

Politics, Religion, and Heritage: St. Andrew's United Church

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2012

Text of a Presentation made at the 7th Carleton Heritage Symposium

I will be talking about three subjects my mother taught me to avoid in polite conversation: politics, religion, and heritage. In response to the symposium organizers question "What other 'heritage voices' exist? Where or from whom are they coming?" I suggest that churches are non-governmental institutions facing considerable challenges regarding heritage preservation and what to do with their surplus of historic buildings. Having said that, 'heritage' refers that which is tangible, and intangible. As a case study, I've chosen St. Andrew's United Church, Toronto, 117 Bloor Street East between Yonge and Church Streets. The church has a 172-year history and a tradition of service to its community, which its congregation cherishes deeply. In the 1970s, its medieval-revival building of 1923 badly needed extensive repairs and renovations. However, the only way to ensure the congregation could continue to serve at its historic location would be to redevelop its site. The Church of St. Andrew was forced to choose between preserving its spiritual heritage or its built heritage, a situation faced by many long-established churches in Ontario, and across the country. I will provide a brief overview of the remarkable story of St. Andrew's and the congregation's experience in a climate of urban reform in 1970s Toronto.



Figure 1: St. Andrew's United Church

First, let us get acquainted with St. Andrew's as it stands today (Figure 1). It is tucked into a densely populated area of commercial and residential high-rises at Canada's busiest – and priciest -- intersection, Yonge and Bloor.



Figure 2: St. Andrew's Church, 1983
(Page & Steele)

Completed in 1983, the church was designed by Page & Steele partner David Horne, whose forté was commercial buildings, although he had designed two religious buildings prior. The late modern style of the current building (Figure 2) contrasts sharply with the previous St. Andrew's church, completed in 1923 by Sprout & Rolph, architects, of Toronto (Figure 3).

By the late 1960s, the 1923 building had become outdated, needed extensive repairs to a leaky roof, was expensive to heat, and was too big for the dwindling congregation. To bring the church to "first-class condition" the estimated cost exceeded \$1,000,000.¹ The feasibility of redevelopment was studied between 1970 and 1972,² and in June 1972,

¹John Webster Grant, "The Story of Redevelopment as Told by Dr. Davidson," *St. Andrew's United Church: A History*: 8.

²United Church of Canada Archives, St. Andrew's Church (Toronto, Ontario) fonds, St. Andrew's United Church fonds, 2007.110L-box 195-file 12-5, "Research and Development Committee Memo to Members," n.d.

St. Andrew's redevelopment plans were publicly unveiled in the *Toronto Star*.³ A developer had seen the potential for a commercial building on St. Andrew's valuable property, and had, together with the Church, come up with a mixed-use plan far ahead of its time, for Toronto: a church inside an office tower.



Figure 3: East Elevation of Church, 1981

The existing church would be demolished except for its bell tower (Figure 4). The tower would serve as a shared "Christian Information Centre" with other churches in the neighbourhood.⁴ Two eighteen-storey office towers encompassing 330,000 square feet would be built on the site of the old church and generate healthy annual lease payments to St. Andrew's, enough to keep the church in the black for decades. 20,000 square feet on the first and second floors of one tower would be allotted to the Church, rent-free. As *Star* religion editor Tom Harpur noted "at one stroke, the congregation will be able to keep its present strategic location, get rid of the nagging problem of maintaining an ancient edifice, gain a modern church plant that is flexible and geared to new kinds of ministries, and, at the same time, more than triple its present income. It's the kind of set-up most congregations only get to dream about."

It was a vision of redevelopment "based on the actions of a church in Chicago that had built a high-

³ United Church of Canada Archives, St. Andrew's Church (Toronto, Ontario) fonds, St. Andrew's United Church fonds, 2007.110L- box 195- file 12-1, Tom Harpur, "Downtown church to be rebuilt in an office tower," *The Toronto Star*, Saturday, 17 June 1972: 63.

