

OPINION

The Chateau Laurier's new addition will be nice. The debate has been ugly

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Ottawa is about to be ruined by a work of architecture. That's the weird refrain that has been echoing across talk radio and social media as news emerged that a new addition to the Chateau Laurier – at last! – seems to be going ahead.

On Thursday, the planning committee of Ottawa city council voted to approve the hotel's new wing designed by architectsAlliance. Brace yourself for the construction of the most notorious piece of architecture in the country.

I find this debate gratifying and also deeply weird. I believe firmly that places matter and that architecture has an important role to play in shaping who we are. But the protests about the Chateau have been ugly: angry, full of anti-intellectual and spurious arguments, tinged with thoughtless jingoism that misrepresents the history of the city and the country.

All this for a polite and well-made box of hotel rooms dressed in glass, limestone and copper. Strange.

The design that's been approved was architectsAlliance's fifth version of the hotel addition for owner Larco Investments Ltd. The addition has changed dramatically since it was first put forward: It's become shorter; it's changed from two wings, continuing the shape of the 1912 hotel, into a single low wing that closes the hotel into a rough square and presents a new face to the adjacent Major's Hill Park. It is, as it's been shown to the public, a polite and urbane piece of architecture that will be beautiful to see up close.

The man at the centre of the controversy, architectsAlliance head Peter Clewes, sounded a bit weary when I reached him on Thursday. "I agree" he said, "that the stakes are high. We've always felt that this was a critically important building, and we've been working to create something that is beautiful and carefully thought out."

However, he said the criticism has been hard to reconcile. "We've been facing opponents in five directions and they all want different things," Clewes said.

This is not well-understood, but it's entirely true. On one side has been the populist critique that the new hotel "should look exactly like the old one," Clewes said. On the other is the advice of heritage professionals that the new addition should be different from, and "subordinate" to, the original architecture.

The popular argument implies that central Ottawa is some sort of historic theme park. The idea is that being able to see this modernist addition to the Chateau somehow degrades the entire experience of being in and around Parliament. Maclean's writer Stephen Maher waxed on this theme recently, saying that "the beautiful historic space at the heart of our capital will be permanently damaged" by the presence of a building that is "a cheap, ugly afterthought." The addition "will wreck the experience of walking through Major's Hill Park."

Strong words! I recently spent an afternoon hanging around the hotel and the adjacent Major's Hill Park to get a sense of what this critique is all about. The park is an important place and one of the best spots to see Parliament in dialogue with the landscape of the river. From the statue of Colonel By, on a lush summer day, the back of the Chateau was barely visible behind the trees.

As I walked up close to the hotel, I could see what's there now, behind a 10-metre border of shrubs: a wall and a parking lot. There used to be a four-storey parking garage on the spot. And somehow, as Clewes pointed out, "the back of the hotel was never sacred before."

The new wing will present a new face to the park, carefully detailed and clad at its base in limestone. There's no question that from close up, this will be an improvement to one aspect of the park.

But let's be honest: The real problem is that the new building will be visible within a landscape dominated by the Gothic grandeur of Parliament. It will be new and it will spoil the illusion that the area around Parliament is straight out of a fairy tale. It is a scene of "traditional" architecture, to use the term many people are familiar with, in which "modern" architecture is nowhere to be seen.

Unless you look around, that is. In fact, most of downtown Ottawa was made in the post-Second World War era. Even when the local cartoonist Andrew King tried his hand at drawing an olde-style wing for the hotel, the Brutalist headquarters of the Department of National Defence – designed by John C. Parkin in 1969 – was poking out in the background.

This is true for the larger area as well. Ottawa is largely a 20th-century city; Most of its major buildings, for better as well as for worse, are products of the past three generations. If you actually look at the city, this is perfectly plain.

And Clewes's new addition to this tapestry will be a worthy one: unflashy, well-made of quality materials, arranged on its site in a careful manner. It is not the expressive and ambitious kind of addition that would be encouraged in the Netherlands or Spain,

places where architecture matters more and where nobody wants to pretend time has stopped. But, it will be good and Canadian. It won't remake Ottawa, but it won't ruin it, either.

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