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24 Sussex Redux

In a special series, TONY ATHERTON goes to some of our city's top architects and designers to get a sense of what could be done with the home of our prime minister



■ Above 24 Sussex in 1950 during renovations to turn it into the official residence of the prime minister

■ Opposite A bird's-eye view of 24 Sussex, showing its proximity to the river. Garage and security installation are visible on right

BUILT a heartbeat after the nation was born, it was called, wistfully, Gorffwysfa, Welsh for "resting place" or "place of peace." In the generations that followed, however, there was little rest or peace for the grand limestone manor at 24 Sussex.

In other circumstances, Gorffwysfa might have had a happier fate, might have survived in its original Gothic Revival splendour — all peaked roofs and gingerbread — might have been scrupulously maintained by owners proud of a gracefully aging Victorian dowager.

But it occupied a prime piece of real estate on the heights above the Ottawa River, and the government thought to save it from the vagaries of private ownership. So after some legal wrangling in the middle of the last century, the people of Canada took control of the residence, spent half a million dollars changing every blessed thing inside and out, and then handed it to the rough care of a series of tenants who had little reason to worry about its long-term welfare — and every reason to ignore it.

Now, nearly a century and a half since its doors first opened to the cream of Ottawa society, Gorffwysfa is a notorious yet relatively anonymous residence, known by its address and little else. Few Canadians have more than the vaguest idea of its exterior, and fewer still have been invited inside.

What we do know is that 24 Sussex is in an appalling state of disrepair. The wind rattles through windows that haven't been replaced in generations, the plumbing is wonky, the wiring awry, the air conditioning practically nonexistent. There's asbestos in the walls, mould in the basement, and no internal sprinkler system. Seven years ago, the estimated cost of "urgent" renovations was \$10 million, half again what the home was assessed at for tax purposes at the time.

And that was before Lauren Harper started a home for wayward cats on the third floor.

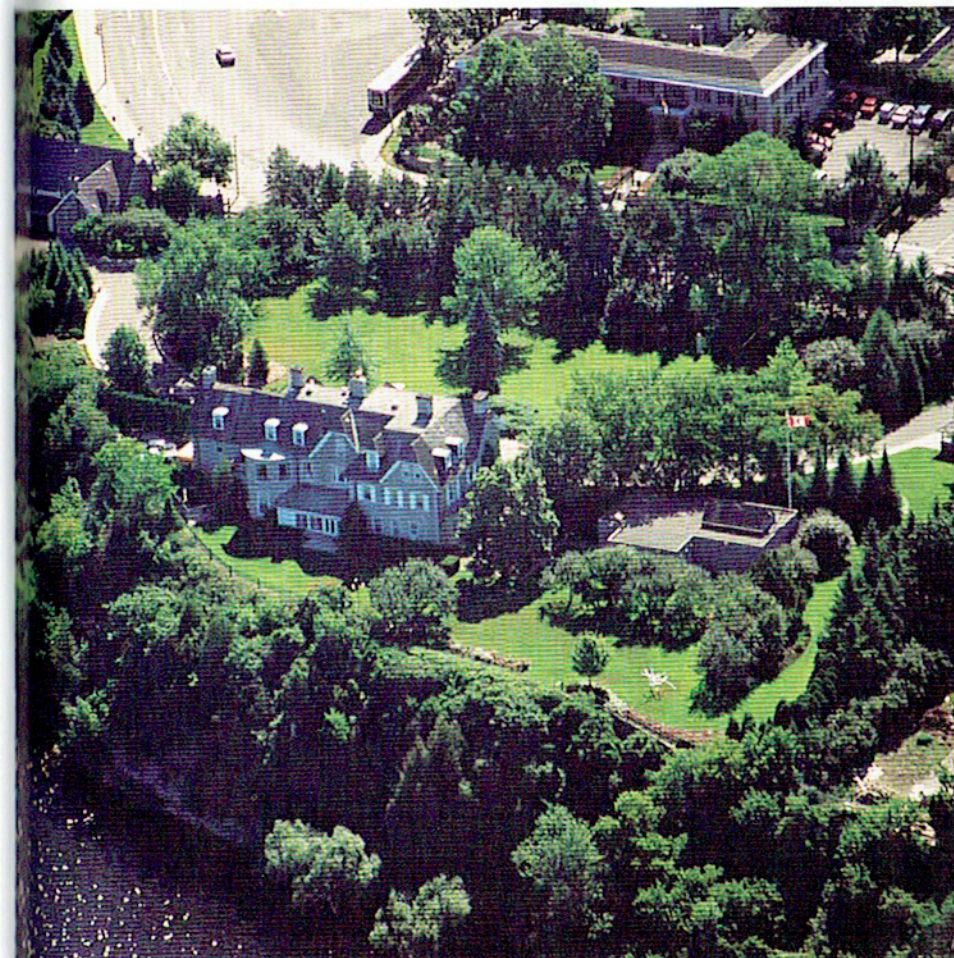
“24 Sussex is in an appalling state of disrepair. The wind rattles through windows that haven't been replaced in generations, the plumbing is wonky, the wiring awry, the air conditioning practically nonexistent. There's asbestos in the walls, mould in the basement, and no internal sprinkler system”

