

Courthouse Gazette



Saint John Theatre Co.

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SYDNEY STREET COURTHOUSE DESIGN REVEAL JANUARY 29, 2021

The public will soon get a long-awaited preview of the design when plans for the project are presented to the Saint John Heritage Review Board on **January 29th**. That day, SJTC will host a design reveal at 12 noon (online) from the BMO studio. **We'll send out reminders and hope you will join us.**

As many New Brunswickers know, the Courthouse, built in the 1820s, is an architectural gem, with its iconic spiral staircase, marble floors, and gracious sandstone façade. Our plans to infuse the Courthouse with new life as a performance venue are four years in the making from when we first walked through the doors. This work has continued to advance steadily, even when the world shut down over much of 2020.

The detailed design process has been iterative, complex, and thorough. This is partly due to the fact that the Courthouse has already been 'rebuilt' once before, following a fire in 1919 which left only a standing shell. Our exploratory work revealed that the reconstructed Courthouse is actually a 'building within a building'.

EXP Architects and Avant Garde Construction Management – our design and construction team – have engaged in extensive exploration to understand how to sensitively develop the building, preserving the most important historic elements while planning for a modern performing arts facility that serves the

community. We've also drawn on the expertise of Theatre Consultants Collaborative (TCC) on professional theatre design and acoustic engineering consultants Jaffe Holden.

As well, Covid's devastating impact on social gatherings, especially in the performing arts, has impacted the design process, as we anticipate what the future holds for streaming, safe gathering and audience preferences.

We are confident that our design will protect and build upon the historic, architectural and structural attributes of the Courthouse. But we've also been visionary – to develop a gem of a small performance venue that is 'future-proofed' – embracing contemporary theatre design and future technical requirements as a welcoming and safe space.

We're excited to present the design to Saint John's Heritage Review Board for consideration. Once that process is completed, we will take the project to the next step – which is to mobilize the Saint John community to achieve this project.

FROM THE ASHES

Saint John history buffs are likely aware that the Sydney Street Courthouse was gutted by a devastating fire in 1919. All that was left standing were the four exterior walls and the two spiral staircases.

But what many people may not know is that Saint John almost lost the building following that fire. Media coverage of the fate of the building between July and December 1919 shows that many groups, including the Saint John Local Council of Women, "disagree with the wish of others to preserve the Old Courthouse and endorse



Photo: New Brunswick Museum

the suggestion of the mayor and Commissioners that a newer and larger building be erected on that site." Other arguments for not preserving the Courthouse included its "lack of historic significance", that the Courthouse was too small, that the "walls were not suitable for police purposes" and that it would be too costly.

Luckily, the decision was made to rebuild the Courthouse in 1923, as a new steel building within the shell of the exterior with construction completed in 1925. The relationship between the 100-year-old steel and concrete building within 200-year-old walls resulted in complex structural elements for us to consider. Our design and engineering work has been largely focused on understanding the dynamics of these two structures. We've explored how the inside walls connect with the exterior walls, leaving a roughly two-inch gap. We also needed to determine the health of the steel

girders, interior walls, marble floors, foundation, basement and roof structure to understand what we could use or re-purpose. And, what we could lose without compromising the building's historic integrity. We've taken extensive care to safeguard historical elements such as courtroom furniture, and terra cotta columns for example, for potential re-integration as functional or design elements. Both spiral staircases remain in excellent condition and we are very pleased about that.

One concern raised 100 years ago during public debates on whether to destroy or preserve the building, remains a reality today. The Courthouse is actually not a large building - only close to 11,000 square feet over three floors with a very narrow profile. The rear stone wall of the building shows wear and tear of 200 years of buffeting by winds and weather. Our plan to build on to the rear of the building will anchor it and improve the overall structural

integrity of the Courthouse. It will also provide us with the additional footprint required for our programming needs and full public accessibility with the important benefit of stabilizing the overall structure.

We're looking forward to revealing our design to the public - it marks a great opportunity to save this building for a second time in its 200-year history, infusing it with life for hopefully another 100 years.

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A collection of clippings from 1919 regarding the fate of the building.