

A Different Vision of Culture? The Daily Press Building in Timmins, Ontario, 1940-1995

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In 1992, after a decade of controversy, the Daily Press Building in Timmins, Ontario, was declared an historic site by the National Heritage Board and the Ontario Heritage Foundation. On October 19, 1995, this same building became the first Heritage site to be demolished since the Canadian government began designating historic sites in 1919.¹ The Daily Press building was lauded by architectural historian Robert Hill as "an outstanding example of the 'moderne' style,... a key work in the history and development of Northern Ontario, and a landmark design in this province's architectural history."² The question arises whether the Thomson empire had a cultural responsibility to maintain this historical landmark. If not, should the City of Timmins and the Timmins taxpayers have accepted the responsibility? Why did this architectural landmark turn into rubble? Why did no organization or institution step in to rescue it? Governmental, cultural, and architectural preservation organizations all expressed interest in protecting the building, but none would assume responsibility for it.

The building was commissioned by Sir Roy Thomson, founder of the Thomson newspaper empire. Constructed in 1940 and located at the corner of Cedar Street and Second Avenue, it was a prominent landmark in downtown Timmins. The design, by architects George Yule Masson and Hugh P. Sheppard of Windsor, Ontario, provided an exceptional example of Moderne architecture, a style prominent from the 1920s through to about 1945. In contrast to the vertical, highly ornamental and angular effects of Art Deco, the Art Moderne style is characterized by curvilinear shapes, sweeping horizontality, and the use of glass block and long continuous bands of windows. All of these elements were present in the Timmins Daily Press Building.

While the exterior of the Daily Press Building was Art Moderne, many of the interior fittings, such as light fixtures, were Art Deco. The interior curved walls and elements of trim repeated the exterior curvilinear shapes, creating an integrated whole. The interior foyer, reception room doorways and exterior doors were recessed and flanked with glass panels. The highlight of the circular entrance lobby was a geometric compass design embedded in the terrazzo floor.

The building had a basement, two full floors, and a partial third floor. The basement housed the printing plant of the newspaper. On the ground floor were the composing rooms, advertising and accounting departments. The steel desks and metal light fixtures in the ground floor offices demonstrated modern efficiency

and functionality. In contrast, the second floor, which housed the CKGB studios and offices, as well as the newspaper's editorial room and publisher's office, was a model of comfort and luxury:

The *pièce de résistance* was the (octagonal) reception room, upon which the architects lavished considerable attention. Squared-off, deep seated couches and sleek end tables (ordered from the Taylor Furniture company of Toronto) were placed against the north and south walls of the room. Over a sixteen-petalled floral motif in the centre of a plush green and ivory rug, woven in England to the architects' specifications, stood a circular glass table. The mellow colour scheme was complemented by a soft glow from the vertical light fixtures. Doors occupied five walls, and a large glass bubble facing outward from Studio "A" dominated the remaining wall, which, like the rest, was panelled in veneer.³

The third floor housed a compact bachelor apartment with all the modern conveniences, for Thomson's use as a home-away-from-home.

When I visited the old Daily Press building in 1993, it had been empty for some years. The power had been disconnected. A layer of grime and a patina of neglect masked some of the architectural splendour. A small group of City staff, of which I was a part, entered the old Daily Press building by the narrow back door, where paperboys used to pick up their bundles for delivery.

Warped by the passage of time, the door groaned loudly as it closed behind us. I was momentarily enveloped by darkness until I turned on the little miner's lamp attached to my hard hat. Outside, the hard hats and bulky lamps seemed unnecessary; inside, they were a godsend.

We descended the concrete stairs into the murky darkness. I had to pick my way carefully, avoiding broken light tubes, deep puddles, and sudden changes of level in the floor. The hiss of the boilers and printing presses still seemed to echo through the space. The concrete floor was covered in great sheets of paint, which, having peeled off the ceiling, crunched underfoot like giant corn flakes. On the ground floor, a sole un-boarded window scattered daylight onto apparently random concrete pillars. Fifty years ago, even ten years ago, the room must have been as busy as a Victorian train station.

In the main entrance, the glass blocks flanking the double doors let in sunshine that reflected on the steel trim of the smoothly curved stucco walls. A set of broad stairs curved up to the second floor. The satin-smooth bronze top of the handrail had long given way to a chrome and paint-spotted railing. A maze of doors

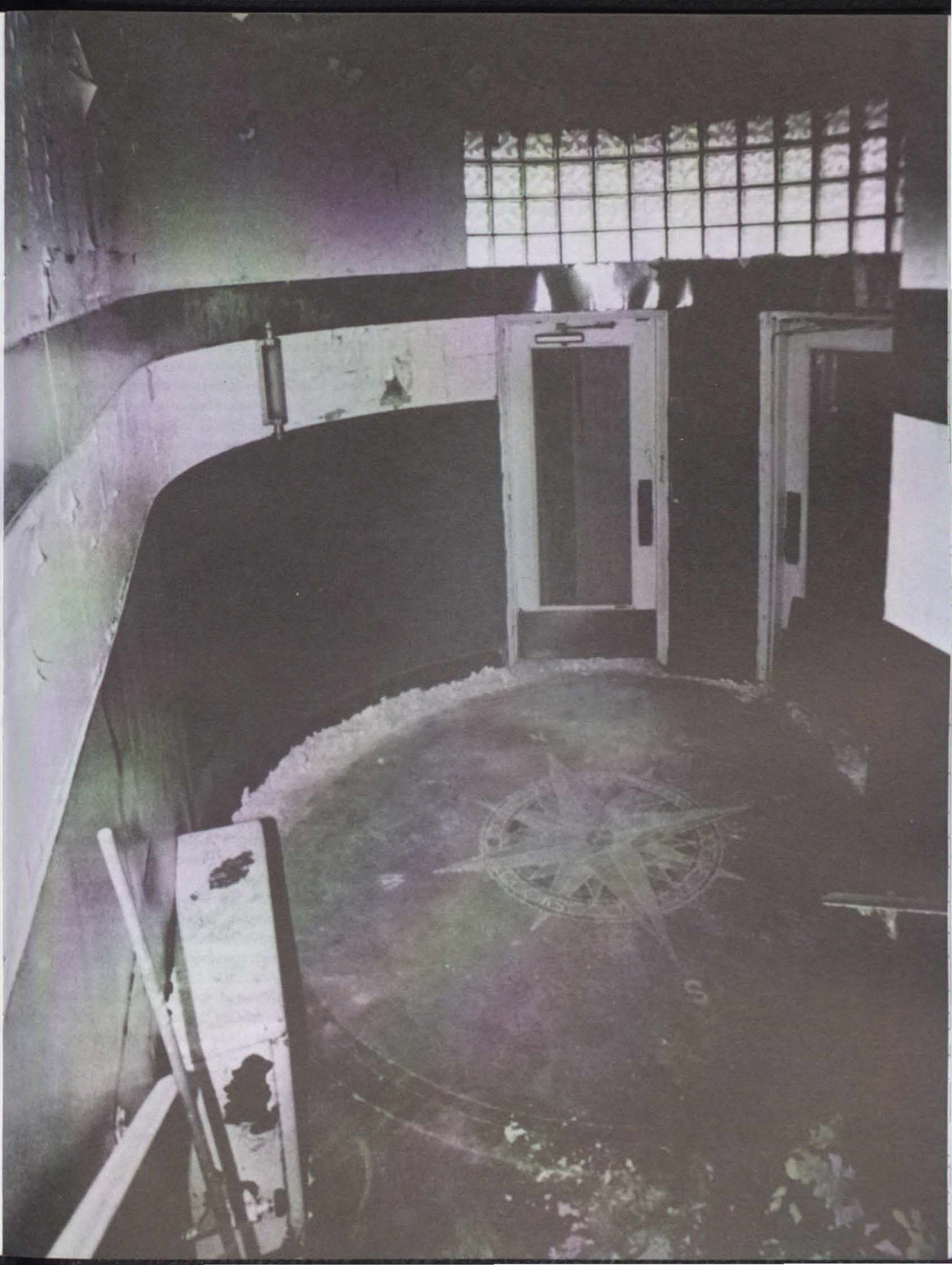
opened onto the central octagonal reception area. The floor had a linoleum compass pattern recalling the marble original in the lobby. Still, the ravages of time were not so evident here. It was not hard to imagine a CKGB announcer broadcasting the news amid ivory and green carpeting, custom made light fixtures, and elaborate Moderne decor. Some of the office doors still retained their embossed names: "Managing Editor," "Photography and Engraving." Square hatches, with doors that slid upward, were built into the walls of some of the newspaper offices. These doors led to tubes through which editors used to hurtle stories to the typesetting room on the main floor.

The top storey once housed the private apartments of Thomson and his partner, Jack Kent Cooke, who was the General Manager of CKGB Radio. In the centre of the stairwell, a cylindrical light fixture hung without its Art Deco shade. The smaller bachelor apartment belonged to Cooke; a lavish fireplace surrounded by glowing pink mirror tiles was the focus of the small living room. There was no view to the city from this room, though light filtered in through the glass block window. Lord Thomson's suite across the hall was much more grandiose than Cooke's quarters. The front room fireplace was inlaid with black and pink triangular and square mosaic tiles. From the living room, a door led out onto a curved balcony overlooking the city below. The kitchen was deep and narrow, with double sinks and rounded counters lined with open shelves. The benches in the seating area held only half-burned black candles; the lamp overhead, complete with its shade that looked like an inverted stainless steel bowl, was purely decorative.