THE National Capital Commission, landlord of 24 Sussex since 1988, has been trying for years to get an incumbent prime minister to a) approve a whopping renovation budget and b) relocate while the work is being done. Since the former has been politically fraught and the latter inconvenient, the NCC has had little success. An incoming prime minister's decision to forgo the pleasures of 24 Sussex, at least temporarily, has precipitated unprecedented interest in the future of the mouldering residence.

As part of an ongoing series intended to enliven the debate over 24 Sussex, *Ottawa Magazine* flirts with an option that the NCC is loath to consider — starting from scratch. We asked three Ottawa architecture and design firms — Barry J. Hobin and Associates Architects Inc., Christopher Simmonds Architect, and Chris Straka's VERT — to imagine that the lot was empty and heritage and security concerns were not an issue. What might they do with the blank canvas of that handsomely situated four-acre lot? Their enthusiasm for the project is revealing. Chris Simmonds supposes that every Ottawa architect has at some point driven by 24 Sussex and wondered "What if ...?"

To leaven this wild imagining, we have asked two experts — Arthur Milnes, political historian, and Allan Teramura, president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada — to argue the merits of renovating and maintaining the current building as the official residence (Milnes) versus beginning afresh (Teramura).

In our next issue, we will return our focus to the existing residence and speculate anew. The renovations required at 24 Sussex would improve the comfort, safety, and efficiency of the building — but not its look, which has changed little in 64 years. We have asked four local interior designers to take up the slack, reimagining some of the semi-public spaces within the prime ministerial home, unfettered by the usual constraints. Wait until you see what they come up with.

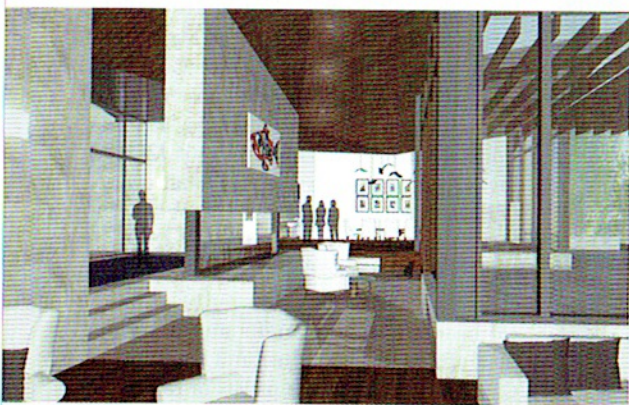


PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL COMMISSION

See more at
ottawamagazine.com

Check out our website for more 24 Sussex floor plans and designs from our architects and designers as well as visions for the prime ministerial home from students Balquis Attef, Matt Lerch, Steve Schuhmann, Jason Surkan and Sebastian Wooff in Carleton University's School of Architecture.

Christopher Simmonds Architect Inc.
(as designed by Samantha Schneider)



DEEP rich Canadian hardwood and limestone distinguish grand formal spaces beneath a roof as skewed and staggered as a wild Canadian landscape in this concept created by Samantha Schneider of Christopher Simmonds Architect.

The long, linear, single-storey great house is the least expensive of the designs. It has fewer than half the rooms of the current residence, but the scale of the formal spaces is large, and nearly all the living spaces take advantage of the dramatic view offered by the cliff-top location of 24 Sussex.

"I guess it's more residential-scale in some ways — however, the roof takes it slightly somewhere else. I think it just suits the site and the purpose," says Schneider.

The design is partly instinctual, says Schneider. "This is more to do with creating landscape," she says.

"The intention, says Chris Simmonds, "was to use forms, like the form of the roof, in a way that people could relate to." A sloped roof is more familiar than a flat roof, he says, but a sloped roof "in the form of a crystalline composition would be understood as something that was evocative of the landscape."

Inside, limestone and torrefied ash continue to be dominant elements. A long floating stone fireplace that marks the grand entrance can also be seen from each of the formal spaces, including the sunken living room and den.



