

SPEECH

Archives of Ontario

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These are exciting times for the Archives of Ontario. In 2009, we are poised to take our place as one of the best-housed archival facilities in the world. We are about to move into premises that will equal, in terms of their ability to make the documentary treasures of Ontario history accessible to the public, the improvements that we have already made to archival sciences and management over the years.

We've come a long way. When the Archives of Ontario was founded in 1903, the management of archival resources was still in its infancy – to say nothing of the preservation sciences. Though the Government of Ontario was a pioneer in recognizing the need to collect and preserve our documentary history, the science of collection management and conservation was largely undeveloped. The 20th century, then, was our time: a time of gradually evolving archival practices, a time when we hammered out the professional standards that now guide the collecting and describing of historical materials, a time when we gradually learned how to conserve as well as collect.

A parallel development has taken place in terms of the physical development of archival facilities. We now have the technical means to store fragile documents virtually in perpetuity, free from the dangers of light and damp and the corrosion caused by certain acids. What the Archives of Ontario has lacked until now, however, is a state-of-the-art building, where we can close the loop with superb client service that will allow us to take real advantage of the recent progress within the discipline. For nearly four decades now, we have “made do” with a converted office tower, where the floors have recently had to be reinforced to bear the weight of our records and a

constant battle is waged against moisture and mould. That is about to end. The Archives of Ontario is poised to come out of the wilderness.

That journey out of the wilderness, which is slated to end in 2009 when we move into brand new premises at York University, began some 20 years ago. That was when the government committed itself to modernizing the Archives of Ontario. Over the next several years, a number of schemes came and went, the most dramatic suggestion being the \$84 million conversion of the old Government of Ontario Building at Exhibition Place in Toronto. It was an impossible price tag at the time, when Ontario was sagging into recession. It remains an impossible amount of money. No government then or since has been prepared to invest that kind of money in a new home for the Archives of Ontario.

Clearly, a different strategy was needed. In 2000, when a new Archivist of Ontario was appointed, a new, two-pronged campaign was launched to find a new home. The first prong of the strategy was “compromise.” The second prong was “adaptation” – in other words, finding a way to adapt to the realities of government priorities. If the Archives of Ontario was ever going to re-position

itself physically, it needed first of all to re-position itself politically. The Archives had to find a way to move itself upwards on the list of valuable public assets.

We began to look at how, and to what degree, the Archives could compromise in order to improve its facilities at acceptable cost. First of all, we looked at the issues of customer convenience as they related to site. Most users of the Archives depend on public transit in order to visit the facility. In fact, the ideal location for the Archives is exactly where it is today, only steps from the legislative buildings and close to very efficient transit. However, the cost of downtown accommodation is also extremely high.

Secondly – still talking in ideal terms – we knew that we wanted to house the collections on the same site as the service centre. In terms of customer service, that is the ideal arrangement. But just consider how large that single facility would have to be: the Archives of Ontario has a collection of over 300,000 record boxes, 50,000 bound volumes, 200,000 architectural drawings, 40,000 maps and 1.7 million photos. We are talking about a massive building in the real estate heart of Toronto.

The first compromise came in terms of the single building. We decided we could, after all, live with two buildings – a public service facility, located within easy reach of public transit, perhaps in the Queen’s Park area; and a large, off-site storage facility built in an area where the real estate was much less expensive. The two facilities could be linked by twice-daily deliveries of requested records. It was a plan that could be made to work.

Now the Archives had a plan, the trick was how to sell it to the government. In order to do this successfully, the organization had to learn how to adapt to the realities of government decision-making. The Conservative Government at the time approved the acquisition of new facilities. That approval wasn’t an accident. The Archives had carefully repositioned itself to recognize and respond to government priorities – which included the need to rein in costs and privatize services wherever possible.

To begin with, the need for new facilities was positioned as a “cost avoidance” exercise. That means that the Archives set out to measure the cost of NOT protecting the collections adequately. Though it is, in fact, difficult to put a price on documentary history – most of which is priceless – the Archives’ collections have been appraised

at a value of approximately \$400 million. A conservation study in the early 1990s suggested a probable 2 percent deterioration rate for collections that are improperly stored. Using that rate and applying it to a value of \$400 million, we arrived at a staggering number of \$8,000,000 million of lost value in government assets every year. This was information that made the government sit up and take notice. Suddenly, we were not talking about some intangible heritage value but rather about hard, cold cash.

