



A not-for-profit agency
of the Government of Ontario
Un organisme à but non lucratif
relevant du gouvernement de l'Ontario

The Royal York Hotel

On Tuesday, June 8, 2004, the Ontario Heritage Foundation unveiled a provincial plaque in Toronto to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Royal York Hotel. The bilingual text reads as follows:

THE ROYAL YORK HOTEL

Built on the site of the Queen's Hotel by the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1928-29, the Royal York Hotel was part of its coast-to-coast chain of grand hotels. The skyscraper hotel, designed by Montreal architects Ross and Macdonald in association with Sproatt and Rolph of Toronto, was the largest hotel in the British Commonwealth and dramatically altered the Toronto skyline. Inside, attractive rooms – from the classicism of the 1928-29 interior to the 1957-59 extension decorated in Canadian themes – have provided the setting for conventions, entertainers, cocktails, teas, debutante balls and royal visits. Together with Union Station to the south and the Dominion Public Building to the southeast, the Royal York Hotel has created one of the finest streetscapes in the provincial capital.

L'HÔTEL ROYAL YORK

Construit sur le site de l'hôtel Queen's par le Canadien Pacifique en 1928-1929, l'hôtel Royal York faisait partie de la chaîne d'hôtels de luxe transcontinentale de la société ferroviaire. L'hôtel en forme de gratte-ciel, fruit de la collaboration des architectes montréalais Ross et Macdonald et des architectes torontois Sproatt et Rolph, était le plus grand hôtel du Commonwealth britannique; sa construction a changé radicalement la ligne d'horizon de Toronto. À l'intérieur, les pièces originales, aménagées dans le style classique en vogue à l'époque, ainsi que les salles de l'aile construite entre 1957 et 1959 aux motifs canadiens, ont servi de cadre à maints congrès, spectacles, cocktails, thés, bals des débutantes et visites royales. Le panorama de rue créé par l'hôtel Royal York, la gare Union, au sud, et l'édifice public Dominion, au sud-est, est l'un des plus beaux de la capitale provinciale.

Historical background

Emergence of railway hotels

In the 1830s, “grand” or “palace” hotels – large, luxurious, purpose-built hotels that catered to high-end clientele – began appearing in Great Britain and the United States. Early examples of this building type include Tremont House in Boston (1830), Astor House in New York (1834) and the Queen’s Hotel in Cheltenham, England (1838).

British railway companies began opening grand hotels like the Royal Western Hotel in Bristol (1839) and the Adelaide and Victoria in London (1839) in the late 1830s. Many of these railway hotels were lavish, including the Midland Grand Hotel of London (1873), which epitomized the railway hotel, and the Royal York Hotel in York, England (1877), dramatically situated beside the railway tracks.

The first purpose-built grand hotel in Canada was the Windsor Hotel in Montreal (1878). In 1886, the Montreal-based Canadian Pacific Railway began constructing its chain of grand hotels, which included Banff Springs Hotel in the Rocky Mountains (1888), Château Frontenac in Quebec (1893) and Place Viger Hotel in Montreal (1898). In Toronto, the Queen’s Hotel – on the site where the Royal York Hotel would eventually be built – was important in the late 19th century because of its size, which grew because of additions to the building. In 1903, the first purpose-built grand hotel in Toronto opened – the King Edward Hotel, built by banker and distiller George Gooderham.

The Château Laurier in Ottawa (1912) was the first hotel developed by the Grand Trunk Railway and the first grand hotel designed by Montreal architect George A. Ross. In partnership with David H. MacFarlane and subsequently with Robert H. Macdonald, Ross designed three more grand hotels for the Grand Trunk – Fort Garry Hotel in Winnipeg (1913), Hotel Macdonald in Edmonton (1915) and the Qu’Appelle in Regina (not completed). Ross and Macdonald also designed for the United Hotels Company of America the Mount Royal Hotel in Montreal (1923), which was the biggest hotel in the British Empire at that time.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Pacific Railway expanded its chain by opening hotels in Calgary and Vancouver, improving the Château Frontenac, rebuilding the Château Lake Louise in Alberta, enlarging the Banff Springs Hotel and building Hotel Saskatchewan in Regina. This latter hotel was designed by Ross and Macdonald who the Canadian Pacific Railway subsequently commissioned to build the Royal York in Toronto – the largest railway hotel in its chain.

