

**NORTHERN ELECTRIC BUILDING**  
150 Robson Street, VANCOUVER

23 February 2017

**CONSERVATION PLAN**



**Figure 1: View of Northern Electric Building from Robson and Cambie, looking south. The original 1928 portion includes the western half of the Robson frontage and the entire Cambie frontage.**

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This report has been commissioned by Amacon Developments to accompany a Rezoning Application by GBL Architects for the retention and rehabilitation of the façades of the historic Northern Electric (later Catholic Charities) Building as part of the redevelopment of the site with a new residential tower and hotel.

## **2.0 STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The Northern Electric Company Building (and formerly the Archdiocese of Vancouver Catholic Centre), is a three storey brick and stone building located in downtown Vancouver. The building is listed on the Vancouver Heritage Register in the “B” category and is not designated.

The building in its present form (Fig 1) was built in two phases, 1928 and 1947, for the Northern Electric Co. of Montreal, designed by J. O. Despatie (the NEC’s own architect) in collaboration with McCarter Nairne architects of Vancouver.

**See Appendix A for the complete SOS**

## **3.0 HERITAGE CONTEXT**

The block bounded by Robson, Beattie, Smithe and Cambie Streets contains eleven buildings listed on the Vancouver Heritage Register in the B or C category. They exhibit characteristics of the vernacular commercial/warehouse buildings found just a block south in the Yaletown Heritage Area (H3). Yet the Northern Electric Building departs from the simple vernacular typical of Yaletown by exhibiting a more formal, Classical design on the Robson frontage.

The block developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century following the example of earlier vernacular buildings in Yaletown. The Cambie and Beattie streetscapes (Figures 2 and 3) are composed of similar brick faced buildings with industrial sash windows ranging from two to six stories. Some of these buildings have been rehabilitated for office, commercial, restaurant and residential use.

The sloping nature of the block, with Robson Street being at the high point, includes a central lane divided by a grade change (Fig 4), with a hammerhead configuration that has the unusual aspect of being almost the width of typical street. (The Yaletown street pattern does not include laneways.) The 1947 part of the Northern Electric Building that faces this laneway areas features board-formed concrete exteriors walls (Fig 7), reflective of its construction during the post-war Modern movement in BC.



**Figure 2:** Cambie streetscape of heritage-listed building with Northern Electric Building on far left.



**Figure 3:** View of Beattie streetscape



Figure 4: View of lane between Beattie and Cambie Streets, opposite NEB

## 4.0 CONSERVATION PLAN

### 4.1 Assessment

The exterior of the building, particularly the brick and granite masonry, is generally in good condition. The original Kawneer steel windows are mostly intact but have deteriorated and show signs of rust under their painted frames. The steel windows along the lane are particularly problematic as they have embedded wire mesh set into the steel frames, a detail which makes replacement (clear, unwired) very challenging.

The interior has had considerable changes to the interior, primarily related the conversion in 1958 by the Catholic Charities and there are no features of historic value inside the building.

The exterior features brown wire-cut brick cladding with dressed and rough faced granite framing elements along the Robson façade at ground level. Windows openings have stone sills and lintels. There is a continuous shallow parapet cornice with some curved articulation capped with a painted metal flashing which is in fair condition.

There are three entryways, two on Robson and one on Cambie. The eastern entry on Robson (Fig 8) is in close to its original 1947 configuration while the western one (Fig 9), dating from 1928, has been altered with brick infill. The Cambie doorway (Fig 10) is largely original and is proposed to be altered for the new residential entrance.



Figure 5: View of Cambie façade looking north



Figure 6: Detail of Robson St. entry



Figure 7: Detail of banded concrete on south facade

NORTHERN ELECTRIC BUILDING CONSERVATION PLAN



Figure 8: Eastern Robson entry



Figure 9: Western Robson entry



Figure 10: Cambie entrance

## 4.2 Conservation Strategy

As the building occupies almost the entire lot (except for the eastern corner) and extends to the street and lane frontages, this poses challenges for retention which limited conservation options to retaining the principal façades *in situ* with new construction within for the hotel and tower.