Learning to speak the government's language was only part of the Archives' campaign to win support for new housing. The government was also interested in privatization of government services. The Archives came forward with a proposal to solve its major storage problem through a public-private partnership approach – with the private sector constructing the facility, then providing storage and retrieval services to the government. This did two things. In practical terms, it meant that the Government of Ontario would not need up-front capital in order to build the facility. In political terms, it also put approval of the project into the lap of the Cabinet Committee on Privatization and Superbuild. This committee, chaired by the Minister of Finance, was the government's single most important committee at the time.

In fact, the political profile of the Archives during the early years of the 21st century also began to change as a result of a whole new slate of Outreach activities. In 2002, the organization became one of the first archives in Canada to reach out to communicate the content and significance of its collections in a proactive way. The significance of that shift is visible in the statistics. In 2007, 2.5 million visits are made *every month* to the Archives of Ontario website. That figure has nearly doubled since the Outreach function was established in 2002.

It was the marking of our 100th anniversary in 2003 that gave us the perfect opportunity to start placing a dedicated focus on outward-reaching initiatives. And so, in the past six years, we've shaped a dynamic Outreach program consisting of exhibits, educational programming, public speaking, and a donor relations initiative. It has enlarged the constituency for heritage products in Ontario and enriched the Archives as an institution. Also, in general, it has established a partnership model that may well be a model for other areas of the Ontario public service.

The Archives of Ontario has two important resources, beginning with the collections. The second resource is the expertise of Archives staff. In broad terms, the Outreach program aimed to improve links between itself and the broader Ontario community and to make both its collections and expertise more widely known and accessible. When the Archives laid the foundations of the new Outreach and Partnership program in 2002 and assigned a full-time staff member to develop it, it demonstrated landmark commitment to a little traveled road in the archival community.

The tendency in this profession, where the core functions are so costly and absorbing, is to focus resources on conservation and archival processes. Though some archives in Canada have small outreach programs, the Archives of Ontario broke new ground in launching a full-scale outreach, education and partnership program and by bringing a dedicated staff member on board to manage it.

Partnership is key to much that has happened in the last six years. During that time, the Archives has developed what is virtually a new culture based on the creation of strong and mutually beneficial partnerships. In other words, it has turned away from its traditionally inward-

facing orientation. This is true in the area of Outreach, where by identifying organizations that share common interests, the Archives has put its collections to work for those, among others, who teach and learn history in Ontario. It has also proven worth in the struggle to achieve new premises.

And the approach worked. Suddenly, the Archives of Ontario was presenting itself to government not just as the preserver of heritage, but as a major partner of many important organizations and of the private sector. Yes, the preservation of heritage was, and is, key to our operations. But now, the government could see the organization as a valuable information asset as well, and one that needed better protection and access in order to continue to deliver innovative services to the public.

In terms of the new facility, the decision to forge a major private-public partnership was not taken lightly or without acute awareness of the risks. The most worrying aspect was a potential loss of control over just where and what the facility would be, and how it would be developed. To manage that risk, the Archives came forward with an Accommodation Strategy in 2002 and hired a project team to proceed along two separate paths: one, the

creation of a service contract for the building of offsite storage; and, two, a construction project for a new main facility. Because we didn't want to emphasize what could be perceived as a negative – which was the two-building compromise – the intention was to keep the private service contract relatively quiet and celebrate the announcement and construction of a new, high-profile public-service building in the downtown.

This is when the project hit its first major obstacle – which was identifying a suitable piece of land for a relatively small building – just over 100,000 square feet – in the downtown core. When the government's real estate agency was unable to locate any surplus property, we were forced to go to the private sector. And still we couldn't find suitable and affordable land in the downtown. We even looked at leasing a property, but the best offer we got was 150,000 square feet of space below ground level.

The Archives kept looking and eventually made the right connection in the world of real estate. An enlightened developer from Canada Life came in and spent time to learn what the Archives was all about and what was needed in terms of space and functionality. The company

then presented us with a long-term leasing opportunity. This was the partner we had been looking for. The proposal offered the Archives everything it needed in terms of a state-of-the-art customer service centre. And best of all, from the government's point of view, no upfront capital was needed. After issuing a public proposal call to see what else was on offer, the government approved the Canada Life proposal to construct a new purpose-built facility on a wonderful site, steps from Union Station and a subway stop and a mere 15-minute walk from Queen's Park.

It sounds like the happy ending. It was not. The large insurance company that was going to build a new Archives was swallowed by an even larger insurance company within weeks of the government's award of the contract, and the proposal was pulled. Before the deal could be put back together, an election was called. A new government took office and we were told that a 138,000-square-foot facility in downtown Toronto just wasn't on. There we were, back at the starting gate.

