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[Christopher Hume's article on The Hamilton City Hall](#)

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HAMILTON

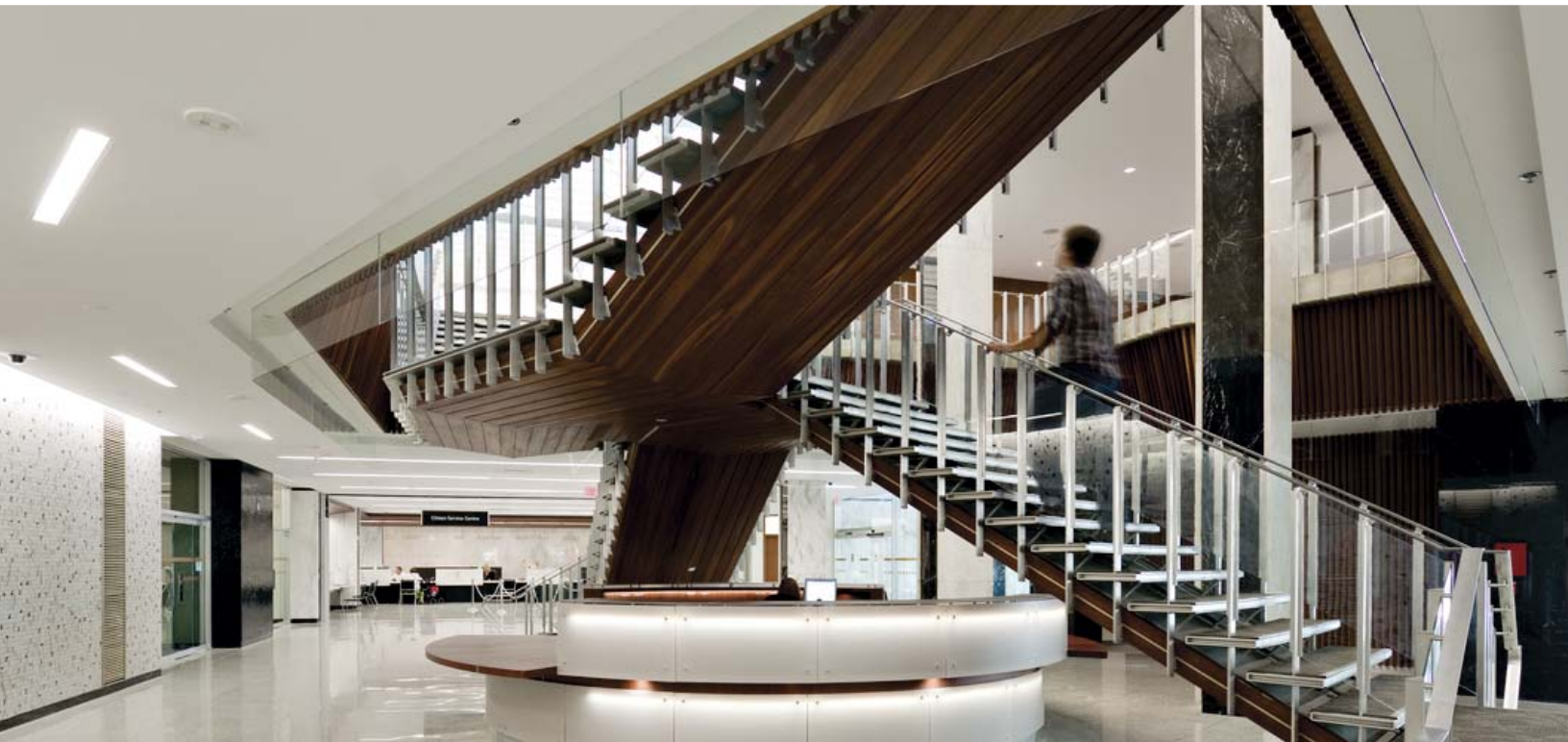
Half a century after it opened, Hamilton City Hall remains a building of the future. Indeed, it is one of those rare modernist structures that feels as fresh now as it must have in 1960 when it was completed. Designed by City Architect Stanley Roscoe — who knew that Steeltown once had a city architect?