⁴ Harpur, "Downtown church to be rebuilt in an office tower," 63.

rise building with a church on the top floors."⁵ St. Andrew's may have had the Chicago Temple Building (1923-24, Holabird and Roche, architects). Floors five through twenty-one are rented as offices while the rest of the space is set aside for religious use of the building's owner, First United Methodist Church.⁶

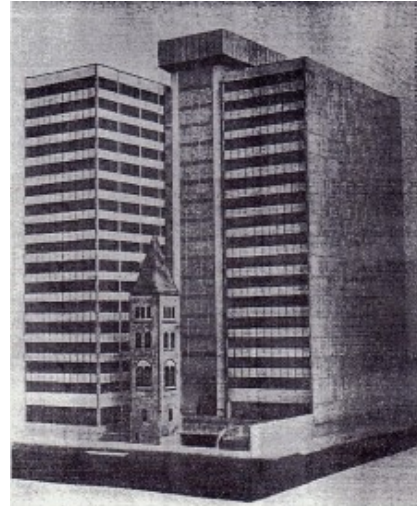


Figure 4: Model, St. Andrew's Church and Office Tower Mixed-Use Development, 1972 (Eastburt Group)

David Horne was among several architects invited to submit plans for the church design within the office tower. Understandably, "the congregation felt terribly insecure about dealing with the developer... they were looking for an architect who would not only design their church, but assist them in understanding the development process, protect their interests."⁷ Once Horne heard the redevelopment proposal details, he declined to give a presentation. The architect recounted that "I told them I didn't want to have anything to do with the project. It would be tied up at city hall for years and it simply wasn't functional. But in doing this, I impressed the congregation. They phoned me the next day and

⁵ John Webster Grant, "The Redevelopment Story as Told By One of the Key Lay Leaders—the Late John Deacon," *St. Andrew's United Church: A History*, 16.

⁶ "Architecture," *First United Methodist Church: The Chicago Temple official website*, 2011, <http://www.chicagotemple.org/architecture.php>, 10 July 2011.

⁷ Mary Jane Copps, "The church that David Horn built," *Canadian Building* 31:3, 37.

asked me to be their architect.”⁸ There were considerable flaws in the St. Andrew’s Place plan which Horne explained to the Committee. In Horne’s words, “the developer was anticipating approval of exorbitant density changes, and the idea of the office building including the church, a structure which has different zoning and insurance needs, did not appeal to (me).”⁹ The design for the complex was abandoned in favour of one with a separate commercial building at 121 Bloor Street East and a church at 117 Bloor Street East (Figure 5).

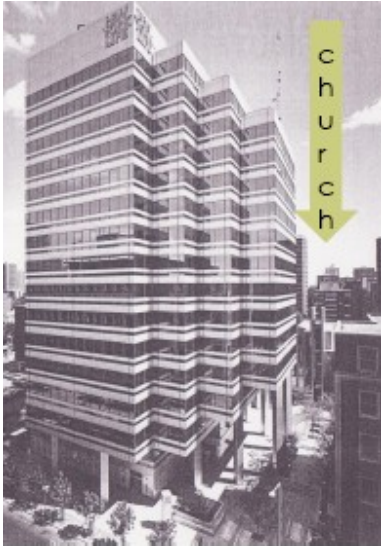


Figure 5: New York Life tower and St. Andrew’s United Church, 1983 (*Canadian Architect*)

In June 1973 Horne presented a new plan, compliant with city by-laws, to the church.¹⁰ St. Andrew’s entered into discussions with the Planning Committee of the City of Toronto.¹¹ The Church innocently waded into the murky waters of urban politics, not knowing a tidal wave of change was coming to City Hall. Riding the wave was a man who would become Toronto’s “tiny, perfect mayor,” David Crombie (b. 1936).