Left The design features a peaked roof and lots of windows on the river side of the building, allowing views of the Gatineau Hills

Below This side of the building faces Sussex Drive. The roof line is meant to evoke a sense of Canadian geography

Opposite Large formal spaces within the design all have a river view. The dining room (top) leads down to a sunken lounge and living room (centre and below) marked by a massive floating fireplace



“The values we are trying to embody are interconnection and respect for the environment and openness, transparency and communication ... using materials in honest, communicative ways”

Christopher Simmonds, architect

COMPENDIUM

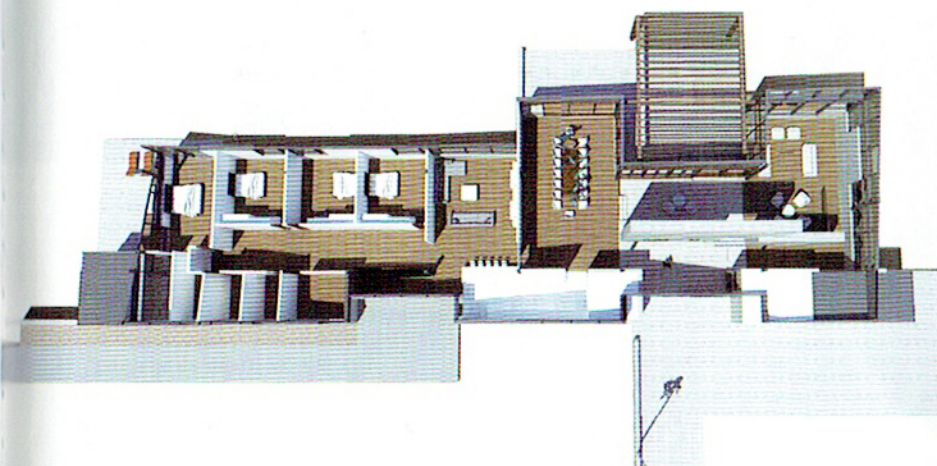
Living Space: 7,050 square feet on the ground floor plus 6,350 square feet in the basement.

Cost: \$3.877 million, not including extraordinary security measures.

Materials: Canadian elements predominate. The dramatic roofline is clad in long-lasting zinc and faced on the underside with torrefied ash. The limestone base is re-dressed stone from the original building.

Environment: The roof projects to the south and folds along the west side to increase shading, ground-source heat pump for heating/cooling, triple glazing in windows, possible thin-film solar cells on metal roof.

Outbuilding: The design assumes an outbuilding that serves as a garage and service quarters. A 2,000-square-foot outbuilding would add \$900,000 to the budget. A basement provides space for storage and mechanical services.



Barry J. Hobin & Associates Architects Inc. (group design)

A DRAMATIC two-level residence carved into the cliff above the Ottawa River amid landscaping that evokes the geography of Canada would inspire Canadians and impress foreign visitors, says celebrated Ottawa architect Barry Hobin.

Seeking to move "beyond style," the design will reference the earliest forms of Canadian architecture, says Hobin, including the lodges of West Coast Aborigines and the post-and-beam barns of European settlers.

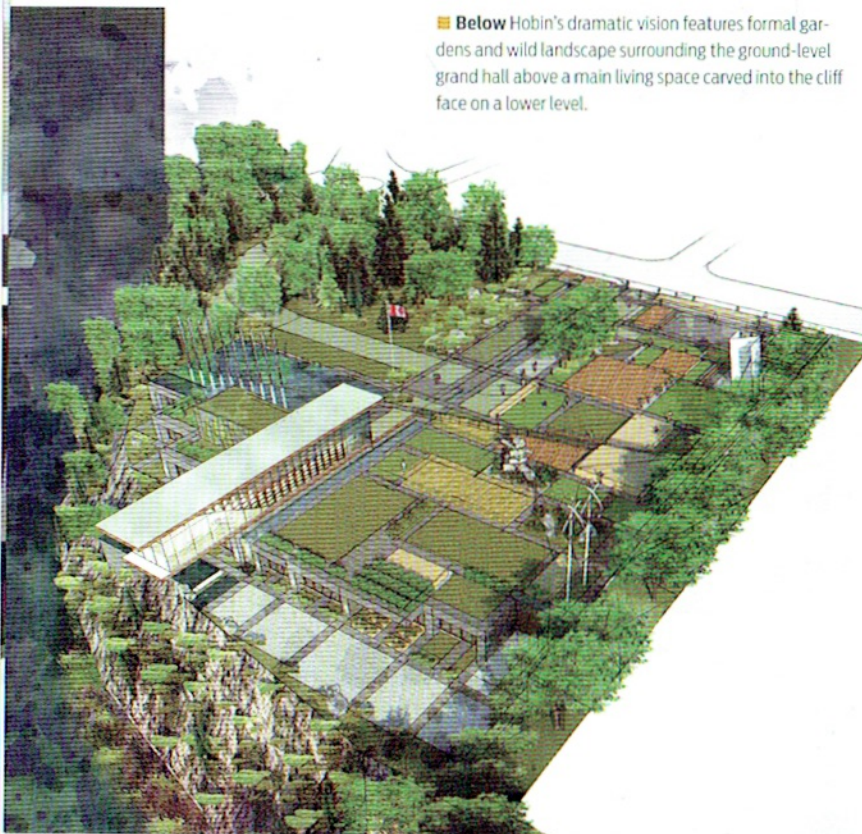
The ground floor entrance leads into a "grand welcoming hall" that projects out over the river a little like a Grand Canyon Skywalk, says Hobin. "It will take your breath away."

