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Adaptively Reusing the Province's Heritage Buildings: The Case for Her Majesty's Penitentiary and Waterford Hospital

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Introduction

The adaptive reuse of heritage buildings is, increasingly, seen as a critical way to preserve collective memory and sense of place while reducing greenhouse gas emissions through the retention of the energy embodied in them (recycling). Demolishing older structures – particularly those that are sound – results in the loss of all of the energy (and greenhouse gases) expended to build them, fills up our landfill, and results in more greenhouse gas emissions when they are replaced with new structures. If we are to battle climate change, recycling buildings is not just a "nice to do" but a critical "must do".

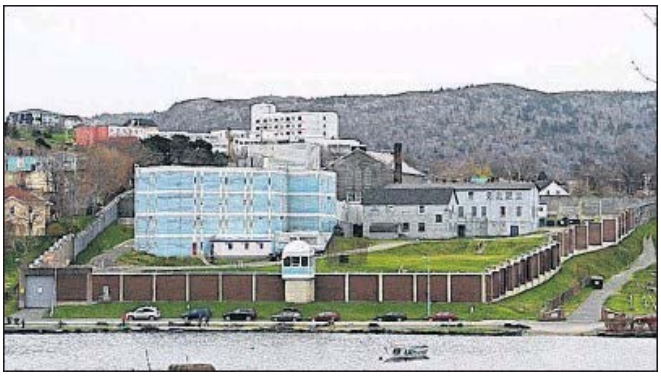
Sometimes historic structures, particularly institutional ones, can have complicated and even painful histories. Indigenous residential schools are an example of this. Repurposing such structures, especially when a new use can bring significant community benefit, can turn a negative into a positive and serve as an important memorial to what went on in the past.

The decision to replace the Waterford Hospital and, at some point, Her Majesty's Penitentiary, offers an opportunity to consider the future of these two important historic sites, particularly through the lenses of environmental sustainability and preserving historic values. Both date from the mid-19th century, a period of social reform in which, at least initially, there was an impetus to house mentally-ill patients and prisoners in a more humane way than had been done in the past.

The rationale for not retaining historic buildings is often the need for expensive environmental remediation resulting from the presence of asbestos and other contaminants. The reality is that these will need to be abated even if the building was to be demolished. There are many successful examples of former industrial and institutional buildings being cleaned up and redeveloped.

This paper is intended to foster a discussion about the significance of these two important institutions and what the opportunities might be for imagining their future. In addition to a history of the two structures and a discussion on their heritage values, a number of case studies of successful adaptive reuse of historic former prisons and psychiatric hospitals are presented.

Her Majesty's Penitentiary, St. John's



Historical Background

Her Majesty's Penitentiary (HMP) is an important structure in the history of the justice system in Newfoundland and Labrador. Although prisons had existed on the island since the early 18th century, HMP was the first free-standing, purpose-built prison structure in St. John's. The building was intended to replace the crumbling wooden Signal Hill Gaol. (The Signal Hill Gaol was a converted military barracks, called into service after the Great Fire of 1846 destroyed the courthouse jail). Construction began in 1852. Designed by Birmingham architect R.D. Hill, HMP was built using imported brick and stone from England. The structure had a wooden frame roof with slate shingles. Leftover brick and stone was sold and used for the façade of the "Old College" or Skinner Building of St. Bonaventure's College, which still stands today. (Heritage NL, 2008)

The original building (what is now the Centre Block) was completed in 1859. Minimal renovations or repairs were undertaken in the 85 years that followed, although the small building was soon overcrowded. (A wooden broom factory staffed by prisoners operated onsite from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, but that structure no longer exists.). The first major modification of the building was the addition of the East and West wings in 1944-5. With the construction of a modern cell block in 1981, the Centre Block and East and West Wings were turned over largely to prison administration and programs. The interior of the original Centre block was completely demolished and replaced with modern offices and classrooms in 1994. Despite renovations over time, H.M. Penitentiary no longer meets the needs of a modern provincial correctional facility. A replacement facility, to be built on a different site, is estimated to be under construction by 2022.

Architectural Values

HMP's construction style and materials connect it with other buildings in the St. John's area. The austere neo-Classical style of the building was typical of prison buildings of this era. The forbidding architecture was intended to intimidate onlookers while also conveying an atmosphere of strict moral reformation. Different wings of the building show progression of institutional architecture over time and reflect changes both in building styles and the correctional system over time.

The oldest part of the penitentiary is an example of mid-19th century architecture, which is relatively uncommon in a cityscape shaped by the Great Fire of 1892. This is particularly true in the Quidi Vidi area, where the penitentiary is the oldest lakeside structure still standing.

