

Bennett: Proposed addition to Château Laurier still doesn't meet the standard

On Friday, a City of Ottawa joint committee will consider the hotel owner's latest design pitch. Here's why it should be rejected.

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View of the latest Château Laurier proposal looking south on Mackenzie Avenue. Handout

By now most people – proponents, the public, politicians and professionals (architectural as well as heritage) – are probably exhausted by the ongoing saga of proposed additions to Ottawa’s iconic Château Laurier Hotel. A joint meeting of the City of Ottawa’s planning committee and built-heritage sub-committee will take place Friday to consider hotel owner Larco’s current proposal for an addition to

Ottawa's much-loved landmark. The recommendations coming out of that joint meeting will have a profound impact on the heritage value of this national historic site.

Notwithstanding Heritage Ottawa's support for this proposal, the proposal currently under consideration by the city (often referred to as Version Six) is not compliant with the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada (S&G) and should be rejected.

The proposal violates the following provisions of the S&G: 1) make new work subordinate to the historic place; 2) new construction must not obscure or have a negative impact on character-defining forms or spatial configurations; and 3) an appropriate balance must be struck between mere imitation of existing form and pointed contrast. Version Six does not meet these requirements.

First, the east pavilion on the Mackenzie Avenue side of the château projects beyond the adjacent section of the existing landmark hotel, thereby completely obstructing views of a significant section of the historic château as one proceeds south along Mackenzie Avenue toward the hotel. This clearly contravenes the requirement in the S&G that a new addition be subordinate to the historic place, and that it not obscure character-defining forms or spatial configurations.

Second, the irregular, offset pattern of solids and voids on the façades of both proposed pavilions is completely at odds with the regular, vertical alignment of windows of the national historic site. The overall impression created by this asymmetry is of a Rubik's cube where nothing aligns vertically (unlike the existing Château Laurier).

The stark and jarring contrast between the regular pattern of solids and voids of the national historic site, and the irregular, offset pattern in the proposed addition clearly violates the requirement to avoid "pointed contrast" expressed in Standard 11 of the S&G. If this is not pointed contrast, it is difficult to imagine what pointed contrast might actually be.

The design of the façades in Version Six is so incompatible, and so problematic overall, that correcting the problem of misalignment simply creates another problem and another incompatibility. The pronounced arrhythmia of the façades was completely unnecessary to achieve an acceptable level of distinguishability between the historic landmark and the addition. And to anticipate a possible rejoinder that this irregular, dissonant pattern evokes the asymmetry of the historic château: such a rejoinder would reduce this attribute of asymmetry to parody, if not absurdity.

I have immense respect for the four experts engaged by Heritage Ottawa who found that Version Six of the proposed addition to the Château Laurier was compliant with the S&G, so it is with some reluctance that I dissent from their conclusion, which did not consider the S&G in their totality. For example, it is not enough that Version Six avoid "mere imitation"; it must also avoid "pointed contrast." In order to be compliant with the S&G, a proposal must be fully, not partially, compliant. Obscuring character-defining forms and employing pointed contrast on whole façades is not compatible with the S&G. Version Six should not be approved.

Gordon Bennett, former director of policy, National Historic Sites, played a key role in the federal government's Historic Places Initiative, which included development of the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada.