
From Reading Room to Committee Room

by Stephen H. Delroy and Audrey Dubé

The operation of a legislature not only demands a chamber but also halls, offices and special rooms. Similarly, political factors affect the size, location style and embellishment of special rooms. Not surprisingly, changes in political operations and attitudes lead to changes in the use and, therefore, the art, furnishing and architecture of special rooms. Thus on September 30, 1990 the former Parliamentary Reading Room was converted to a committee room. This article outlines the historical evolution of one corner of Canada's Parliament Buildings.

The tradition of a reading room for the House of Commons and for the Senate predates Confederation. Before Confederation, the Parliament of the united Province of Canada moved from one city to another. Between August 1852 and February 1854, it met at the Hôtel du Parlement in Quebec City. On the ground floor besides a committee room, a conference room and a library, two large reading rooms were reserved for members of the Legislative Assembly and for members of the Legislative Council.¹

In 1859 the architects Thomas Fuller and Chilion Jones submitted their plans for the Parliament buildings in Ottawa. These plans included a reading room at the north end of each house.² However, it was not until 1882 that the reading room of the House of Commons was moved into a larger place occupied previously by the Supreme Court and by the Library of Parliament. This large room (35 ft. x 70 ft.), designed originally as the Picture Gallery, afforded a good reading room for the members of the House of Commons and at the same time served as an addition to the overcrowded library.³ Filled with newspapers, periodicals and with a collection of 20,000 books in its upper gallery, this was the starting place of the fire that destroyed the Centre Block in 1916.

At its first meeting, the Joint Committee on the Reconstruction of Parliament Building examined three

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The Reading Room in the 1920s
(National Archives of Canada PA34213)

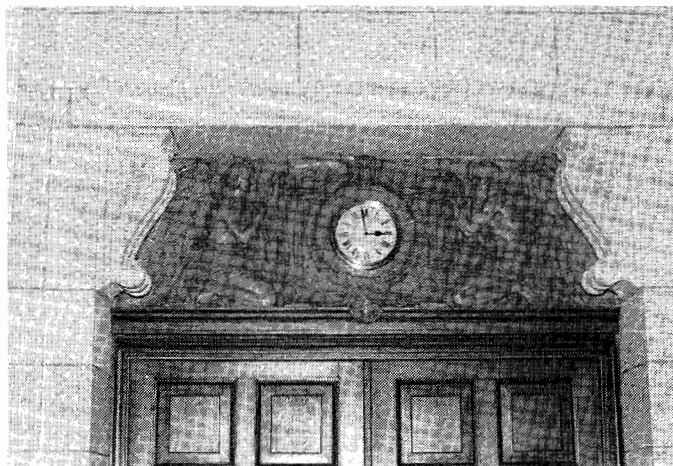
sets of plans. Each one gave appropriate space and strategic locations to the reading rooms.⁴

The new reading room (40 ft. x 65 ft.) of the House of Commons designed by architects John A. Pearson and Jean O. Marchand, was larger than the Senate reading room since there would be more members in the Commons.

For seventy years this room provided parliamentarians, staff, and members of the press gallery with an extensive collection of Canadian and foreign newspapers and periodicals including numerous local weekly papers.

After its creation, the reading room fell under the jurisdiction of the Clerk of the House of Commons who reported directly to the Speaker. In 1954, following a recommendation put forward by the Internal Economy Committee, it was placed under the authority of the Library of Parliament.⁵ The Joint Committee on the Library was also ready to accept the responsibility for the Senate reading room but the Upper House declined the offer. To emphasize that it was accessible to all Parliamentarians, the House of Commons Reading Room became known as the Parliamentary Reading Room.

This change of jurisdiction took place during the restoration of the Library of Parliament, after the 1952 fire. For four years part of the Reading Room was assigned to the Library of Parliament, as a central office where they assembled a collection of books and documents to give members a quick reference service.⁶



The tympanum over the main entrance door

During the same period, the library stored part of its collection, in a smaller room that connected the first floor of the House of Commons with the Library.⁷ This would become the new Parliamentary Reading Room (134-N) after September 1990.

The size and strategic location of the Reading Room in 1920 reflected the growing size and importance of the House compared to the Senate. Similarly the recent rise in the importance of House committees has resulted in its conversion as a committee room close to the Commons Chamber. Other special rooms have also been affected by changing needs. The Commonwealth Room next door used to be a Smoking Room. The new committee room will also give the public freer access to one of Parliament's most elegant heritage rooms. This is part of the political process of making Parliament more accessible to the Canadian public.