Cultural Heritage Values

The H.M. Penitentiary complex tells unique stories about the social history of St. John's. This large imposing structure sits in a formerly agricultural/forested area on what used to be the outskirts of town—a location which speaks to its historic role as a place to isolate prisoners. In addition to its primary goal as a correctional facility, the building once played an important role in the urban economy. Unpaid prison labour was used for numerous public works and construction projects during the 19th and 20th century. Most famously, the ceilings of St. John's heritage buildings like the Colonial Building and Government house were painted by an artist serving time at HMP in the 1880s. The complex was home to a small broom factory for several decades, in which inmates once made the majority of brooms used in St. John's.

The most significant part of this building is its role in the cultural and physical landscape of the area. HMP is a defining landmark on the Quidi Vidi skyline and the only remaining 19th century public structure in an area which saw rapid change and redevelopment in the 20th century.

Demolishing the building in favour of new dense development or high rise structures (as has been done on the Pleasantville side of the lake) could destroy sight lines and overshadow other historic properties on Forest Rd. and Quidi Vidi Rd as well as the green spaces in the area.

For further information about the Penitentiary's history and historic architectural features, see Heritage NL's detailed building report from 2008: https://heritagefoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/stjohns-h.m._penitentiary.pdf

Potential

Adaptive reuse can take many forms. In some cases, the old exterior is incorporated into a modern building. An adaptation of the decommissioned HMP complex has potential for multi-use buildings for community services, small business owners/artisans, performance spaces, community organizations, parks or community gardens, etc. Depending on the condition and integrity of later additions, they may be removed while retaining the more historical elements. But serious consideration should be given to the creative adaptation of as many building components as possible.

Many adaptively reused buildings, particularly those with complex legacies like HMP, include elements that speak to their history and legacy that may include monuments, public art, or interpretive panels. Numerous former prisons have successfully been converted this way.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Workhouse Arts Center, Lorton, VA, USA (formerly the Lorton Reformatory)

The Lorton Reformatory opened in 1910 as a prison and work camp. It operated for over 90 years as a correctional facility. In 1997, the overcrowded complex had fallen into such disrepair that it was no longer deemed fit for use. The prison land was sold to the county after the last prisoner left in 2001. Rather than demolish the 1920s-era brick buildings, the county redeveloped it into a hub for the arts. Since 2008, the Workhouse Arts Center has housed artist studios, galleries and theatre spaces. (Workhouse Arts Center, n.d.)

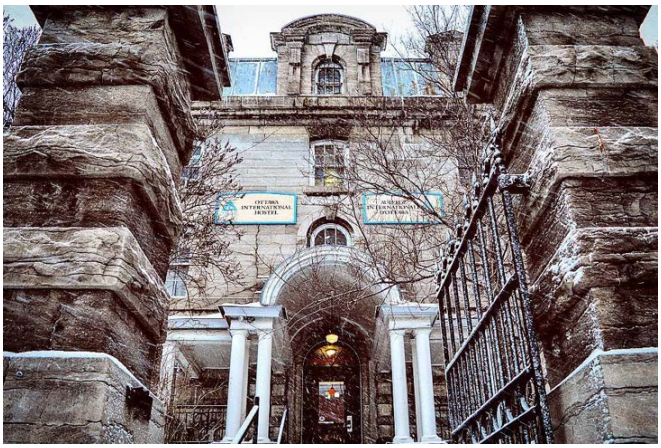
See: https://www.workhousearts.org

Case Study 2: 50 St. Peter St, Salem, MA, USA (formerly the Salem Jail)

Built in 1813 and extended in the 1880s, the historic Salem Jail remained in use until 1991. The property—which had neither electricity nor running water—sat unused for years, with only the most basic maintenance work undertaken by the city to stabilize the structure. In the early 2000s, developers worked with the local heritage organization to convert the building to luxury apartments. Since 2010, the building has housed two dozen apartments, a restaurant and an exhibit space exploring the history of the Salem Jail. (Historic Salem, 2019)

See:
https://www.apartments.com/50-st-peter-st-salem-ma/f303sjr/

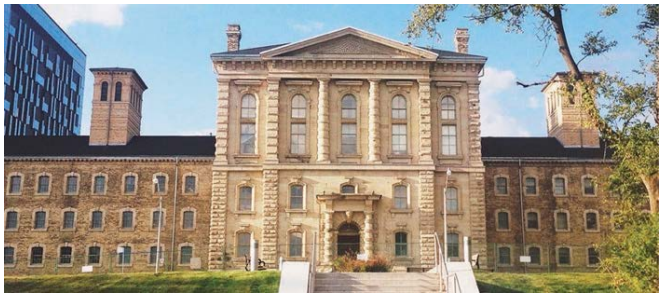
Case Study 3: HI Ottawa Jail Hostel, Ottawa, ON (formerly the Carleton County Gaol)



