

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

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Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Accessibility and Historic Buildings

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PAPER: 2011-31

REVIEW DATE: February 2011

Catherine Leitch likes old buildings. "They have a certain character that the new ones just don't have," says the City of Toronto program coordinator, who is a great admirer and supporter of historic sites. Catherine is also a wheelchair user with special concerns about the restoration and redesign of historic structures. "Like any citizen, I would like to have access to historic buildings. I would like to come in the same door as everyone else."

Accessibility, Catherine says, should not be restricted to issues of wheelchair access, either. People with other disabilities, such as the hearing and visual impairment should also be better accommodated at historic buildings. It makes good business sense to make historic sites more accessible, she says. "The market that enjoys heritage buildings is the same demographic market that is growing older and becoming less mobile. By making our buildings more accessible, we are not only doing the right ethical thing, we are also accommodating a major consumer group."

The current standards for disabled access to all buildings, including historic structures, are outlined in the Guidelines for Assessing Accommodation Requirements for Persons with Disabilities, developed by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (1988). The Commission clearly places human need ahead of architectural considerations.

Heritage buildings in Ontario

Following the Second World War, cities and towns across Ontario and North America changed dramatically. Many historic buildings from the 19th century were demolished and replaced by housing projects, apartment buildings and expressways to allow for growth and expansion. Interest in historic architecture was minimal. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, there was a renewed appreciation for the beauty, detail and craftsmanship of historic architecture. A new movement developed, which encouraged the preservation of historic structures.

Ontario's government came under intense public pressure to create legislation to protect historic buildings. In response, the province in 1974 passed the Ontario Heritage Act, which gives municipalities the power to designate historic structures and districts and sets out the procedures to be followed in implementing heritage designation programs. In the 1990s, with the rapid growth of cultural tourism, the

preservation of historic buildings has become an *important* social and economic factor in the development of cities and towns around the world.

Accessibility in Ontario

In the 1970s and early 1980s, as interest in preserving historic structures grew, so too did the movement to promote the rights of persons with disabilities, including access to buildings. At that time, there were few legislative measures directed to making existing buildings accessible for persons with disabilities. The passage of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and a landmark legal case on the subject of accessibility to buildings in the mid-1980s, led to the amendment of the Ontario Human Rights Code and the development of accessibility guidelines. Section 15 of the Charter guarantees equality under the law and freedom from discrimination based on grounds such as sex, race, or mental and physical disabilities.

What are the guidelines?

The guidelines for accessibility under the Human Rights Code provide guidance to the public on matters concerning accessibility issues. The *Ontario Human Rights Commission* has favoured equality of access. Accessibility complaints can also be settled through mediation in cooperation with the Commission. Although the accessibility guidelines have been developed to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from society as a result of their disability, the guidelines benefit everyone. Improving accessibility helps people with children in strollers, senior citizens and people carrying heavy packages. In addition, it allows for easier shipping and handling of objects along a ramp.

What do the guidelines mean for historic buildings?

The guidelines mean that workplaces, services and facilities must be adapted so that persons with disabilities can participate in society in much the same way as persons without disabilities. This includes people who have visual and hearing impairments. In the case of historic buildings, the guidelines place the dignity of the person with disabilities first, while preserving the historic appearance of the building. Although the historic *appearance* may not be the primary consideration, both goals can be realized through the use of creative solutions.

Putting the guidelines to work

Working with the guidelines requires creativity and sensitivity on the part of renovation/restoration designers. The following are two examples of historic buildings that have been made accessible while maintaining their historic integrity. As in these examples, every restoration is different.

George Brown House, Toronto: The Ontario Heritage Foundation beautifully restored George Brown House in the late 1980s. Since the traditional entrance to the house is located at the front of the building and is inaccessible to persons with disabilities due to the high stairs, the main entrance was relocated to the side of the building during restoration. In making George Brown House more accessible, the Foundation's architects faced severe structural constraints. But they were still able

to maintain the building's historical integrity while *allowing* for the needs of people with disabilities. By relocating the main entrance, all visitors, including those with disabilities, have equal access to the historic house. As a result, the goal of the guidelines has been achieved. Persons with disabilities can experience the house in the same way as persons without disabilities.

Central United Church, Sault Ste. Marie: The main door to this historic church is still at the front of the building. But the new, beautifully detailed ramp at the back has become a commonly used entrance by everyone who visits or attends the church. The church decided to make the rear entrance barrier-free for the simple reason that the parking lot is also located there. Everyone has welcomed the rear-ramp entrance, especially persons with disabilities because of its close proximity to the parking lot. Architect Chris Tossel designed the new ramp to match the historical structure, carefully selecting the stone and mortar to blend in with the original building's material. The ramp is also well integrated with the surrounding landscape and does not appear out of place.

Accessible historic buildings

Planning renovations to make a historic building more accessible? Here are some suggestions to consider:

Form an Accessibility Advisory Committee: Before starting any construction, form a group to discuss and analyse accessibility issues in relation to the historic structure. Try to involve people with expertise in different areas, such as accessibility issues, architecture, building administration and history. A diverse group can discuss accessibility from a variety of points of view and reach a well-informed decision.

Prepare a clear, concise policy statement: This statement should be a guiding principle and should be referred to at every stage of the renovations – from preliminary planning to the final detailing for a door handle. The policy statement should be developed and *supported* by the entire organization throughout the renovations.

Make a plan: Develop a comprehensive plan for the building which deals with all functional accessibility issues for persons with disabilities, including telephones, drinking fountains, lever door handles, landscaping, fire alarms and washroom facilities.

Prepared from accessibility resources of the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation.

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