Formal entertaining and dining spaces and the service spaces they require are one level down along the bluff but will still be oriented to take in Parliament Hill and the view of the river. The personal space of the prime minister's family is an integrated wing, attached to the main space but with a separate entrance.

The design is a co-operative effort of a number of architects in Barry J. Hobin and Associates Architects, which has previously designed official residences for diplomats from Iran and Australia.

Hobin wants to open up views to the house and, ideally, allow some access to the grounds to engage Canadians in the design. The current residence is frustrating, he says, because "it has no presence whatsoever and obscures one of the most unbelievable views in the city."

Below Hobin's dramatic vision features formal gardens and wild landscape surrounding the ground-level grand hall above a main living space carved into the cliff face on a lower level.



"The design of the house needs to have a much bigger narrative than that of any one occupier ... the value of the house is the story you are telling about Canada"

Barry J. Hobin, architect

For more of Barry Hobin's designs for 24 Sussex, see his website, hobinarc.com, or ottawamagazine.com.



Main image Hobin's design reshapes the cliff face to create an arresting site for the new residence

Above, left Landscape is important to Hobin's design, including this reflecting pool set in the stone foundations of the former residence. Ten tall masts represent the former prime ministers who served the nation while living here

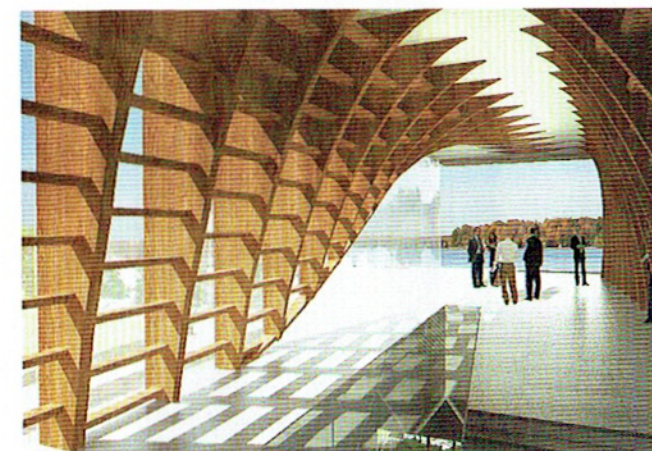
COMPENDIUM

Cost: \$9 million to \$10 million, not including interior finishings and special security features.

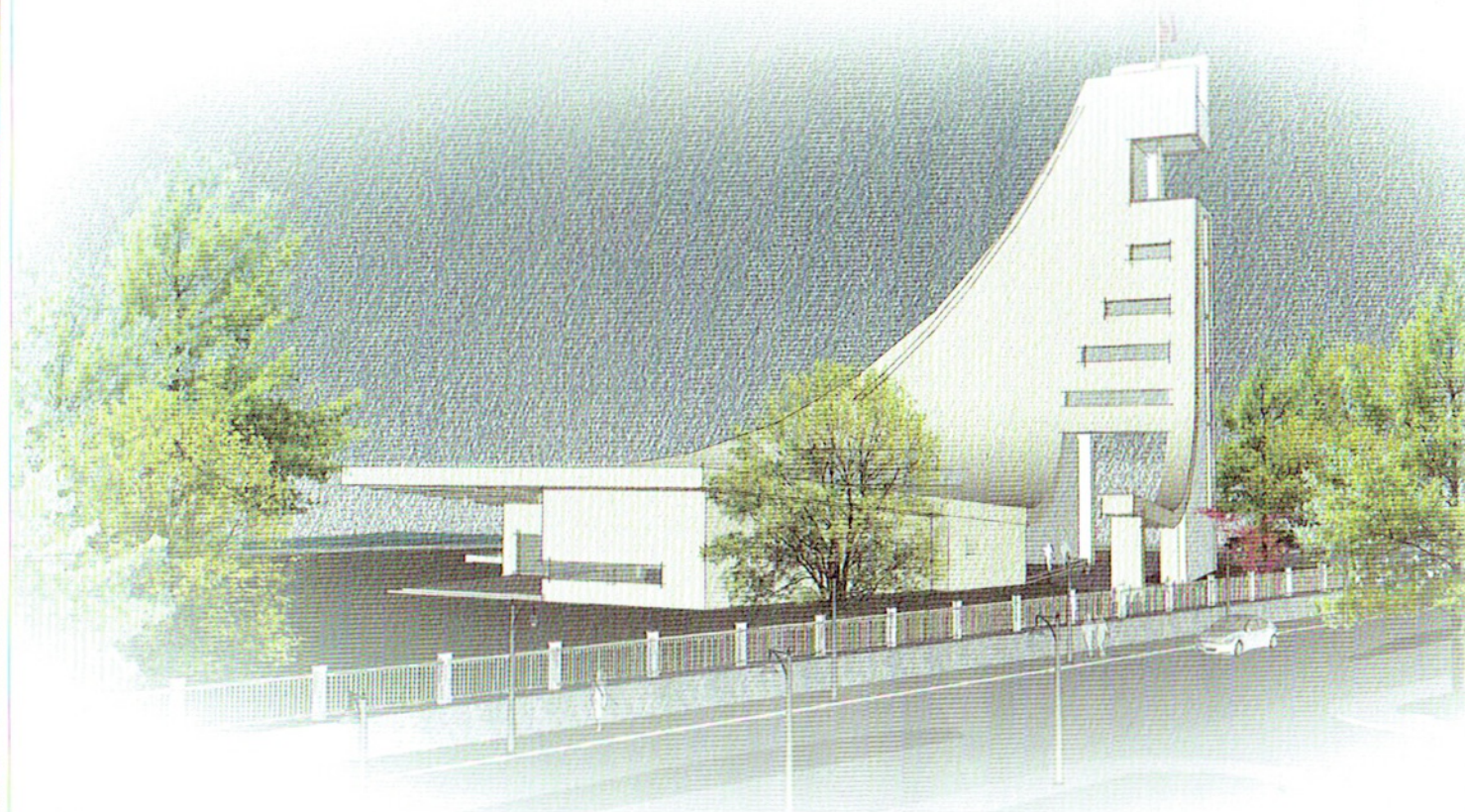
Living Space: 10,000 square feet.