The Carleton County Gaol opened in 1862. This austere Georgian-style stone building was used as a prison until 1972, when inmates were moved from the outdated building into a modern correctional facility. The Canadian Youth Hostel Association renovated the former jail and opened it as a hostel in 1973. It has operated as such ever since, with continued renovations to improve the building's modern function while respecting its heritage features. (HI Canada, 2021)

See:
https://hihostels.ca/en/destinations/ontario/hi-ottawa

Case Study 4: Bridgepoint Active Healthcare administration building, Toronto, ON (formerly The Old Don Jail)



The Old Don Jail was closed in 1977 after serving as a prison for 113 years. In 2013, the building began its new life—with a renovated interior—as the administrative centre for a neighbouring rehabilitation hospital. Some historic rooms of the prison were preserved in their original condition and are open to the public for tours. Heritage regulations required the preservation of the building's exterior features, including the barred windows. However, an exception was granted to remove bars from the window in all offices so as not to affect the mental health of staff and patients using those rooms. A more modern wing of the jail was demolished and the empty space converted to a small park.

The Waterford Hospital, St. John's

Background

The Waterford Hospital building is central to the history of mental healthcare in Newfoundland and Labrador. The "Hospital for Mental and Nervous Diseases" was constructed in 1854-55, in the heart of the Waterford Valley in St. John's. The hospital replaced a smaller overcrowded home near the intersection of Waterford Bridge Rd and Topsail Rd. and sought to house patients who were formerly housed in Both sites were intended as a dramatic improvement on the previous situation, in which people with mental illness or developmental delays were isolated in an often-unheated wing of the hospital at Riverhead. (O' Brien, 1989)

At the time of its construction, it reflected the latest – at that time progressive -- thinking about the appropriate treatment of individuals with mental illness. The facility, constructed in a rural setting, was intended to remove mentally-ill people from hospitals, jails, boarding houses, and private homes to be given specialized treatments to help them get well. This was, before significant overcrowding at the Waterford later in the 19th c, a significant improvement over earlier treatment of individuals with mental health issues. Dr. Henry Hunt Stabb (1812-1892), a tireless advocate for the humane treatment of the "insane" headed up the Waterford for a number of decades.

Despite its proponents' best intentions, the Waterford Hospital was soon overcrowded. The building was extended and renovated multiple times between 1870 and 1908. Patients from across the province were brought to the hospital for treatment. Further extensions and renovations to the building were undertaken in the 1940s and 1950s. The tenets of mental health care were in transition by the time the building was officially renamed as the "Waterford Hospital" in the 1970s. (O' Brien, 1989) Since then, mental healthcare has shifted to emphasize holistic community-based services, rather than the institutionalization of the 19th century. The isolation of the site from the Health Sciences Centre has also made it difficult to integrate care at the Waterford Hospital with other healthcare services, thus continuing to stigmatize mental health. The Waterford Hospital is now on track to be decommissioned by 2024, with a new mental healthcare centre under construction on Clinch Crescent.

Architectural Significance

With its original 1850s core and numerous extensions, the Waterford is a rare remnant of the institutional heritage of St. John's and the province. The numerous extensions show a progression of institutional architecture and style over time. Some original interiors (ex: a patient room from the 1890s) remain in the building.

The oldest building in the Waterford complex has a simple brick facade, with subdued quoining at the windows as the only decorative feature. The plain style and numerous windows to allow light in are typical of the institutional architecture of many mid-19th century charitable hospitals. Later extensions have a similarly unornamented red brick facade. The property contains considerable green space with mature trees and faces on to Bowring Park.

Cultural Heritage Value

The Waterford is a large, imposing structure. It tells an important story of mental healthcare development in NL, but also stands as a memorial to the people who lived and died within this system. Built beyond what was the edge of the city in 1850s St. Johns, its once- quiet countryside location, still bounded by the greenery of Bowring Park, reflects the tenets of treating mental illness of the mid-19th century. It was thought that mental illness could be cured by taking patients from the 'harmful' moral influences in the outside world and moving them to a quiet green space with plenty of fresh air and busy work. This theory was later disproven and the isolation of the Waterford Hospital contributed to the stigmatization of mental illness as something that should be kept out of sight.