A city councillor since 1970, Crombie was elected mayor of Toronto in December 1972 (and re-elected in 1974 and 1976). An urban reformer inspired by author and activist Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), Crombie

aimed to impose controls on the city’s rapid and expansive redevelopment. “We wanted to put a pause in development so we could do a downtown plan... Toronto in the 1960s was following a North American model,” Crombie explained in 2008.¹²

By-law 348-73, the so-called “45 foot by-law” was imposed by the City against St. Andrew’s Board of Trustees. Its decision not to grant an exception to the Church was upheld by the Ontario Municipal Board on 9 December 1974.¹³ The Trustees, Committee and congregation of St. Andrew’s were stunned by the decisions of the City and O.M.B. As Rev. Davidson explains:

The congregation was just about in despair after years and years of working, planning, thinking, and trying to do what they thought was the right thing for the church – and here they were, being prevented by a secular body from doing it! Like an old dog that had been in the fight, the redevelopment committee sat down and licked their wounds for a few weeks. Then the lawyer sent a letter to the congregation and he wrote there was one last court of appeal – the Government of Ontario. This created a different situation completely! The Municipal Board was not a political body, but the Cabinet was and could be influenced. It appeared we knew quite well how to get in and talk to the Premier...so the congregation took heart. And so, the names of every Cabinet member were listed in the (church) bulletin every week, and members of the congregation were

¹² Rob Roberts, “David Crombie, living the high life,” *Posted Toronto – The National Post Online*, 19 June 2008, <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/toronto/archive/2008/06/19/david-crombie-living-the-high-life.aspx>, 10 July 2011.

¹³ United Church of Canada Archives, St. Andrew’s Church (Toronto, Ontario) St. Andrew’s United Church fonds, 2007.110L-box 195-file 12-3, Letter from Ralph S. Mills, Counsel for the Trustees of St. Andrew’s United Church, 117 Bloor Street East, Toronto, to the Lieutenant-Governor in Council, March 19, 1975, re: “In the Matter of a Decision of the Ontario Municipal Board dated the 9th of day of December, 1974, and a Petition under Sec’n 94 (1) of the OMB Act, by the Corporation of the City of Toronto, Petitioner.

⁸ Copps, “The church that David Horn built:” 37.

⁹ Copps, “The church that David Horn built:” 37.

¹⁰ St. Andrew’s United Church Archives, Research and Development, 1969-1979 fonds, Report to the Congregation on Redevelopment, n.d.

¹¹ Grant, “The Story of Redevelopment as Told by Dr. [sic] Davidson, 10-11.

encouraged to write to them and tell them why they should be allowed to build this church.¹⁴

Appealing to the Cabinet was a bold move virtually unheard of at the time, but the desperate times for the Church called for the proverbial desperate measures.¹⁵ Remarkably, St. Andrew's won an exemption to go ahead with its plans in 1978. The Cabinet heard and agreed with St. Andrew's message, as its minister said: "The consensus of the congregation is that the Church's job is not to save old historical buildings, but to be an active presence in the community serving and ministering to people," explained Rev. Davidson.¹⁶ The Church had been on site since 1891 – it was deeply woven into the community fabric -- but to remain so, it had to undergo significant changes within and without to modernize.



Figure 6: Interior, St. Andrew's Church

It took three years before the congregation vacated its old building and five before their new premises were completed in 1983. In the new church (Figure 6), many of St. Andrew's historic furnishings and stained glass was incorporated at the insistence of the congregation and much to the chagrin of the architect; the stained glass perhaps more successfully than the furnishings (Figure 7). While the

congregation did part with its old building, it does value its intangible heritage and the sacred artifacts associated with it. Without redevelopment, the church would have folded, but instead it is alive and well today. With the 45' by-law, Crombie and his chief planner effectively threw a wet blanket over the red-hot development industry in Toronto, but also nearly smothered St. Andrew's Church in the process, demonstrating that even a tiny, perfect mayor can still make mistakes.



Figure 7: Stained Glass, St. Andrew's Church

¹⁴ Grant, "The Story of Redevelopment as Told By Dr. [sic] Davidson," 11-12.

¹⁵ Mr. Martin Campbell, Chair of the Board of Trustees, St. Andrew's United Church, personal interview, 14 June 2011.

¹⁶ United Church of Canada Archives, "St. Andrew's United Church (Toronto, Ontario)" fonds, St. Andrew's United Church fonds, 2007.110L-box 195-file 8-16, Rev. Davidson cited in "High-rise complex to be constructed. St. Andrew's to be demolished," *Insight*, May 1979, n.p.