Materials: "The very best of what we have to offer from our natural elements," says Hobin. Newfoundland black slate, Ontario stone, and West Coast fir.

Environment: The house will meet Passive House standards with smart systems and passive overactive technologies, including earth tubes, controlled ventilation, and integration of plaza water feature.



Above, right A grand entrance hall of timber and glass projects over the Ottawa River. "It will take your breath away," says Hobin.



A BOLD silhouette defined by an entranceway tower that gives way to a sweeping roof and a projection over the Ottawa River is intended to become an instant icon, says designer Chris Straka.

Straka says his team wanted a structure distinctive enough that almost anyone could draw a sketch if asked, a design "that would endure in the mind but also endure over time."

The entranceway tower nudges up to Sussex Drive, and visitors drive under the tower to enter a long, wide corridor off which are massive formal entertaining spaces under a curvilinear roof. A floor above the central corridor would contain personal space for the prime minister and his or her family. The entrance corridor proceeds to a ramped exhibition hall projecting over the river below grade.

Straka's firm, VERT plan.design.build, is devoted to building extremely energy-efficient "passive-design" homes, but he admits that the projection over the river, with five sides exposed to the elements, is a passive-home no-no. The design makes up for energy loss with a broad south-facing slope from the tower that could be used for solar generation, he says.

Straka's background in environmental design allows him to build homes up to 5,600 square feet, he says. To follow through on this 15,000-square-foot behemoth, he'd have to partner with an architect.

“ If you gave someone pencil and paper and asked them to draw a sketch of 24 Sussex, what would you get back? We concluded most people wouldn't even know if it was a two- or three-storey home”

Chris Straka, designer



■ Opposite Straka and team wanted to create an instant icon that would be a touchstone for Canadians. A tower facing Sussex Drive rises above the entrance, with main living spaces to the west

■ This page The entrance hall continues down a level to end in a small lounge projecting from the cliffside over the river. The tower is situated to face the entrance of Rideau Hall

