



12 April 2018

Councillor Tobi Nussbaum, Chair
Built Heritage Sub-Committee
City of Ottawa

Re: Ugandan High Commission Chancery – 231 Cobourg Street, Ottawa

Dear Chair Nussbaum,

Action Sandy Hill (ASH) continues to strongly oppose the demolition of 231 Cobourg Street because 1) the building is a contributing building in a Heritage Conservation District (HCD); 2) as the City's own expert attests, the condition of the building is due in large part to the current owners' neglect; and, 3) none of the experts have concluded that the building is beyond retention.

1) Heritage Value

The building at 231 Cobourg is located in the Wilbrod/Laurier Heritage Conservation District (HCD) and is a contributing building in the district. The HCD plan states that maintaining contributing buildings is, "*important to maintaining the overall character of the HCD.*" The HCD Plan further states that, "*Demolition of contributing buildings will not normally be supported.*" Additionally, the HCD Plan states that, "*The Wilbrod/Laurier HCD is significant for its association with the development of Sandy Hill as an upper-middle class neighbourhood that was home to many politicians and senior civil servants. In particular, the HCD was the home of several Prime Ministers including Sir John A. MacDonald, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, William Lyon MacKenzie King and Lester B. Pearson.*"

It is clear that Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson resided at 231 Cobourg. As John English's biography, *The Life of Lester Pearson, Vol 2* (Knopf, 1992) notes, Pearson's wife purchased the duplex at 231 Cobourg Street in 1954. According to the *Ottawa Directory*, 1-231 Cobourg is listed as the home address of Lester B Pearson, MP for the years 1955-1958 inclusive. In 1958, he is listed as "leader of the Liberal Party", as well as an MP. It is also worth noting that Pearson won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1957 while he was living at 231 Cobourg. It remains the only Nobel Peace Prize won by a Canadian.

The experts, both City staff and the proponent's consultant, didn't know the above noted information about Pearson's ownership and residency in this building. We now have this critical

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piece of information about the important historical associations with the building thanks solely to the research of community members who had heard anecdotally that Pearson had lived here at one time, and to the research of a consultant hired by ASH.

2) Demolition by Neglect

The current plight of 231 Cobourg is a classic example of demolition by neglect. John G. Cooke and Associates' Building Condition Report clearly identifies that, "*The building has some major defects related to active settlement,*" which must be addressed and that, "*piling is the most effective way of achieving this based on information provided in the two geotechnical reports.*" The Cooke report also identifies that, "*There is evidence of several repair campaigns where mortar was replaced at cracked joints and in all instances the repairs have cracked again, indicating continued settlement.*", but it makes no mention of past attempts to use piles to support the foundation as was clearly needed and as has been undertaken by numerous other property owners in the vicinity.

The Building Condition Report also identifies that this building "*has stood vacant for four years and unheated through at least two winters.*" It is regrettable to think that this building has been allowed to deteriorate to its current state. Sadly, failing to properly repair the foundation over the last several decades, then leaving the building vacant, unheated, and unmaintained for several years has compounded the problems. It is clear therefore that the current condition of the building is due in large part to the neglect of the owners, in other words, clearly this is a case of demolition by neglect.

3) Retention of Existing Building

We are dismayed that despite the motion passed at the Built Heritage Sub-Committee meeting on February 8, 2018, to assess retention options there has been no apparent consideration of this. The Building Condition Report prepared by John G. Cooke & Associates does not speak to the possibility of retention of the building in whole or in part. In fact, we received this Report from City staff concurrently with a slightly altered design for a replacement building. That new design does not reflect any degree of retention whatsoever.

Our response and position is twofold: first – we do not feel that the motion was carried out in full; rather it seems to have been 'checked-off' by those intent on proceeding with the demolition permit, second – we feel that despite its not having been thus oriented, the Building Condition Report provides ample evidence to suggest that the building can indeed be retained. On this point, ASH concurs with Heritage Ottawa's suggestion that, "*the City and the proponent consider the following approach to preserve the existing building:*

- *Excavate around the exterior and waterproof the foundation walls,*
- *Restore the exterior masonry and trim,*
- *Gut the interior to the walls,*
- *Pour a new slab on grade independent of the exterior walls,*
- *Re-frame the interior and roof in wood. Install slip joints at the exterior walls to accommodate continued settlement,*
- *Restore the stairs and landings on the Cobourg Street side to their original configuration.*

Such an approach, although costly, would mitigate the owner's responsibility for the neglect of the building and recognize its significant historical association with Lester B. Pearson as outlined in presentations at the February 8, 2018, BHSC meeting."

According to experts with decades of experience in the preservation of historic buildings, these interventions would neither be cost prohibitive, nor represent 'heroic measures'. Rather they form part of a conservation strategy designed to render this intentionally neglected building serviceable for the immediate future and to preserve it and its important historical associations for future generations.

Conclusion

That 231 Cobourg Street is a contributing building in a designated heritage conservation district has been clearly established. This fact is not contested by the City of Ottawa nor the proponents. Furthermore, the building has important historical associations, including with former Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson. Since the cultural heritage value of the Wilbrod/Laurier HCD lies in part in its historical associations with a number of former Prime Ministers, including Pearson, this building, as a former home of Pearson, serves to underscore the cultural heritage value of the HCD.

The Building Condition Report prepared by John G. Cooke and Associates makes it abundantly clear that the condition of the building is largely due to the neglect of the current owners. Unbelievably, numerous private citizens in close proximity to this building have been able to afford to have their foundations supported using piling, while in this instance a country is claiming that it will be too expensive. Further, multiple engineering assessments assert that restoration and rehabilitation is possible, if costly.

Despite all this, City staff have recommended that City Council approve its demolition and replacement with a so-called "new" design that completely fails to reflect the heritage character of this important district and also makes no effort to express the architectural language of 231 Cobourg. This poses a serious threat to all of our heritage conservation districts. This makes it clear that even when a heritage property is supposed to be protected, the City will not do so. If nothing else, we should be able to rely on the City to defend heritage buildings that have already been individually designated, or designated as part of a district.

While this building may not be architecturally important, it is of significant cultural and historical value at both the Municipal and National level, and of contributing architectural value. It is a protected heritage building that should not be demolished. Furthermore, through the Sandy Hill Cultural Heritage Character Area, Council has recognized Sandy Hill as, "*an important historic urban landscape in Ottawa*" which is to be protected in accordance with Section 2.5.5 (3) of the Official Plan. This Section of the Official Plan is in response to Section 2.6 of the Provincial Policy Statement which states that, "*Significant built heritage resources and significant cultural heritage landscapes shall be conserved.*"

To allow the demolition of 231 Cobourg is to contravene every measure the City has put in place to protect Ottawa's significant built heritage resources and to reward the profound disrespect of our collective heritage that the deliberate neglect of this building reflects. Furthermore, the demolition of this building would irreparably harm a significant cultural heritage landscape. If

the City of Ottawa issues a demolition permit it will be complicit in a clear case of demolition by neglect. That City of Ottawa heritage staff should actively champion the destruction of 231 Cobourg is beyond reckoning. If the City will not protect our collective heritage, who will?

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'C' and 'R' followed by a horizontal line.

Chad Rollins
President, ASH

Cc: Mathieu Fleury, Councillor – Ward 12
Sally Coutts, Coordinator – Heritage Services Section, City of Ottawa