The architects, particularly Pearson gave considerable thought and particular attention to the embellishment of the structure and were very concerned with the finishing of the interior decoration. The work had to be "carried out to his own design and under his direction".⁸

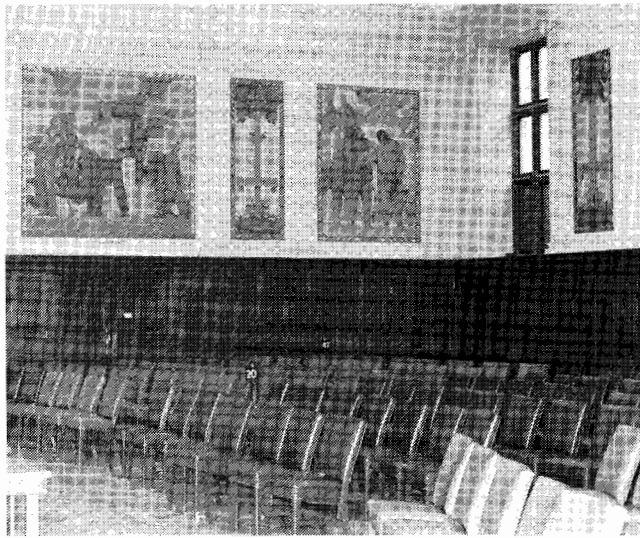
Numerous additions and changes to the original scheme of the interior finish were put before the Joint Committee on Reconstruction of the Parliament Building by Pearson and approved in most cases. These changes were intended to make the rooms more distinctive in character and to add to their value and beauty.

It was said of Pearson that he would not hesitate to spend time working on all the innumerable perfections of constructional and architectural details to produce masterpieces.⁹ The edifice offers not only a diversity of gothic decor but also rooms clothed with a touch of classicism. The Reading Room was one of the largest Special rooms and received a more elaborate architectural treatment and decoration than its counterpart the Railway Committee Room.

Located in a strategic place, it is accessible through the Hall of Honour, the north corridor and the Commonwealth Room. The small corridor leading to the room displays a groined vault ornated with bosses at the intersection of its ribs, and with corbels representing ten outstanding parliamentary correspondents. This project initiated by Public Works in 1949 and completed in 1950 was meant to echo the role of the room and to honor past journalists who had made their mark as founders and editorial writers of Canadian newspapers. Most of them also became involved in politics. Grattan O'Leary, who was one of the first journalists to comment on the rare combination of comfort and beauty of the design of the new reading room after its completion, probably never thought that he might later be a subject of the parliamentary stone carver Cleophas Soucy.

As one enters the room, one is struck by the elegance of the decor, its proportions, and its materials all in keeping with the Beaux-Arts monumental interpretation of classical forms.

The lower half of the room is panelled with oak tinted reddish-brown. The woodwork, executed by T.H. Hancock was started in January 1920 and completed in time for the opening of Parliament the following month.¹⁰ The whole installation was supervised by the general contractor P. Lyall and Sons.



The Reading Room after its conversion to a committee room in 1990

The upper portion consists of flattened pilasters infilled with painted panels and with 9-pane windows on the long sides, which provide clerestory lighting. The walls of imitation Bath stone are provided with decorative elements such as swags, masks and pilasters crowned with corinthian capitals. These decorative elements elegantly frame the murals.

In March 1920, Pearson explained to the Joint Committee on Reconstruction his scheme to decorate the Reading Room with mural paintings. It is interesting to note that the blueprint of 1919 giving specifications for the room had indicated "tapestry" rather than painted panels.¹¹ He requested the authority to expend the sum of \$19,000.00 and engage the "Canadian artist", Arthur Crisp to carry out the decorative scheme.

Born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1881, Crisp went south to live and to further his studies at the Art Student's League of New York. Mural decoration was his medium. When Pearson hired him, Crisp was well known in his field through commissions for theaters, hotels, public buildings, schools, and private residences and had won many awards. Aside from murals he did portrait, and landscape painting, and even won distinction as a battik artist.

