

OPINION

## Relax, Ottawa: The Château isn't falling

ALEX BOZIKOVIC ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

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An assault on the castle! That's been the tone of the intense popular debate in Ottawa over a proposed addition to the Château Laurier. The design by Toronto's architectsAlliance has been cast as a "disgraceful act of heritage vandalism." And yet the latest version of that design goes to the city's built heritage subcommittee Monday with staff support. It might, at last, get built.

That is not the disaster that some heritage advocates fear; the addition, in its current form, is a respectful and respectable piece of architecture. But it sure won't make everyone happy. Nothing could.

The last two years of debate – call them the Château Wars – have taken place on two distinct fronts. One is the popular argument. Ottawans love the Château, and won't accept any change at all. The other is a more subtle argument that the addition should mimic or mirror the existing Château.

First, the popular debate. Ever since the Château's owners, Larco Investments, first revealed addition plans in 2016, Ottawans have been really angry. The Toronto architect Peter Clewes and his firm architectsAlliance, together with ERA Architects, drew up a new wing for the hotel – closing its U shape with new guest and meeting rooms – that was 12 storeys tall, facing Major's Hill Park. It borrowed the limestone and copper of the Château but articulated the façades with an irregular grid of rectangles. Locals compared it to something out of Minecraft or Mordor.

That was and is ridiculous; it's an argument out of 1918, the equivalent of complaining about abstract art because it doesn't look like anything. And yet Canadians are poorly educated about architecture, and most of us don't think very hard about the shape or appearance of our buildings. Accordingly there remains an opposition in many people's minds between "modern" buildings, which are unornamented boxes, and "traditional" buildings, which are everything that is or appears "old."

It's clear which side of the equation is more highly valued: traditional buildings connect to tradition, our past, our history. This makes Mr. Clewes, an avowed modernist, clearly the bad guy. Anything he designs that doesn't look just like the old Château is, in this view, bad news.

This Château discussion is loaded with somewhat treacherous nationalist sentiment. Heritage Ottawa describes the place as a “venerable historic hotel.” Which it is. And yet, what is the history? When the Château was first built in 1912, the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway was working to make Ottawa a destination. The architects, Ross & MacFarlane, were borrowing the “Château style” pioneered by CP a generation earlier. Here, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its turrets, steep copper-clad gables and dormers were borrowed from American robber barons who were borrowing from medieval French nobles.

In short: the Château was originally a piece of commercial fakery, no more an inevitable product of its time and culture than another 20<sup>th</sup>-century chateau, Sleeping Beauty Castle at Disneyland.

That doesn't mean the Château's architecture is not significant. It is. The Château Style became Canada's de facto national style in the 1920s (as the Château Laurier was expanded). Further, the place is full of memories for Ottawans, which is another factor in how we consider the worth of a building.

And it is beautiful.

But it's not a holy site. New additions to the place should be considered with an appropriate, and not excessive, degree of deference. And Mr. Clewes, a self-described “passionate modernist,” uses exactly that language. “I think what you want to do here is be fairly deferential,” he told me this week. “This is about doing something quiet and understated, but beautifully and richly detailed.” The current seven-storey version lives up to that billing. It is short enough not to obscure the hotel's famous frilly roof from Major's Hill Park. It also engages with the park, elegantly so: the glass skin of the building is concealed behind an irregular grid of vertical limestone fins that will echo the limestone of the Château's base.

This is where the heritage advocates get angry, and where the debate gets more complicated.

The main criticism, from Heritage Ottawa and others, has been that the new addition doesn't match the spirit of the Château. Peter Coffman, an architectural historian at Carleton University, told me that “these are two buildings, staring off in opposite directions.” He'd like the new addition to capture the picturesque – which is to say deliberately asymmetrical, consciously ancient – the character of Château.

This would be another perfectly respectable approach. A recently unveiled quasi-Gothic tower at Westminster Abbey, designed by Ptolemy Dean Architects, takes this route. In Canada, a precedent is the Daniels Faculty building at the University of Toronto, designed by NADAAA with ERA. It revives an 1875 seminary with a new wing that – as I wrote last year – “capture[s] its geometric exuberance and expresses it in contemporary language.”

Many ambitious designers today are exploring new ways of adapting forms and ornament from architectural history. I can imagine the Château with a new, playful

addition that puts a contemporary twist on the fairy-tale original. In the hands of, say, Shim-Sutcliffe or Hariri Pontarini, it could be very special. In lesser hands, it could be a disaster.

But Larco Investments has gone with Mr. Clewes, who in his Toronto work has shown himself to be extremely competent at making Modern boxes. Now the Château is likely to get something polite and quiet, which will be distinguished in its details – of the façade, of the ground floor, of the landscape, of the roofscape – are finely resolved.

There's an opportunity for something good to come out of this, now that thousands of Ottawans are paying close attention to a piece of contemporary architecture. Larco and Mr. Clewes will be under pressure to bring God to the details. And, equally, ordinary observers may get the chance to learn that a box can be beautiful, and that there's more than one way for a culture to move forward.

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