University of Manitoba | School of Art

To the Executive Policy Committee, City of Winnipeg

Re: Item #8 Nomination of St. Boniface Health Unit Building, 233 Provencher and Item #9 - Nomination of St. Boniface Police Station/Jail/County Courthouse, 227 Provencher

22.01.2022.

Dear Chairperson Bowman and Council Members,

I fully support the nomination of 233 and 227 Provencher Blvd to be added to the Historical Resources registry of the City of Winnipeg.

As an architectural and art historian who has taught at the University of Manitoba for over 25 years, I am able to contextualize this complex within the larger field of Modernist architecture in specific, and architectural history in general. I can say without reservation that this Civic Centre (of which these two structures form constituent parts), along with the City Hall/Centennial Concert Hall/Manitoba Museum complex, are the most important Modernist architectural ensembles in the Province of Manitoba. Not only is the St. Boniface Civic Centre designed by the person who is probably our most important and most recognized architect, Étienne Gaboury, but it was conceived as a civic centre for the very heart of Franco-Manitoba, for the former City of St. Boniface. I doubt that the City of St. Boniface signed on for the compromise of its cultural heritage when it agreed to become part of Unicity in 1971!

It should also be remembered that – as I demonstrated in my exhibition of 2020 “Bauhaus (Canada) 101” (School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba) Étienne Gaboury has come to recognize his Métis heritage. Thus, this complex is also a prime example of Indigenous architectural heritage in this province.

This is one of Gaboury’s earliest works, and given his pre-eminent stature within the history of Manitoba architecture, has value on that count alone.

Its value goes way beyond its place within Gaboury’s oeuvre, however. The design of the complex, including these two structures, is nothing short of brilliant – which is why it was nominated for the prestigious Massey Medal for Architecture, and why it won the Manitoba Association of Architects Award thereafter. Not only does it create a civic square out of an awkward site, harmoniously incorporating the historic City Hall building, but it succeeds in incorporating a number of different functions into an aesthetically unified whole, while visually

signaling the function of each of its constituent units through its varied massing. Its Brutalist style is ahead of its time in Manitoba, but does not give a "brutal" impression at all—rather one of permanence and refinement. It does this through the Egyptian- and Mesopotamian-inspired detailing of its window treatments and the massing of some of the constituent components—most won't recognize these references, but they will note the impression of refinement and stability. And it does all this while creating a civic square which has been successfully repurposed as a sculpture garden where Winnipegers can enjoy outdoor civic space during all seasons. There is nothing quite like it in this city or province, and few examples in Canada.

Furthermore, the complex is important for the architectural quality of Provencher Boulevard. Removing or unduly altering (*as is always a danger without Historic Resource designation no matter what a given owner says*) would irrevocably damage its surrounding urban fabric.

Finally, as far as I am aware (and I have visited the site numerous times with both my students and on my own), it is in surprisingly good physical condition, both inside and out. This suggests that it is a prime example of an historic building that should be preserved both inside and out.

One of Winnipeg's "calling cards" is its exceptional body of architectural resources of a high quality. This is what struck me most when I moved here from Toronto in 1996. Having grown up in Edmonton, where historic architectural resources disappeared at the drop of a hat, I was deeply impressed by the late 19thcentury, early 20th century, Art Deco and Modernist architecture I found here, much of it of a good or excellent quality—way above the Prairie average. *It is imperative that Winnipeg preserve the best of its past while engaging in dynamic growth. The two goals are not at odds with each other*: Even from the point of view of architectural history, dynamic growth carried out with high aesthetic standards is what will produce—and is producing—the historic resources of the future. *It is imperative that we preserve the best of our architectural heritage, not only for ourselves, but for the future.*

It is surprising to me that this complex, brilliant design by a pre-eminent Indigenous architect whose Église Précieux-Sang, widely considered to be a Canadian (and Indigenous!) architectural masterpiece, has not already long been designated as a Municipal Heritage Resource. The owner who purchased these structures *knew full well what their historic and artistic importance is—there is no way he could not have*. Promises to make minor alterations, are just that—promises, with no recourse in case minds change. *Please do not allow economic or other arguments to compromise a deeply important aspect of our Franco-Manitoban, Métis, Indigenous, Winnipeg, Manitoban and Canadian architectural and cultural heritage.*

Yours sincerely,



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