

## An Open Letter from Supporters of the Friends of the Château Laurier

Sent the week of September 7, 2019

A heritage site is a natural or human-made area or structure recognized as being of outstanding importance and therefore as deserving special protection. The Château Laurier hotel in Ottawa, Ontario, is such a place.

The Château Laurier was constructed between 1907 and 1912 at the nexus of the Ottawa River, the Rideau canal, opposite the then railway station (now the Senate) and beside Parliament Hill. The Château is therefore the “linchpin of a historic capital city,” in the well-chosen words of journalist Stephen Maher. According to Heritage Ottawa, it “is the second most important building in Ottawa after the Parliament Buildings.”

In 1907, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier brokered a deal between the Grand Trunk Railway (now Canadian National Railway) and the City of Ottawa to use a piece of Major's Hills Park to construct an elegant hotel. The playful, romantic style of the Château's turrets and gables beautifully complemented the Gothic Revival style of the Parliament Buildings next door. The success of the Château's original architects in maintaining and enhancing the architectural motif of Parliament Hill led in turn to the equally impressive design of the Supreme Court building by Ernest Cormier so that the Parliamentary district as a whole makes for a sweeping and impressive vista. For over a hundred years, through a variety of renovations and additions to the Château and the nearby public buildings, successive governments have protected the architectural integrity of this built environment. Until now.

In 2013, Larco Investments, owned by the Lalji family of Vancouver, bought the Château and proposed in 2016 a multi-story boxy addition to replace the parking garage. This design is totally at variance with the iconic style of the Château and its surroundings. Peter Coffman, the past president of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada, writes, “the planned addition is essentially a box: all straight lines, right angles and mathematical precision. It does not echo the older building's forms, nor does it join in its romantic spirit.” An inappropriate and jarring addition to an iconic building is bad enough but the views from Major's Hills Park, the Rideau Canal, and the Ottawa River will be impaired as well. Coffman concludes, “the addition will draw a curtain across an integral part of one of the country's most spectacular and revered architectural tableaux.”

This design, suitable at best for a big box store in a strip mall, has been overwhelming rejected by the public in thousands of submissions to the Ottawa City Council. Yet despite this, by a narrow vote (with Ottawa city councillors unanimously opposed but outvoted by suburban representatives), in July 2019, the Council supported the Larco addition. A spokesperson for Larco dismissed the opposition as a “noisy minority.” Let us add our voices to the noise.

Most of us have had the pleasure of working in Ottawa, some on Parliament Hill and others as prominent members of the heritage community. We come from all parts of Canada and have supported different parties and served in different administrations. All of us who have worked near Parliament Hill at some point in our careers have enjoyed the history attached to the Château and been inspired by the views that it commands. Whether it is walking from Gatineau to Ottawa over the Alexandria bridge, clearing your head by strolling in Major's Hill Park after a hard day of decision-making, or taking visitors through the Rideau Canal locks, all of us have looked at the magnificent vistas anchored by the Château Laurier and been awed by the vision of our predecessors. The proposed addition to the Château is not a local

planning decision, it is a heritage issue of national importance. As David Collenette, a former Member of Parliament writes, “the Parliamentary precinct may be in the City of Ottawa, but it belongs to all Canadians.”

Below is a list of potential actions to prevent this potential heritage tragedy. Any one of them could do the job and Heritage Ottawa is leading the charge on the agenda. As national supporters of the Friends of the Château Laurier, we will do what ever we can to support this effort.

- To the owners of Larco: No one disputes your right to demolish a parking garage and improve your property, but you must do so with a design that is compatible with the iconic building you have purchased. You know that opposition to your design is massive and growing. Listen to this outpouring of feeling, meet with your critics, and produce a design that achieves the goal of heritage comparability rather than ignoring it.
- To the Ottawa City Committee of Adjustment: Larco requires a “minor” variance to lift the heritage overlay that applies to the Château Laurier site. The application of Larco is far from “minor” as it destroys the French Revival style of the hotel and the heritage character of the setting. You know that rarely, if ever, has there been such opposition to a developer’s proposal. Listen to the people and turn down Larco’s application.
- To the Government of Ontario: Since the Château Laurier fulfills all the requirements, designate the property as a Provincial Heritage site and issue a stop work order to Larco.
- To the Chair and Board of the National Capital Commission: In 2008, the NCC prepared the Château Laurier Urban Design Guidance which has obviously been ignored in Larco’s design. The NCC owns Major’s Hill Park, and, as the Château abuts the park, any addition must consider night time illumination, landscaping and public access. Use your authority in these areas to demand that Larco take into account the Château’s historic setting and work with the company to achieve a design that does this.
- To Parks Canada: You have the responsibility of managing the Rideau Canal National Historic site and maintaining its visual integrity. The proposed addition to the north side of the Château will forever compromise the panoramic views from the Canal. You should immediately enter into negotiations with Larco to ensure that any addition maintains a vibrant visual perspective.
- To the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO: The Rideau Canal has been designated by you as a World Heritage site. Write the governments of Canada, Ontario and Ottawa expressing concern about the impact of the proposed addition on the setting of the Canal, and, if not changed, raise the possibility of a review of the International Heritage Designation of the site.
- To the Federal Minister responsible for Canada’s National Historic Sites: In 1980, the Château Laurier was designated as a National Historic site. But unless Parks Canada actually owns the site this means little, as the designation brings with it no legislative protection. Canada is the only G8 member that does not provide a legislative framework and sufficient resources to protect our heritage. This must change so the Château Laurier debacle can never occur again. Legislation should be prepared to go to Parliament in the first session following the upcoming election.

- To the Leaders of Canada's Federal Political Parties: With a federal election in the offing, the Château Laurier dispute has revealed great gaps in Canada's protection of its heritage sites. We urge you to make a commitment to help solve the Château dispute by using the federal institutions and regulations at your disposal and to commit further to supporting heritage legislation to prevent similar problems from occurring in the future.
- To the People of Canada: Heritage Ottawa needs your help in continuing the fight to protect the heritage of the Château Laurier and its surroundings. Please donate so it can continue its vital work.
- To the Government of Canada: If all else fails, use the Expropriation Act to purchase the garage structure adjacent to the Château Laurier, build underground parking and deed the land to the National Capital Commission as an extension of Major's Hill Park. For most of the twentieth century, the Château Laurier was owned by CN Hotels and thus the Government of Canada. It was sold to private interests in 1988 without proper protection to preserve its heritage standing, except the designation as a National Historic site in 1980. As we have learned, this designation is for show only, as it is not backed up by legislation. If there is any upside to the Château Laurier dispute it is that it has revealed a major gap in our heritage protection. This must be fixed and, as the process for doing so moves forward, the power of expropriation should be held in reserve to use if necessary.

Since the Parliament buildings were constructed in 1866, Canadians have been blessed with beautiful vistas and iconic buildings woven together in a coherent whole in the Parliamentary district of the national capital. This is an irreplaceable heritage, and it must be passed down intact to future generations. We call on all those in a position to influence or decide the issue of how best to improve the Château Laurier hotel, to respect that patrimony by making heritage preservation the precondition of any plan or design. Our predecessors did so; and we must be the stewards of that precious gift.

Sincerely,

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Also signed by:

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