the King-Spadina neighbourhood that emerged as the city's manufacturing centre after the Great Fire of 1904 destroyed the earlier industrial sector. The Union Building was among the earliest warehouses constructed on Russell Square, the former Upper Canada College campus on King Street, west of Simcoe Street, marking the transition of the area from an institutional setting to an industrial precinct. Following the gradual departure of industries from King-Spadina in the decades after World War II, the Union Building was one of the warehouses converted to commercial uses as this section of King Street West became the heart of the city's Entertainment District.

The Union Building is historically, physically, visually and functionally linked to its setting on the northwest corner of King Street West and Simcoe Street, where it anchors the east end of a group of surviving early 20th century warehouses that share a complementary scale and appearance, most often with Edwardian Classical detailing. The Union Building adjoins two vintage warehouses to the west at #214 and #220 King, which were also developed for the Canadian General Electric Company and its subsidiaries. The Union Building and the neighbouring warehouses on King Street between Simcoe Street and John Street bookend the Royal Alexandra Theatre (1907), which is recognized as a National Historic Site.

Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes of the property at 212 King Street West are:

- The original five-storey warehouse
- The scale, form and massing of the rectangular plan
- The brick cladding, and the brick, stone, terra cotta, metal and wood detailing
- The extended metal cornice with brackets and terra cotta marking the fifth-floor roofline (the sixth storey with the mansard roof is an addition)
- The cornices above the first floor and fourth storey
- The classical organization of the principal (south) façade, with a base, three-storey shaft, and an attic
- The first floor, with the banded brickwork, the round-arched openings with hood moulds and keystones, and the raised centrally-placed entrance in a stone surround with sidelights (the doors are not original)
- Protecting the south entry, the stone portico with paired columns, an entablature with triglyphs, and an ornate cartouche
- Above the first storey, the division of the shaft into three bays where terra cotta surrounds organize the flat-headed window openings with spandrel panels
- The attic storey, with single and three-part window openings that are separated by banding and incised panels with classical detailing
- The continuation of the fenestration and classical detailing from the south façade to the long east elevation on Simcoe Street, where the first bay on the south end projects and incorporates terra cotta surrounds
- On the west elevation, the first bay at the south end of the wall where the fenestration and classical treatment is repeated from the south façade

- The plaque, dating to 1929 and commemorating the area as the original location of Upper Canada College, which is mounted at the south end of the east elevation
- On the north (rear) wall on Pearl Street, the surviving classical pier

The sixth floor with the mansard roof is an addition that is not identified as a heritage attribute.