The Waterford Hospital complex plays an important role in the cultural and physical landscape of the area. It is a defining feature of the Waterford Valley and shows the late 19th to early 20th century transition of this valley from purely agricultural land to residential, institutional and parkland development. The different architectural styles of the various buildings and wings of the Waterford Hospital also reveal its use and development over time with evolving standards for medical practice—a living timeline of both architecture and mental health treatment. The Waterford Hospital also comprises a significant green space in the city which integrates it with the nearby parkland and riverside area.

Potential

With its extensive network of medium-rise structures, the Waterford Hospital has potential for re-use for multiple purposes that could include housing, business, community venues, performance space, to name a few. Located in the centre of the city with ample parking and the proximity to the Waterford River and landscaped Bowring Park area, this is an ideal space for adaptive reuse.

Given its complicated history and stigma for past mental healthcare practices, subsequent to Provincial Government consultations, it was recommended that the Waterford Hospital be retired as a healthcare site. However, the building could still be used to house other public services or educational facilities.

The site also provides an important opportunity to tell the history of mental health treatment in Newfoundland and Labrador and to capture the stories and realities of people who lived and worked within the Waterford's walls.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Towers Corporate Campus, St. John's, NL (formerly St. Bride's College)

Although it was not a hospital, the re-use of the former St. Bride's College campus shows the existing possibilities for the adaptation of an institutional property in the Waterford Valley. These buildings, constructed 1965-1967, were an expansion of the St. Bride's school (and later teacher's college) operated in that location since the late 19th century by the Sisters of Mercy. (Mellin, 2011.) As attendance at St. Bride's declined in the 1970s, the building was rented out for other educational purposes until it finally closed in 2000. (Heritage NL, 2006) In the early

2000s, St. Bride's was redeveloped as a corporate campus while maintaining the original modernist/Brutalist architecture that made the site unique. An undeveloped piece of the site has since been used as the site of a retirement residence.

Case Study 2: Julia Ann Walsh Heritage Centre, Norris Point, NL (formerly the Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital)

This hospital was built by local people in 1938-9, funded as part of the Commission of Government's rural healthcare scheme. It served communities across Bonne Bay until 2001. (Parks Canada, 2006). Thanks in part to the advocacy of a local committee, the former cottage hospital building was saved and renovated while retaining most of its original heritage features. It is now a community hub that houses a library branch, radio station, museum, travellers' hostel, performance space, outdoor garden/greenhouse and several small businesses. (Old Cottage Hospital, 2020)

Case Study 3: Chestnut Green, Foxboro, MA, USA (formerly Foxboro State Hospital)

This 1889 psychiatric hospital was the first in the state to specialize in the treatment of alcoholism. (Foxborough History, n.d.) By 1905, the hospital treated all mental health conditions. The Foxboro State Hospital closed in 1976. Some of the buildings were renovated and turned into the Chestnut Green apartment complex in 2009. The rest of the site is gradually being converted to a mixed-use retail development.

See: https://chestnutgreenapts.com

Case Study 4: Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts, Brandon, MB (formerly the nurse's residence of the Brandon Mental Health Centre)

This main building on this property originally opened as the Brandon Reformatory for Boys in 1890, but was converted into the "Brandon

Asylum for the Insane" in 1891. The property continued to be developed over the next 70 years, with the nurses' residence constructed in 1920-23. The facility closed down in the late 1990s, shortly after the Brandon Mental Health Centre celebrated its centenary. The former nurse's residence was recognized as a provincial historic site in 2001 for both its architecture style and fine interior finishes. It has been converted into the Manitoba Institute of Culinary Arts, operated by the Assiniboine Community College. (Manitoba Historical Society, 2019)

See:
https://assiniboine.net/locations/campus-north-hill-campus-manitoba-institute-culinary-arts/manitoba-institute-culinary

Recommended Next Steps

A number of steps are recommended for preserving and considering potential new uses for both Her Majesty's Penitentiary and the Waterford Hospital when they are vacated:

1. Fully document the heritage values of the two properties including:
    - Archival documentation to capture the evolution of the buildings and their institutional history
    - Physical documentation of the properties through photography, measured drawings, and possible digital scanning
    - Oral histories of individuals who were housed, treated, incarcerated, or worked at these institutions to capture their complex, personal stories.

    This information will be critical to inform strategies for conserving the properties and telling their stories/histories.

2. Undertake a detailed historic structure report that assesses structural conditions, building issues and challenges, and the evolution of the structures, including building interventions, over time.
3. Undertake a community engagement process to capture community values about the properties, along with the identification of community needs that could be met through their adaptive reuse. Engagement tools that could be employed include: surveys, focus group discussions, community planning and design workshops, among others. Subsequently, a call for proposals could be issued for private developers or community groups who may be interested in developing all or parts of these institutional complexes. Particular efforts should be made to engage professional and advocacy groups involved with mental health and the prison penal system.

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