This is a relic from a time when people viewed the world with undiluted optimism.

That's long gone now but thanks to a \$55-million renovation, Hamilton City Hall has been restored, refurbished and returned to some semblance of its former self. Though not every element of the program is equally impressive, the overall result still manages to please. The building may be a relic, but it's one that appears well loved and well-cared for.

Hamilton being Hamilton, the fact the project happened at all is remarkable. One might have expected city council to decamp to some place along the highway, where there's still room for a man to park his car. The decision to stay downtown cannot be taken for granted. Who could forget the fiasco that unfolded last year when the Tiger Cats refused to be part of a plan to build

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a new downtown stadium, preferring instead one in a green-field site on the edge of town? This is a city that has made every mistake in the book, and has the scars to prove it. Few urban centres have managed to inflict as much damage on themselves as has Hamilton. After eviscerating its core in the 1960s and '70s, it seems to have run out of any clear sense of where it was headed and why.

So one wanders through the spaces of revitalized City Hall and marvels that this community of 500,000 ever felt so good about itself. On that basis, the renovation can also be seen as a major act of civic commitment.

Designated a heritage site in 2006, Roscoe's International Style masterpiece displays not just the enthusiasm of early '60s modernism but also the exuberance. The sheer delight this building takes in its materiality, its formal qualities, decorative flourishes and even mechanical details now seems almost poignant. At a time when architecture comes out of a catalogue, the idea that a building should constitute a fully realized architectural vision feels anachronistic.

As heritage architect Paul Sapounzi of VG Architects points out, Hamilton City Hall doesn't meet the average person's notion of heritage, but everything here, from the elevators and doorknobs to the oak paneling and terrazzo floors date from a bygone era where they did things differently. It's one thing to restore a fine old 19th century Romanesque heap, quite another to update lifts installed in the late 1950s. Yet each is as important in its own way.

The restoration also comes at a time of growing interest in modernism, now reduced to a style status along with all the other isms from history. This is a good thing, of course, and in fact, modernism has much to offer in terms of creating spaces rather than architectural artifact. Hamilton City Hall is both a public space and civic landmark. It reads as two V-shaped structures, a small one in front and the larger behind. The former contains the council chamber, visible through the glass wall that faces north onto Main St. and the city. The larger structure, eight storeys tall, houses

the municipal bureaucracy. Though subtle, perhaps, the symbolism of the two elements, and the relationship of one to the other, strikes an appropriately democratic tone. Inside, the building has been left largely intact. Signs of the times are evident in the new desks and furnishings. Cleaned up, the terrazzo flooring, oak paneling, brushed aluminum door handles and marble walls aren't just modern, but contemporary.



The most obvious thing that has changed but not improved is the exterior cladding. The lightly veined white Georgian marble chosen by Roscoe has been replaced by precast concrete. Though the architects have done their best to match the original material, the latter is no substitute for stone.

"Personally," admits architect Carlos Ventin, who has devoted decades to heritage restoration in Ontario, "I would've liked to use the original marble. But it was not an option politically to do something that costs a couple of million dollars more. It was a political decision, not an architectural one."

Concrete, which lacks the translucency of marble, diminishes the material quality of the building but not its formal qualities, especially the sweep of articulated glass-fronted boxes. Look carefully and you can see the same effect reproduced in much contemporary architecture. Hamilton's decision to stay and restore its City Hall bodes well for a town that has suffered serious self-esteem issues. Now, 50 years later, there's reason for optimism once again.

+VG Architects is a full-service architectural firm offering new design, expansions and heritage restorations for cultural, educational, municipal, justice, healthcare, residential and recreational facilities. Our staff of 40 operates in four offices in Ontario, in Brantford, Cambridge, London and Toronto. See www.plusvg.com for more information.

+VG Architects collaborated with Garwood-Jones & Hanham Architects and McCallum Sather Architects.



Mosaic, Atrium