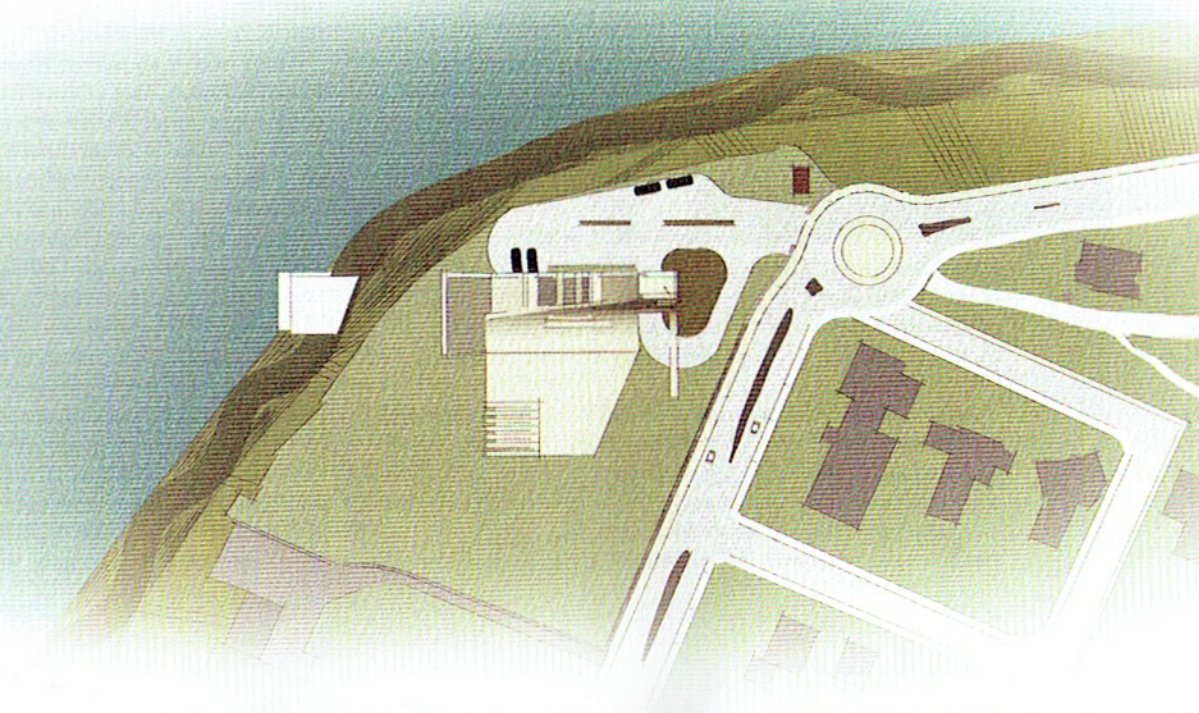
COMPENDIUM

Living Space: Up to 15,000 square feet.

Cost: \$15 million to \$20 million, before landscaping finishings and special security features.

Materials: Glue-laminated timber for rafters, beams, and columns; stone (partially repurposed from existing home) as a veneer on some walls; vegetated roof above formal entertaining area; landscaping representing regional ecologies.

Environment/Energy Efficiency: Roof-wall with surface area great enough for discreet photovoltaic generation system, air-source heat-pump technology, high-efficiency heat-recovery ventilation system, and restrained use of glazing.





Save the History Behind Those Walls

For many, the best solution to the 24 Sussex problem is simply to tear it down. But as historian **ARTHUR MILNES** argues, we have much more to lose than just bricks and mortar

OVER THE YEARS, whenever the issue of the future of 24 Sussex Drive is raised, I quietly think of one name and one name only. And the man I think of isn't even Canadian. Yet I know exactly what he'd do, faced with a crumbling national institution that belongs to no single prime minister or party but instead belongs to us all as Canadians.

He was an American, a farmer from Missouri who by happenstance, hard work, and more than a little luck became president of the United States. Today, decades after he left office with his popularity in the doldrums, historians have concluded for the most part that when it mattered, Harry Truman got the big decisions right.

And one of those decisions was to defy public opinion, large swaths of media opinion, and hostility from Congress to repair and upgrade a building — the White House — that to him was a shrine to America's proud history.

"History for Truman," wrote his biographer, David McCullough, "was never just something in a book, but part of

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life, and of interest primarily because it had to do with people. Often when he spoke of Andrew Jackson or John Quincy Adams, it was as if he were talking about someone he knew."

And so President Truman moved out of the crumbling White House for approximately three years and allowed that famous building, the residence of the president, to be properly restored.

Americans, most particularly their presidents, have been thanking Truman ever since. And the pious editorialists and opposition politicians who opposed this renovation? Their names have been lost to history while Truman's lives on.

So today, as Ottawa considers the future of 24 Sussex Drive, Truman's steadfast example should be considered and emulated here.

Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent was the first prime minister of Canada to live at the home on Sussex above the Ottawa River. Since then, nine other prime ministers have earned the right to use 24 Sussex Drive as their home.

Think of it — for almost 70 years of Canada's history, that address has been our leader's home. Whenever I see the house as I drive by or on the few occasions I have been there, I don't think of the costs of renovation or the very Canadian-like columns that will dismissively greet a renovation; I think of the history that went on behind those walls.

I picture two very different men, from different parties, who one night in the early 1980s put politics aside to strengthen our country. It was at that home that Pierre Trudeau and William Davis met, as Canadians, to make an agreement that bequeathed the country a Charter of Rights. In the same vein, I picture Mr. Diefenbaker at work in his study

there, alone, crafting the Bill of Rights more than 20 years earlier.

I also picture a day in 1990 when Canada's Prime Minister Brian Mulroney spoke to the newly free Nelson Mandela by phone from that house. I think of Pearson in that home, cajoling and convincing reluctant ministers and MPs to join him on the path to medicare. Later, I can imagine Mr. Harper carefully crafting his historic apology to Indigenous peoples in the same study where Mr. St. Laurent himself might have worked so long ago. Then there is Mr. Chrétien, who was meeting with a provincial premier at 24 Sussex on a September morning in 2001 when the world changed forever.