We returned to the outside, into the glaring sunshine and the roar of traffic on Second Avenue. From this side, the Daily Press building showed its gleaming, white, smooth and comforting curves to the world. Its windows were boarded up, however, like sightless eyes. It looked abandoned and hopeful, awaiting its fate.

Roy Thomson, later Lord Thomson of Fleet (he earned his knighthood after buying the *Times* and *Sunday Times* of London), began his career in Timmins. Recognizing that radio would develop into a significant communications medium in the North, Thomson had bought two struggling radio stations, one in Timmins and one in North Bay.

Thomson's parsimony was legendary. He made his fortune through stringent cost-cutting and detailed budgeting. Manual typewriters were not replaced with newer equipment, and staff writers reportedly used





scrap paper rather than notepads on assignments.⁴ This penny-pinching may have hastened the demise of the Daily Press building.

On the other hand he could also be generous. Thomson donated \$110,000 and \$250,000 to North Bay for a swimming pool and a YMCA building to commemorate Canada's centennial.⁵ Perhaps a different vision of culture is suggested when sports facilities figure high in priority, but funding is much more scarce for the preservation of a historical site such as the Daily Press building. Thomson's generosity never extended, however, to the City of Timmins, where his newspaper career began. This lack of beneficence resulted in some resentment among Timmins residents and politicians, and was another factor in the eventual destruction of the building.

For 50 years the building was used as headquarters for the *Daily Press* newspaper and CKGB radio. During the early 1980s, rumours developed that new offices would be constructed. With a new facility imminent, Thomson paid little attention to the maintenance or refurbishing of the existing building. The paint began to peel, and torn pieces of plastic covered the windows. Already the decline of the building had begun.

After the new Daily Press Building was inaugurated in 1984, Thomson offered to sell the original structure to the City of Timmins for \$500,000. The City, perhaps expecting a donation rather than an acquisition, declined the offer.

The Thomson empire lost interest in the building after Roy Thomson died of a stroke in 1976 and his son, Kenneth Roy Thomson, became Chairman and President of the Thomson empire. The younger Thomson had very little attachment to Timmins. "It's a company asset," he said of the old Daily Press building, "It's got to be sold." He believed his father would have also tried to sell it.⁶

Between 1984 and 1987, a number of transactions involving the property took place, and owners came and went. After 1986, the building stood empty; an ad appeared regularly in northern Ontario newspapers offering it for sale at \$210,000. Then on December 10, 1987, John Butler, Publisher and General manager of the *Daily Press*, offered to sell the structure to the City for \$1, on the condition that it be used for cultural purposes. Included in the offer was a donation of \$100,000 to assist toward the renovations. The City considered the offer at a Council meeting on December 21, 1987. Moments after the delegations finished their presentations, City Council voted unanimously to decline the offer. It was

felt the building would require extensive and costly renovation.⁷

City Council's decision caused a flurry of articles in the *Globe and Mail*, and aroused the interest of conservation groups across Canada. Each group demanded that someone—more specifically someone else—take action. Eventually the City acquired the building anyway. They received it in 1994 in lieu of an overdue tax payment of almost \$90,000. A local group of concerned citizens continued efforts to have the building designated a national historic site, in order to make it eligible for additional grants. Finally, in 1992 the building was officially designated a National Historic Site.

The Timmins Library, looking to expand, expressed interest in using the building. In addition, the local museum, a municipal department, and a federally-funded Canadian National Exhibition Centre deliberated using the building, but no decisive plan was adopted. Instead, the City decided to demolish the building. Articles and letters about the decision appeared in newspapers all over the country. There were letters of concern from the Heritage Canada Foundation, the Ministry of Culture and other interested individuals and organizations. The provincial and federal governments offered technical advice and assistance, but would not intervene to protect the building.

On October 19, 1995, as a tour of delegates from the Ontario Museum Association and other dignitaries visiting the City drove by, a bulldozer levelled the building. The demolition crew salvaged only the terrazzo compass. In a ceremony in April 1996, the compass was mounted on the outside of the new Press building. This destruction of an important part of our historical and cultural legacy evoked an emotional response from architecture enthusiasts across Canada. Everyone cared. No one took responsibility.

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1. National Heritage Board Chairman Tom Simon, in "Thomson Building Coming Down," *Daily Press* (19 August 1995).

2. Robert G. Hill, *Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1810-1950*, 1987.

3. Anita Spadafore, "Art Moderne in the North: The Timmins Daily Press Building," *Northward Journal* 54 (1990): 35-6.

4. Susan Goldenberg, *The Thomson Empire* (Toronto: Methuen, 1984): 13.

5. Vicki Gilhula, "Historical Building Is For Sale," *Globe & Mail* (26 August 1987).

6. Canadian Press, "Globe Story Stirs Interest in Timmins Press Building," *Globe & Mail* (14 September 1987).

7. Paul Vandenburg, "City Rejects Thomson Offer," *Daily Press* (22 December 1987).