

ATTN: Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Public Services and Procurement
Board of Directors, National Capital Commission

October 16, 2024

Dear Minister Duclos and Members of the National Capital Commission Board of Directors,

I wish to state my opposition to replacing the Alexandra Bridge. I firmly believe that the bridge should undergo a proper heritage assessment that includes long-term lifecycle costs as well as recognition of its unique patrimonial value.

Architects and engineers increasingly sound the alarm over destroying buildings and structures. The amount of embedded energy released through dismantling and replacement only fuels the climate emergency. No rash decision should be made without thorough studies on the value – historical and patrimonial as well as structural and material – of keeping and repairing the bridge. It should be noted that the proposed replacement designs found on the National Capital Commission website barely deserve attention. None exhibit any structural daring or elegance of form worthy of supplanting the Alexandra Bridge. All three, simply put, are clunky.

I as an architectural historian approach the bridge as a marvel of late-Victorian engineering. It deserves recognition as a pioneering effort of the storied Dominion Bridge Company of Canada (which also erected the elegant Minto bridges in Ottawa) working on behalf of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The origins of client and contractor allow seeing the bridge as living testament to remarkable feats of engineering at the heart of conceiving and building a modern nation.

Design history is vital to notions on patrimonial value. The Alexandra as a steel cantilever structure not only recalls its sister bridge in Quebec City but leads right back to Fowler and Baker's legendary Firth of Forth finished in 1889 outside Edinburgh, Scotland. 1889 is not an arbitrary date. It is the same year as Eiffel's Tour de 300 Metres for the Exposition Universelle in Paris. It also is the very moment that the steel frame triumphs in the rise of the Chicago skyscraper. The sudden arrival of the Bessemer convertor in the late nineteenth century reshapes the world – a world no longer governed by iron but ruled by steel. The Alexandra Bridge

in this sense embodies a *material history* that unites pioneering technology, innovative engineering, industrial need, national myth, and much more at the dawn of the twentieth century.

I urge the National Capital Commission, Public Services and Procurement Canada, city councils in Ottawa and Gatineau, and allied built heritage committees to consider the rich legacies of our national engineering symbolised in the Alexandra Bridge. Advanced technical research, experimental means of construction, reorganized forms of labour, formation of home-grown scientific know-how, national needs, and so much more: all played a part in the heroic span across the Ottawa River. The same aspects can be found today in the very materials that compose the bridge and quite literally preserve its legacy. We should not dismantle the bridge and destroy our past. Preservation never is easy but it allows us to shed light on our collective national history that can be handed down to succeeding generation. Always remember: destroying something means that every material memory tied to it will disappear forever.

I urge you to consider a proper reassessment of the Alexandra Bridge from all angles. A radical solution might appear such as grafting something new on to the old (shades of Japanese *kintsugi*). Any path toward replacing the bridge ultimately must begin by scrapping the uninspired proposals by Arup Canada and Knight Architects and initiating a proper international architecture competition that will bring true design excellence to bear on what after all is a world capital city. It is hard to image great river cities – London and Paris immediately come to mind – settling for half-best. Why should Ottawa?

This letter expresses only my ideas and not those of my employer. Thank you for considering my views.

Yours very sincerely,



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