All these thoughts of mine are compounded each time I'm in Ottawa as I pass by another stately home where a prime minister once lived. Earnscliffe. The home of Canada's first and founding Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald.

I am filled with a great sadness each time I go by Earnscliffe or visit there. In that building, the Father of Confederation lived and died, passing away there in 1891 while still prime minister.

In many countries, Earnscliffe would be a shrine, probably still the official residence of Canada's prime ministers. But what did Canadians allow to happen? We sold our first prime minister's house, and it is now foreign soil as the home of the British High Commissioner to Canada. There was even a public lawn sale where our first prime minister's possessions were sold like damaged goods at a thrift shop.

And now some suggest we should do the same to 24 Sussex Drive, just pitch it — and our history — away when history becomes inconvenient or expensive.

“Now some suggest we should do the same to 24 Sussex ... just pitch it — and our history — away when history becomes inconvenient or expensive”

This approach is very Canadian. It is also so very sad.

President Truman and his family moved back into the White House in March of 1952. A few weeks later he took his entire nation on a televised tour of America's newly renovated home. History records that 30 million Americans watched this tour of their house.

In writing of Truman's tour, Jack Gould of the *New York Times* summed up what mattered most.

"The president was an inexhaustible source of information. He explained the decor and furnishings and offered a host of anecdotes on former occupants of the White House," Gould wrote. "Yet through his narratives there always ran an underlying note of deeply sincere and moving awe for the historic continuity of the presidency."

Take a drive by Earnscliffe today. Go by the now empty 24 Sussex. Tell me, then, that Canadians don't need more of what Gould wrote about regarding our history and national institutions in the capital.

Tell me we don't need our own Harry Truman.

Arthur Milnes, a Fellow of the Queen's School of Policy Studies, served proudly as a speechwriter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Before that he was researcher on the Rt. Hon. Brian Mulroney's bestselling Memoirs and has edited or co-edited books about past prime ministers Sir John A. Macdonald, Arthur Meighen, R.B. Bennett, and John N. Turner and U.S. presidents Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush. His latest book, Canada Always: The Speeches of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, will be published by McClelland and Stewart later this year.



Above The many faces of 24 Sussex. Originally a neo-Gothic design, the house's chateausque features, including a turret, were added in the Edwardian era. The design was dramatically changed after it was expropriated by the government in the 1940s

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The Case for Moving the Prime Ministerial Residence

It's time to think about a new use for 24 Sussex. And concerns about security, media, and international diplomacy make a strong argument in favour of a fresh start at a different address, says **ALLAN TERAMURA**, president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada

IS CANADA, ALMOST 150 YEARS after Confederation, in need of a purpose-built prime ministerial residence?

Long-delayed repairs to 24 Sussex are finally being looked at seriously, and this is an occasion to think about whether it is still the most suitable building to house this important function. While the house has tremendous historical value and must be restored, it may now be time to think of a more appropriate use for it.

Many changes in the requirements for the prime ministerial residence have happened over the years. Security, for example, is clearly a major challenge. When one approaches the building, the first thing that comes into view is the massive steel fence, then the guard post and vehicle barriers, then the cameras, then the security detail's cars and trucks, then, finally, jammed behind this intimidating visual cacophony, the house itself. Not the most welcoming presentation. No wonder Margaret Trudeau called it the "crown jewel of Canada's federal penitentiary system." The view looking out from inside must be grim.

And it's very likely that this situation would remain unchanged even if the building were demolished and rebuilt in situ. The challenge is the tension between the very real security requirements of the VIP occupants and the immediate proxim-

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ity of the house to a public road. On a larger site, these necessary technicalities could be incorporated in a more discreet manner at some distance from the house proper, making the immediate surroundings more domestic and dignified.

Assuming a suitable site is available somewhere nearby and the political will exists to explore alternative solutions, an exciting range of possibilities begins to emerge.

It's likely that the Canadian government now requires better and larger settings for official dinners and other diplomatic functions than was anticipated in the 1940s. While other, grander spaces exist for ceremonial events in the parliamentary precinct and Rideau Hall, there is something special about being invited to the government leader's personal home. Expanding the capacity to host official events in a more intimate setting can play an important role in Canada's international relations; such intangibles are important in politics and diplomacy.

Also, in today's media environment, the importance of the ability to supply visually arresting settings for photos and videos of meetings with global leaders should not be underestimated. The history of 20th-century Canadian architecture is richly populated with examples of significant houses carefully integrated into their surrounding landscape; for example, the Gordon Smith House in Vancouver by the late architect Arthur Erickson.