Largest hotel in the British Empire

At its opening on June 11, 1929, Edward Wentworth Beatty, chairman and president of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, explained the reason for developing the Royal York Hotel

in Toronto by noting that the city was accessible to over 40 million people living in eastern Canada and the United States. Beatty also commented: “Practically ever since the [First World] war it has been a personal ambition of mine to construct a hotel in the City of Toronto, but I had to wait until general conditions justified the substantial expenditure involved and until the site was made available.”¹

The site chosen for the Royal York Hotel by the Canadian Pacific Railway was that of the Queen’s Hotel, which was demolished in 1927. The Queen’s Hotel, which a 1929 newspaper editorial called “the historic Queen’s Hotel with all its memories of old-time celebrities,”² was highly regarded by the Toronto public and visitors to the city. The building site was located opposite the magnificent Union Station, built between 1914 and 1927 by the all-Canadian architectural team of Ross and Macdonald, Hugh G. Jones of the Canadian Pacific Railway and John M. Lyle. A 1928 promotional booklet published by the Canadian Pacific hotel department described the setting of the Royal York Hotel:

In the downtown heart of Toronto, modern and smart capital of the great province of Ontario, rise the classic storeys of The Royal York, the largest and most palatial hotel in the British Empire, a titan-like palace of over 1,000 rooms, built, owned and operated by the Canadian Pacific. Its exterior design inspired by the architecture of medieval Lombardy, The Royal York, when completed, will thrust a great limestone tower into the sky from an historic site on the north side of Front Street, the broad thoroughfare that sweeps curvingly along the edge of the low bluff from which the city looks down upon the blue harbor-waters.

Across the pavement, and connected with The Royal York by a subway, is the new Union Station, with its rail connections to all parts of Canada and the United States.³

Ross and Macdonald, perhaps the biggest architectural firm in Canada during the late 1920s, was chosen for the Royal York Hotel project. The firm was expert in shaping complex building mass and organizing vast interior space, having worked on Union Station, six grand hotels, and

¹ “Governor-General Opens Royal York,” *The Evening Telegram*, June 11, 1929, p. 2.

² “The Royal York,” *The Evening Telegram*, June 11, 1929, p. 6.

³ Canadian Pacific, *The Royal York: A Canadian Pacific Hotel, Toronto, Ontario, The Largest Hotel in the British Empire, Towering in Giant Grace above Lake Ontario and Toronto’s Island-Circled Harbor, An Imposing and Stately Headquarters for Conventions* (Montreal: Canadian Pacific Hotel Department, 1928), n.p., Toronto Reference Library.

other large-scale commissions. Ross and Macdonald were associated with the well-known Toronto firm of Sproatt and Rolph and worked together on the Eaton's College Street Store – another significant project of that era.

Built in 1928-29, the Royal York Hotel dramatically altered the cityscape of early 20th-century Toronto. “The largest hotel in the British Empire,”⁴ contemporary writers called it “a mountain over city and lake”⁵ and “a city within a city block”.⁶ Its block-sized bulk rested against the Front Street sidewalk, on the early shoreline of Lake Ontario, at the edge between the central business district and lands occupied by the railway and port. In juxtaposition to the long, low, colonnaded Union Station, the hotel's 28 storeys of steel frame completely encased in Indiana limestone rose in steps to a steeply pitched copper château roof. The skyscraper hotel instantly became a Toronto landmark, surpassing the height of other buildings in the city and characterizing the skyline for three or more decades. Without undue exaggeration, *The Toronto Daily Star* declared the hotel had become, on opening, “a public institution – as much a part of Toronto as the Union Station” and “a gesture of Toronto's growing greatness – a cosmopolitan gesture to all the world's travellers.”⁷

The gigantic new building with its two flanking wings accommodated many uses for both hotel clientele and the general public. Over the sub-basement level with its hotel service facilities was the basement floor. The basement floor, partly above grade, was accessed by three street-to-basement entrances and a tunnel clad in travertine marble leading to Union Station. An arcade on the basement floor contained shops, a bank, barber shop, coffee shop and grill room. The arcade was equipped with its own kitchen and service area, and enhanced by an exhibition hall featuring displays of Canadian Pacific Railway destinations.

The five-storey base of the building contained most of the hotel's public rooms as well as the first bedroom floor. The main floor included a spectacular lobby with marble pillars parallel to Front Street, a perpendicular axis of main entrance vestibule and elevator hall, and a great lounge and 500-seat dining room called the Imperial Room that extended to the York Street façade, from which the Canadian Pacific Royal York (CPRY) broadcasted radio shows across the country. A café in the northeast corner, a sprawling back kitchen and smaller rooms (the

⁴ There were many references to the hotel's size on its opening. A somewhat later one is: P.J. Wood, *The Royal York Hotel, Toronto, Canada: The Largest Hotel in the British Empire* (Ottawa: Industrial Accident Prevention Associations, 1934), Fairmont Royal York archival files.

