

JOHN SEWELL



Old building, new solution

A startling and unique solution to the vexing problem of what to do with the old City Hall when a new one is planned, is about to be provided in the nation's capital. It's a move that the Foreign Investment Review Agency might not have permitted. Thank goodness it's been replaced by Investment Canada.

The Ottawa City Hall is, for now, nestled snugly on Green Island just to the right of and behind the Parliament buildings. It's a relatively non-descript building, to my mind, even if it was built by Charles Trudeau, brother of the former prime minister.

Its one architectural distinction is the oversized mayor's office, which Mayor Marion Dewar says can "comfortably hold 60 people at one time." When Charlotte Whitten was mayor, she apparently gave but a single directive to the architect: make her office larger than that of any cabinet minister.

Building too small by half

The building has been a success in spite of its location. Ms Dewar says it is always busy with citizens coming and going, and in the evenings, it's hard to get a free committee room because of all the residents' group meetings. At 14,000 square metres, it's too small by half. For the past eight years, the city has rented outside office space for some departments and probably paid enough in rent to buy a new building.

There are two possible solutions to the space problem: expand the present building or start over on a new site. A consultant has been retained to look at those options, and later this week, City Hall will hold a press conference to suggest how the public can get involved in this round of decision-making.

Ms Dewar talks hopefully of finding a downtown site where a structure can be built "that expresses the sense of what this city is." It would be a good opportunity for the people who live in Ottawa to have a sense of their own place, rather than being overwhelmed by the presence of the federal government and its structures. But that would depend on the city's finding an appropriate site at the right price, holding a successful architectural competition — as in Mississauga, Ont., where a design of real distinction was agreed on and is now being built — and finding a buyer for the present City Hall.

Who would want to buy the old City Hall? The climate of the present Government should give you a clue.

Who else but Americans?

Who else but the U.S. Government? It is known that the Americans are searching for a new embassy site. Green Island is superb from their point of view because access is limited to two bridges, making security easy.

In fact, it is such an appropriate location that the city could expect to command an excellent price for the building, a sum that might allow City Council to buy and build exactly where it wants and in an appropriate form, all at a cost within the means of Ottawa's property taxpayers. It would be U.S. investment in the Canadian capital's City Hall.

If it came to pass, then the U.S. ambassador rather than the mayor of Ottawa could have an office larger than any cabinet minister's.

This is perhaps appropriate to the tone and feel of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's notion of hierarchies.

Will they then try to change the name of the island? Aren't the possibilities running through your head enchanting?

Ottawa could set a precedent for all large Canadian cities — getting the Americans to help relocate City Hall into the mainstream of urban life. Maybe they would even want to help build those massive domed stadiums we need to protect us from acid rain.