Conservation will include:

- bracing of all four façades of the building prior to excavation for new parkade and internal structural system
- complete conservation of the Robson, Cambie and laneway façades in situ including stone and brick detailing, with replacement metal windows
- new Cambie entrance which enlarges the existing doorway
- replacing the Robson entries with wider, more modern design
- new opening on lane façade for access to parkade

## 4.3 Conservation Procedures / Outline Specifications

### General Requirements

The work entails the retention and rehabilitation of the principal façades of the historic Northern Electric Building.

The Outline Specifications outline the work that entails the review, protection, salvage and sampling of methods and materials for conservation work in addition to general rehabilitation work on site. At the DP stage a more detailed set of specifications will be provided in a more comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Temporary shoring of the façade has been designed to not damage masonry surfaces. Temporary protection is required to the top of exterior wall.

### Reference Standards

- Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada
- Annotated Master Specifications for the Cleaning and Repointing of Historic Masonry; Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, 1985.

### Outline Specifications

The outline specification for conservation procedures includes:

Element	Condition	Conservation Work
Roof	fair	to be replaced with new structural roof as part of new tower
Flashing	fair	repair and painted existing metal flashing
Parapet	fair	brick parapet to be retained and structurally restrained from behind
Brick Masonry	good	- undertake test samples of stone and brick surface

		condition
		- clean with low-pressure water wash and hand tools
		- hand tools for cleaning out mortar joints;
		- mortar to match existing in composition, strength, colour and pointing profile;
		- sandblasting and other abrasive measures not permitted;
		- coatings subject to review by heritage consultant
Stone Masonry	fair	stone masonry to be inspected for condition and general conservation work
Metal Windows	poor	most steel windows show rust and signs of decay - replace existing metal windows with new double-glazed metal sash with profiles to match original metal windows sash and frame colour as per Colour Scheme
Doors and Entries	fair	- replace with new glazed front doors in metal frames - hardware to be determined
Signage	none	to be determined at DP stage
Lighting	none	to be determined at DP stage

#### 4.4 Maintenance Plan

For the long-term protection of the heritage building a Maintenance Plan is recommended to be adopted by the building owner or party responsible for the heritage features of the rehabilitated building. The Maintenance Plan should include provisions for:

- copy of the Maintenance Plan and this Conservation Report to incorporated into the terms of reference for the management and maintenance contract for the building
- cyclical maintenance procedures are adopted as outlined below
- record drawings and photos of the building to be kept by the management / maintenance contractor
- records of all maintenance procedures to be kept by owner
- maintenance is not subject to a Heritage Alteration Permit, unless change in paint colour or material is contemplated
- all other changes to the building are subject to a Heritage Alteration Permit

#### Annual Maintenance

- gutter and rainwater leader cleaning and flushing out; repair where necessary for good operation
- vegetation and landscaping at building face is controlled
- roof is maintained
- perimeter drainage is in good working order

Five-Year Maintenance Cycle

- inspect stone and masonry surfaces
- inspect windows for repainting as required

Ten-Year Maintenance Cycle

- inspect roof , gutters and rain water leaders for condition; repair or replace as required
- inspect window sash, frames and sills for condition and repair as needed

Twenty-Year Cycle

- inspect roof for condition and life span

**3.5 Colour Scheme**

The colour scheme for painted surfaces of the heritage facades, essentially the flashings and window frames, is to be confirmed at the DP stage, based on a colour palette and placement is as determined by sampling on site of evidence of original paint colours. The following elements would be painted or coated:

- Parapet flashing and related trims
- Upper floors metal window frames and sash
- Main floor storefronts and glazing
- concrete surfaces on lane elevation

**4.6 Historic Interpretation**

A permanent Interpretation Program, will be established for the building at the DP stage, possibly integrated with the Public Art package describing the buildings social and architectural history. This may include use of historic photos and memorabilia as part of a designed installation and may include stories about the history of the building . Options for exploration include panels or installation in metal, glass, set into the floor (or the pavement outside) or a media piece (video info screen).

**4.7 Heritage Consultant**

Robert Lemon Architect Inc. has been retained to provide heritage-consulting advice for the duration of the project.