A new prime ministerial residence should be a masterful achievement in this tradition. Classic examples blur the boundary between house and garden, creating an integrated experiential whole. Considering the symbolic significance of this building, the landscape architecture could be a poetic interpretation of the very idea of the Canadian northern wilderness. What better setting for a photo opportunity with a visiting world leader? Images like this would be broadcast to the world, thereby forming part of our national identity.

A house built with diplomatic functions in mind would be designed to display art. The curation of the artworks would reflect both the tastes of the residents and the best of Canadian artistic achievement, and just as importantly, the ability to display a wide variety of artifacts would be professionally integrated into the design of the building.

The building could be humble in its material palette while being rich in carefully worked out, beautiful, and practical details. If the leader of the federal government woke up every day in such an environment, perhaps he or she would gain a greater appreciation of the impact of thoughtful building on one's quality of life. This would be a good thing for all of us.

The building could easily embody state-of-the-art

“In today's media environment, the importance of visually arresting settings for photos and videos of meetings with global leaders should not be underestimated”

green technologies. A carbon-neutral design should, at least, be an aspirational goal.

The feel of the home should be neither regal nor presidential, as this would not be appropriate for the status of the intended occupant. The prime minister is, after all, only an ordinary citizen who happens to have an extraordinary job. A feeling of domesticity should prevail, balanced with the generosity necessary for entertaining global leaders.

Twenty-four Sussex was built for a private citizen and adapted over the years to serve a more public function. It's possible that it can successfully be further adapted to better suit an evolving role in Canada's political life, fulfilling all the objectives listed above.

A purpose-built prime minister's residence and landscape, however, is more likely to succeed, in my view.

Moreover, liberated from the security constraints of an official residence, 24 Sussex could be restored to reflect the character it had when first selected to serve as the prime minister's residence. (This character can be briefly glimpsed in the 1957 NFB short *Capital City*, available on their website.) A new, publicly accessible function, such as a museum, could be introduced, and with the security infrastructure removed, the streetscape would be dramatically improved.

No political party will sign off on an extravagant or excessively luxurious official residence, nor should they. I do hope, however, that if a government chooses to build a new prime minister's residence, it will be bold enough to build a house that will serve the country well for the next 150 years. ■

Allan Teramura, FRAIC, is president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and is a principal at Watson MacEwan Teramura Architects in Ottawa, specializing in the conservation of historic structures. A member of UNESCO's International Council on Monuments and Sites, he has recently worked on Parliament Hill's Centre Block and planning studies in the parliamentary precinct.

Change of Address

The NCC could always expropriate another home — but which one?

BUILDING A NEW HOME on the grounds of 24 Sussex is not the only alternative to renovations estimated at \$10 million seven years ago. The NCC could, in theory, buy — or more likely expropriate — another existing home and adapt it to fit.

There is a significant precedent: 24 Sussex itself was expropriated by the federal government in the 1940s.

But is there anything in Ottawa's stock of grand homes that might be a more cost-effective alternative to renovating 24 Sussex?

Ottawa's most expensive home is not a likely candidate; expropriating Michael and Marlen Cowpland's Rockcliffe Park residence could likely run the government \$14 million or more (not counting the legal costs of the inevitable court battle). And while the 20,000-square-foot home — all glass and golden arches — might be said to have a place in the high-tech history of Ottawa, not to mention serving as a setting for Marlen Cowpland's short-lived TV series *Celebrity Pets*, as a prime minister's residence, it lacks a certain gravitas.

The gracious brick house of Ottawa developers Sean Murray and Jamilah Taib on Manor Avenue is a better prospect. Newer than the Cowpland estate, you can bet it has working air conditioning, and it's a steal based on its 2016 assessed value of \$11 million. It offers about the same living space as 24 Sussex, though its one-acre lot is a quarter the size of the current home's lot.

Something a little older, perhaps? How about 400 Acacia Ave. in Rockcliffe Park, built in 1930 and owned by the U.S. government, and which was extensively renovated in recent years? Sure, the public spaces are a little more cramped than prime ministers have been used to, and it sits on only three-quarters of an acre, but it has eight bedrooms and was recently listed for a mere \$4,750,000. That leaves a lot of wiggle room for renovations.

Some historians think the best alternative to 24 Sussex is just down the road at 140 Sussex. Earnscliffe, a gracefully maintained Victorian beauty handsomely situated between the Macdonald-Cartier Bridge and the National Research Council, has been the home of successive British High Commissioners to Canada since 1930. Built the year Ottawa was incorporated (1855) and once the home of Sir John A. Macdonald, its pedigree and, by all accounts, its upkeep, are considerably superior to the current PM's residence.

But it would take a pretty piece of diplomacy to convince the U.K. foreign service to swap for 24 Sussex. — *Tony Atherton*



Earnscliffe Could the best alternative to 24 Sussex Drive be the home of the British High Commissioner? Built in 1855, it was once the home of Sir John A. Macdonald

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