

First Unitarian Congregation

Description

The property at 175 St. Clair Avenue West is worthy of inclusion on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties for its cultural heritage value. Historical records indicate that the First Unitarian Congregation has been located on the south side of St. Clair Avenue, west of Avenue Road, since the early 1950s. The distinctive north façade dates to 1993. The original building and its addition were executed by the Toronto architectural partnership of Bruce Brown and Brisley Architects and the successor firm of Brown Beck and Ross Architects.

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

The First Unitarian Congregation has design value as a well-crafted example of Modern design applied to a religious building. The church is highlighted with detailing by metal smith Don Stuart and the monumental stained glass window entitled “Radiance, Reflection, Revelation” by artist Sarah Hall. The latter project was nominated for the Ontario Art Council’s Jean A. Chalmers Award as one of the largest single commissions for stained glass in the Toronto area.

The building has associative value for its connections with the First Unitarian Congregation. The origins of the congregation date to the 17th century when the church was founded in the United States according to the principles of individual freedom of belief, use of reason in religion, and liberal social action. The Toronto congregation was organized in 1846, followed by the opening of a church on Jarvis Street in 1854. Identified as the earliest religious body in Toronto to recognize the equal rights of women, its membership in the late 1800s included Emily Stowe, the first practicing female physician in the city. In 1950, members of the congregation founded the Elizabeth Fry Society, which continues to assist women prisoners during incarceration and following release. Among the causes advocated by the First Unitarian Congregation during its long history in Toronto are abolition of the death penalty, nuclear disarmament, native issues, gay and lesbian rights, assistance for the homeless, and numerous other activities supporting social change.

The First Unitarian Congregation is associated with the practice of the Toronto architectural firm now known as BB&R Architect Inc. Founded in 1891 by the important Toronto architect J. Francis Brown, the practice evolved to include three generations of the Brown family and partnerships with other leading designers. While the firm originally gained prominence with its industrial buildings after the Great Fire of 1904, over time church projects became its mainstay. In the early 1950s, BB&R introduced contemporary designs to its religious commissions, including the noted McMaster Divinity College and Chapel (1958) in Hamilton.

Contextually, with its unique design and embellishments, the First Unitarian Congregation is a landmark on St. Clair Avenue West, west of Avenue Road.

Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes of the First Unitarian Congregation related to the building's design, associative and contextual value as an example of Modern styling that is an institutional landmark on St. Clair Avenue West are:

- The scale, massing and form of the asymmetrical plan, which rises one extended storey under a flat roofline with coping
- The stone, brick and glass cladding and trim
- The principal (north) façade, which conceals the bulk of the building to the rear (south), and features stone band courses on the walls flanking the offset tower
- The distinctive tower that rises in tiers and incorporates an oversized multi-paned stained glass window with a triangular top
- The main entrance, which is placed at the base of the tower in a flat-headed surround
- The fenestration on the north façade, with full-height rectangular window openings with multi-paned windows on the left (east), and similar openings reduced in size on the west (right) side