**5.0 STRUCTURAL ENGINEER'S REPORT**

submitted under separate cover

Respectfully Submitted  
ROBERT LEMON ARCHITECT INC.



Robert G. Lemon Architect

**APPENDIX A: STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

**NORTHERN ELECTRIC COMPANY BUILDING**

**Formerly the ARCHDIOCESE OF VANCOUVER CATHOLIC CENTRE  
150 ROBSON STREET, VANCOUVER**

**For AMACON**

*Note: this SOS is prepared for Amacon for municipal heritage planning purposes. The consent of the owner must be secured for the SOS to be used for other purposes including possible listing on the provincial or federal registers of historic places.*



**HISTORIC PLACE DESCRIPTION**

The Northern Electric Company Building (and formerly the Archdiocese of Vancouver Catholic Centre), is a three storey brick and stone building located in downtown Vancouver. The building is listed on the Vancouver Heritage Register in the “B” category and is not designated.



Northern Electric Company Building, 1929. COV Bu N279.1

## HERITAGE VALUE

The building is of heritage value for its history in the evolution downtown Vancouver, as a part of an urban block of similarly-scaled buildings, as the legacy of an early telecommunications company, as an early example of repurposing of an existing building, as a presence of the Catholic Church in Vancouver, as the work of an important architectural firm and for its distinctive architectural design.

More Yaletown than Downtown, the Northern Electric Company's building was located at the eastern end of Robson Street at the time the business centre of Vancouver had shifted west from its historic core in Gastown and along West Hastings Street. At the end of a block of midrise warehouse buildings at the north edge of Yaletown, the building completes the block in scale and form of buildings.

As offices and a storage and distribution facility for the NEC the building represents the early era of the telecommunications industry in Vancouver. Based in Montreal, the firm made and distributed a range of telephone components, wire and cable, electrical apparatus and radio components across Canada. A prominent neon sign was once a rooftop landmark, originally

reading “Northern Electric” and later “Catholic Charities”.

The building in its present form was built in two phases, 1928 and 1947, for the Northern Electric Co. of Montreal, designed by J. O. Despatie (the NEC’s own architect) in collaboration with McCarter Nairne architects of Vancouver. McCarter Nairne are important local architects who designed the Marine Building in 1928-30, the same year as NEC. Also dating from 1928, the NEC’s Winnipeg building was designed by Despatie (with a local architectural firm).

The exterior is of value as an interesting example of commercial vernacular design with Art Moderne / Classical motifs at the entrance. The Robson Street entry features three bays framed with handsome broad granite fluted pilasters and a rusticated granite base. The balance of the building is clad in wire-cut brick and has metal-framed windows. A vestige of an old rail line to the Robson frontage is evident in parking lot to the east (a former gas station).

A large addition was made to the east in 1947 for NEC (designed by McCarter Nairne) which continues the same detailing on the Robson frontage but has an interesting modernist board-formed concrete banding on the lane elevation. McCarter Nairne used exposed board-formed concrete on many of their buildings, including parts of the downtown YMCA and a number of buildings at the Pacific National Exhibition grounds.

In 1958 the building was purchased by the Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver for use as their Catholic Centre containing offices and for the Catholic Charities Mens’ Hostel. Internal renovations were done to designs by John Harvey, architect. Some modifications to the Robson entrance have subsequently been made. The CAV sold the building to Amacon in 20XX. There is little remaining of heritage value on interior.

## **CHARACTER DEFINING ELEMENTS**

- building’s location on Robson Street with setback
- part of a block with warehouse structures at the northern edge of Yaletown
- three-storey massing with distinctive parapet in two parts reflecting its addition
- granite detailing around Robson Street entry
- wire cut brick veneer
- regular pattern of metal-framed windows with stone sills and lintels
- board-formed concrete on lane elevation of 1947 addition

## **RESEARCH NOTES**

Luxton Donald, ed. Building the West: The Early Architects of British Columbia. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2003

City of Vancouver heritage files

City of Vancouver Archives

Archdiocese of Vancouver files and records

Virtual Heritage Winnipeg website