⁵ “Final Finishing Touches Given Royal York Hotel for Opening Ceremonies,” *The Globe*, June 11, 1929, p. 13.

⁶ Ernest Evans, “A City Within a City Block,” *MacLean's Magazine* Vol. 42 No. 10 (May 15, 1929), p. 43.

⁷ “Great Hotel's Opening is Marked by Banquet to Nearly 2,000 Guests,” *The Toronto Daily Star*, June 11, 1929, p. 1.

hotel office, writing room, ticket office, news stand, etc.) were also located on the main floor. The coffered wood ceiling of the lobby could best be appreciated from the main mezzanine floor balcony. In addition to balcony seating, the main mezzanine floor provided a wood-panelled library with 12,000 books, another writing room, hotel executive offices, a lounge and private dining rooms of varying sizes. A lost-and-found office, ladies' hairdressing parlours, a playroom for children and a hospital (with doctor and nurse in attendance) were also located on the main mezzanine floor. The next two floors up – the convention floor and the convention mezzanine floor – offered “unprecedented facilities for the holding of conventions”⁸ with seating for 4,070 conventioners and 2,800 banqueters. The floors, which were laid out symmetrically, had a travertine-pillared foyer with balcony above in the centre of the floor. The concert or convention hall was located on the York Street end. The room was equipped with an enormous Casavant Frères pipe organ and a New Super Simplex Projector for showing sound and motion pictures, which the *Toronto Daily Star* described as “the first of its kind in North America.”⁹ Other convention rooms included a banquet hall on the east end, a ballroom facing Front Street and lit by an arcade of windows and a huge kitchen and service area at the back along Piper Street.

Eleven bedroom floors were laid out in an efficient H-shaped floor plan, ensuring that every room received natural light. Five more bedroom floors continued in the central block. Standard bedrooms came with bath, shower and clothes closet. Large sample and show rooms for travelling salesmen were also available. A series of five-roomed suites were furnished in various themes – for example, the Tudor Suite, the Art Moderne Suite, the Dutch Suite and the Vice-Regal Suites.

Twenty-two storeys above the street in the central block of the hotel, the roof garden seated 315 diners who could look out the arcaded windows to views of Toronto Bay and Lake Ontario. With its mezzanine, it was a self-contained unit complete with kitchen, service rooms, check rooms and washrooms. Like all floors in the hotel, the roof garden was served by high-speed passenger elevators whose cabs were decorated with walnut Art Deco grilles. Above the roof garden mezzanine floor were four storeys used for elevator machinery, ventilation equipment, water tanks and the workshop of the hotel's silversmith.

The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada awarded its gold medal to the Royal York Hotel in 1930. The Institute summed up the building's importance:

⁸ J. Martin Gardner, “Hotels,” *The Toronto City Directory 1929* (Toronto: Mighit Directories, 1929), p. 19.

⁹ “New Talkies To Use 3-Dimension Screen,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 1929; “Movie Men to Meet To Discuss Problems,” *Toronto Daily Star*, October 1929.

This building can, without question, be considered one of the most important structures erected in Canada during recent years. It is to the credit of the architects, Messrs. Ross & Macdonald, of Montreal, with whom were associated Messrs. Sproatt & Rolph, of Toronto, that they have not only succeeded in designing a modern and complete hotel for that most enterprising of Canadian corporations – the Canadian Pacific Railway – but they have also provided the city of Toronto with a monument that its citizens may well be proud of.¹⁰

The building of the Royal York Hotel beautified Front Street, an important route linking to Queen's Park via University Avenue. The appearance of Front Street was enhanced by the monumental Dominion Public Building, built in 1929-32 and 1935-36 to the southeast of the hotel, and Union Station, constructed in 1914-27 to the south of the hotel. Together, these buildings created one of the finest streetscapes in the provincial capital.

The hotel is enlarged

An additional 165 rooms were added to the hotel in a centre wing facing Piper Street in 1930 for convention trade. In 1957-59, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company added a seamless 400-room addition on the east to the height of the 1928-29 flanking wings. Today, the 1928 and 1957 cornerstones on Front Street mark the join between the two. The extension, designed by Ross, Patterson, Townsend and Fish of Montreal in association with Charles B. Dolphin of Toronto, reclaimed the title of the biggest hotel in the British Commonwealth for the Royal York, which the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal had temporarily eclipsed.