In July 1921, Crisp brought some of the panels to the site (they were shipped from New York) and installed them; the large panels were completed by him during his visit.¹² The entire project consisting of 17 panels was finished in March 1922. The most prominent of the paintings are the ones on the south and north walls.

The warm colors (earth tones along with shades of green, ochre, and turquoise) play a key role in creating the atmosphere of the room. When the murals were installed, critics described them as typical of Crisp's bold and colorful style.¹³

Two panels celebrate the art of printing. The dominant one capped with a pediment above the fireplace is entitled "The Spirit of the Printed Word". It is an admirable symbolic sketch representing the diffusion of knowledge. The symbolic figure holds up the torch of knowledge, and a mirror reflecting the news of the world. "The boys represent mechanical phases; the globes show the British Empire picked out in red. The dove represents good news; the messenger pigeon, transmission of news; the raven, disastrous news".¹⁴

Across the room is "The Printed Word", a more literal companion panel that expresses the purpose of a reading room devoted to Canadian newspapers. This painting celebrates the achievements of the press. Pictured is a circa-1920 press with a group of pressmen examining a proof-sheet. This represents the printing industry in Canada and the dissemination of information concerning the affairs of the country.

Four other murals portraying epochal development of Canada are located in the corners of the room. They represent:

- East – the movement of grain, fruit and fish through Canadian seaports illustrates commercial activity in this region.
- South – the agricultural activity is depicted by fertile fruit farms and grain fields. The panel was created at a time when grain fields symbolized Ontario rather than the Prairies.
- West – the lumber industry is represented by a typical British Columbia logging scene.
- North – voyageurs and fur trappers represent exploration and hunting activity.

The ceiling of the Reading Room was temporarily decorated for the opening of Parliament. In May 1919, Pearson received permission to employ a sculptor to make the models for the ornaments of the ceilings in the

House of Commons Chamber, the Reading Room, the Commonwealth room, Parliamentary Restaurant and the private dining rooms.¹⁵

Enrico F. Cerracchio was hired by Pearson for the sum of \$3,000.00 and a further commission (\$8,000.00) was added to this first contract on December of the same year to decorate other rooms.¹⁶ The artist, born in Italy in 1880, emigrated to the United States in 1900. His principal works include statues, busts and commemorative monuments.

The effective cove ceiling in the renaissance tradition enhances the beauty of this classical decor. Cartouches framed with figures and rich mouldings displaying motifs such as scrolls and palmettes are painted with soft tones. The fluorescent fixtures installed in 1947 have been an unfortunate addition. The figures in the tympan made of compo over the main entrance door harmonize with the style of the ceiling.

The mantle of the fireplace of black and gold marble with inlaid bands of sienna marble was provided by Mariotti Marble Company of Montreal.¹⁷ It was impossible to use the fireplace, since the flue was used as a fresh air duct. Recently, a gas fixture was installed. The andirons as well as the club fender with upholstery seats and brass insertions were executed by the iron master Paul Beau in 1925.¹⁸ Crafted into forms of grotesque, winged griffins and decorated with repoussé designs, the huge andirons are resting on wide iron bars hammered into volutes. The massive quality of these ornate pieces with the use of large rivets give the ironwork a medieval appearance appropriate to the building.¹⁹ Originally the fireplace had all its accessories including an oak wood box with beaten iron mounts. They were designed by John A. Pearson and L.S. Lemasne.

The elaboration of embellishment here and elsewhere in the Parliamentary precinct was meant to symbolize the dignity of Parliament as an institution.

The drawings, layouts and orders for the furnishing of this room were made directly by the architect Pearson.

During 1990, a parquet of oak, walnut and maple in a palace pattern replaced the linoleum flooring. The border running around the room lacks a reddish tint which might have created a link with the wall panelling.

The influence of politics on room decoration is clear. The former Reading Room was the archetypical special room and the architect devoted considerable personal attention to ensure that its decoration echoed its reference

function and yet symbolized the country as a whole. Throughout the building, Canada is represented by groups of provincial symbols to emphasize the confederate nature of the country.

Just as the historical and political importance of railways are indicated by the very name of the Railway Committee room across the Hall of Honour, so too the importance of journalism in the political process is commemorated in the sculptured heads of the entrance way to the Reading Room.

Parliament is both an historical and a living institution. As a result both tradition and current use are continually reflected in its art, artifacts and architecture.*

Notes

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