Meanwhile the storage service part of the puzzle was fitting neatly into place. The storage and retrieval services moved quietly and efficiently through approvals, an RFP,

the award of the contract to Archives ONE, construction of a new facility 50 kilometres outside the city and the successful transfer of 280,000 containers of records between April 2005 and March 2006. All this was accomplished without a single service disruption. In fact, so efficient was the process – which we handled completely in house – that the accomplishment actually slipped beneath the radar screen for most observers.

Our partnership with Archives ONE has proven to be a tremendous success. In the fall of 2006, we jointly won the highest award in the Service category at the Canadian Council for Public Private Partnerships Innovation Awards.

Meanwhile, the Archives was still looking for land for the Main Public Service Facility. So far there had been no public outcry over the looming danger to priceless heritage materials. Nevertheless, it was communications that eventually helped us to turn the corner. In effect, the Archives found a media champion in political columnist, Ian Urquhart. More than a year passed after the collapse of the Canada Life deal before this influential journalist came for a visit. He toured the current public facility and was appalled at the conditions there. He started writing

columns, asking why the government had refused to revamp the first deal with Canada Life and, more importantly, what were they doing about getting a new facility for the Archives. Questions were asked in the House. The Archives commissioned an internal audit report that summarized (once again) severe risks to the collections. Health and safety issues were brought to the fore – sagging floors, mould in the walls, insufficient fire protection. In spite of the new offsite storage that now accommodated as much as 90 percent of the collections in safe, environmentally controlled storage, the remaining 10 percent was still at risk. This included much of the most valuable, fragile and regularly consulted materials, which still had to be stored at the main facility. This part of the collections is valued at over \$250 million. Another report on the rate of deterioration was commissioned and assessed the loss of value there at over a million dollars a month.

Governments listen when the media speaks. A new process began. The government called for proposals for a facility that would meet the Archives' spatial, functional and technical performance standards and leased to the government over the long term. The government would not have to provide any capital upfront, but the lease would cost it \$200 million over the next 35 years. The

Archives continued to fight for an accessible site, but in fact the search zone had now become the entire Greater Toronto Area – from Lake Ontario to Barrie and Hamilton to Oshawa.

In the end, there were four short-listed proponents – three downtown locations and one at York University, Canada’s third-largest post-secondary institution. However, three of the four eventually withdrew, leaving only York in contention. Ultimately, more value was put on “proximity to meeting and educational facilities” than on closeness to “high order” public transit. The project was awarded in December 2006, a 97,000-square-foot building was designed and responsibility for construction placed in the hands of a Vancouver developer.

A groundbreaking ceremony on April 30, 2007 marked the beginning of the end of this long saga of the Archives of Ontario’s search for a new home. For the first time in its 100-year history, Canada’s largest provincial archival repository will benefit from a purpose-built home that will provide enhanced access to Ontario’s documentary memory. Users of the Archives of Ontario will be exposed to a welcoming and truly modern environment.

Finally, after years of planning, lobbying and campaigning, the Archives is about to gain the research space it needs, along with better security and improved storage for the records. The public reference area will be 75 percent larger than the present facility. The building will have appropriate offices, state-of-the-art labs and processing space and – best of all – proper storage facilities for the most fragile and valuable items in its collections. Particularly exciting in terms of Outreach is the introduction of dedicated exhibit and classroom space. These spaces will create opportunities for new and diverse groups, including students and teachers, to engage more dynamically with their documentary heritage.

These initiatives will build on the pre-existing Outreach program that has been implemented over the last six years. Innovative partnerships with organizations and individuals from heritage, cultural, arts and education communities have resulted in greater exposure for the Archives of Ontario's holdings and a heightened awareness of the relevance of archival records. These partnerships played their part in the successful outcome of the building campaign. And now, in turn, the new building is going to both strengthen existing relationships and

foster new alliances.

So here at last is the happy ending. Construction of the new client service facility is proceeding on a fast track basis, with a scheduled opening date of April 2009. What were the factors that allowed us to navigate to this much-to-be-desired end? Flexibility. Willingness to compromise. An ability to re-shape corporate priorities to win official support. And most of all – a vigorous outreach campaign that has made “partnership” a fundamental part of the way we do business. The Archives of Ontario has won its battle to find a new home. The real winners, however, are the people of Ontario. As of April 2009, the Archives of Ontario will be better positioned to serve the people of Ontario and to protect the province’s documentary heritage for generations to come.