At the opening of the addition on February 21, 1959, Canadian Pacific president N.R. Crump said the enlargement of the Royal York expressed his company's recognition of Toronto as the convention centre of Canada. The hotel's improved convention facilities included the Canadian Room, which replaced the 1929 banquet hall. It was the largest room of its kind in Canada, seating 2,200 people for meetings or 1,550 for banquets. A hidden hydraulic hoist could lift large trucks, cars and tractors onto the floor for commercial exhibits. Contrasting with the classicism employed throughout the 1929 interior, the Canadian Room was strikingly Modern. The room featured a huge illuminated global projection relief map of Canada and a relief of the Canadian coat-of-arms carved from Canadian elm. Its wall fabric incorporated elements of the Canadian coat-of-arms. The room also contained back-lit glass panels on which were etched the provincial and territorial coats-of-arms and tempered plate glass doors incised with the Tudor rose, maple leaf and fleur-de-lis. Its ceiling was brightly coloured with undulating translucent aluminum panels and wide plaster ribs.

¹⁰ "Editorial," *The Journal; Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* Vol. 6 No. 8 (August 1929), p. 245.

The Canadian Room set the tone for the hotel's new public rooms named after, and decorated in the spirit of, Canada's provinces and territories. The interior designer Ernest Rex who worked in the firm of Ross, Patterson, Townsend and Fish involved Canadian artists and artisans in developing the all-Canadian theme that highlighted the role the Canadian Pacific Railway played in the growth of the country.

Adjoining the Canadian Room on the convention floor was the Ontario Room, the largest of the provincial rooms. It was decorated with 16 baseboard planter boxes whose inlaid fruitwood panels depicted authentic historical scenes from 19th-century Ontario. The room also had polished mother-of-pearl tile walls, draperies in shades of blue, a mural representing the 1788 Mississauga land surrender and four chandeliers shaped like baskets of trilliums hanging below a suspended ceiling of gold aluminum.

On the main mezzanine floor, appropriately decorated rooms named for the other provinces, territories and Algonquin Provincial Park served as convention meeting rooms or private dining rooms. For example, the British Columbia Room had wall panelling of British Columbia fir, eight totem poles, carved wainscotting with Pacific Coast Native motifs and a hand-painted B.C. provincial crest of carved pine.

Interior renovations

In 1972 and 1973, the hotel underwent an extensive renovation program, called the Royal York Revelation, to modernize its image. Webb Zerafa Menkes Housden, the architects who were designing the Royal Bank Plaza next door, cut a hole in the main-floor lobby for a spiral staircase, covered the marble pillars in the lobby with wood panelling, hung modern wall lamps and a chandelier and replaced rugs with carpet. By 1994, the American interior designer Deborah Lloyd Forrest reversed the changes to the pillars for Canadian Pacific Hotels. In 1999, Canadian Pacific Hotels acquired Fairmont Hotels creating Fairmont Hotels & Resorts. The Royal York was subsequently renamed the Fairmont Royal York.

In 2001, Forrest designed the Fairmont Royal York's new floor in marble mosaic tile. However, many of the Royal York's attractive public rooms and passageways have survived changes in taste. The main-floor lobby and mezzanine are dazzling with the elaborately patterned coffered ceiling and broad pillars cleverly doubling as ventilation shafts. The convention floor also features a travertine-pillared foyer and mezzanine. The tunnel to Union Station, the elevator hall on the main floor and the east extension elevator hall where the elevators are headed by bas-relief depictions of Fort York, Fort Macleod and Fort Anne are memorable entrances. The main-floor Imperial Room and its lobby (originally, the main dining room and great lounge) and the concert hall and ballroom on the convention floor essentially retain their classical grandeur. Aspects of the original décor of the provincial rooms persist, and visitors continue to delight in

the totem poles of the British Columbia Room, the tapestries of the Quebec Room and the Algonquin Room's mural by A.J. Casson. The panelled library with built-in glass and wood bookcases continues to charm. These interior spaces have provided the setting for innumerable conventions, supper dances, celebrity entertainers, cocktails and afternoon tea, debutante balls, ceremonial functions and royal visits.

A Toronto landmark

The Royal York Hotel was built for the Canadian Pacific Railway and was the largest of its coast-to-coast chain of grand hotels. Designed by Ross and Macdonald, perhaps the biggest architectural firm in Canada in the late 1920s, the great height and distinctive profile dramatically changed the Toronto skyline. The skyscraper hotel instantly became a Toronto landmark and, in conjunction with Union Station to the south and the Dominion Public Building to the southeast, has created one of the finest streetscapes in the provincial capital. Today, the Fairmont Royal York remains an important Toronto landmark.

The Ontario Heritage Foundation gratefully acknowledges the research of Paul Dilse in preparing this paper.

© [Ontario Heritage Foundation](#), 2004