

24 Sussex Redux

In a special series, TONY ATHERTON goes to some of our city's top architects and designers to get a sense of what could be done with the home of our prime minister



■ **Above** 24 Sussex in 1950 during renovations to turn it into the official residence of the prime minister

■ **Opposite** A bird's-eye view of 24 Sussex, showing its proximity to the river. Garage and security installation are visible on right

BUILT a heartbeat after the nation was born, it was called, wistfully, Gorfhwysfa, Welsh for “resting place” or “place of peace.” In the generations that followed, however, there was little rest or peace for the grand limestone manor at 24 Sussex.

In other circumstances, Gorfhwysfa might have had a happier fate, might have survived in its original Gothic Revival splendour — all peaked roofs and gingerbread — might have been scrupulously maintained by owners proud of a gracefully aging Victorian dowager.

But it occupied a prime piece of real estate on the heights above the Ottawa River, and the government thought to save it from the vagaries of private ownership. So after some legal wrangling in the middle of the last century, the people of Canada took control of the residence, spent half a million dollars changing every blessed thing inside and out, and then handed it to the rough care of a series of tenants who had little reason to worry about its long-term welfare — and every reason to ignore it.

Now, nearly a century and a half since its doors first opened to the cream of Ottawa society, Gorfhwysfa is a notorious yet relatively anonymous residence, known by its address and little else. Few Canadians have more than the vague idea of its exterior, and fewer still have been invited inside.

What we do know is that 24 Sussex is in an appalling state of disrepair. The wind rattles through windows that haven't been replaced in generations, the plumbing is wonky, the wiring awry, the air conditioning practically nonexistent. There's asbestos in the walls, mould in the basement, and no internal sprinkler system. Seven years ago, the estimated cost of “urgent” renovations was \$10 million, half again what the home was assessed at for tax purposes at the time.

And that was before Laureen Harper started a home for wayward cats on the third floor.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL COMMISSION

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Check out our website for more 24 Sussex floor plans and designs from our architects and designers as well as visions for the prime ministerial home from students Balquis Attef, Matt Lerch, Steve Schuhmann, Jason Surkan and Sebastian Woolff in Carleton University's School of Architecture.

THE National Capital Commission, landlord of 24 Sussex since 1988, has been trying for years to get an incumbent prime minister to a) approve a whopping renovation budget and b) relocate while the work is being done. Since the former has been politically fraught and the latter inconvenient, the NCC has had little success. An incoming prime minister's decision to forgo the pleasures of 24 Sussex, at least temporarily, has precipitated unprecedented interest in the future of the mouldering residence.

As part of an ongoing series intended to enliven the debate over 24 Sussex, *Ottawa Magazine* flirts with an option that the NCC is loath to consider — starting from scratch. We asked three Ottawa architecture and design firms — Barry J. Hobin and Associates Architects Inc., Christopher Simmonds Architect, and Chris Straka's VERT — to imagine that the lot was empty and heritage and security concerns were not an issue. What might they do with the blank canvas of that handsomely situated four-acre lot? Their enthusiasm for the project is revealing. Chris Simmonds supposes that every Ottawa architect has at some point driven by 24 Sussex and wondered “What if...?”

To leaven this wild imagining, we have asked two experts — Arthur Milnes, political historian, and Allan Teramura, president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada — to argue the merits of renovating and maintaining the current building as the official residence (Milnes) versus beginning afresh (Teramura).

In our next issue, we will return our focus to the existing residence and speculate anew. The renovations required at 24 Sussex would improve the comfort, safety, and efficiency of the building — but not its look, which has changed little in 64 years. We have asked four local interior designers to take up the slack, reimagining some of the semi-public spaces within the prime ministerial home, unfettered by the usual constraints. Wait until you see what they come up with.

(as designed by Samantha Schneider)



DEEP rich Canadian hardwood and limestone distinguish grand formal spaces beneath a roof as skewed and staggered as a wild Canadian landscape in this concept created by Samantha Schneider of Christopher Simmonds Architect.

The long, linear, single-storey great house is the least expensive of the designs. It has fewer than half the rooms of the current residence, but the scale of the formal spaces is large, and nearly all the living spaces take advantage of the dramatic view offered by the cliff-top location of 24 Sussex.

"I guess it's more residential-scale in some ways — however, the roof takes it slightly somewhere else. I think it just suits the site and the purpose," says Schneider.

The design is partly instinctual, says Schneider. "This is more to do with creating landscape," she says.

"The intention, says Chris Simmonds, "was to use forms, like the form of the roof, in a way that people could relate to." A sloped roof is more familiar than a flat roof, he says, but a sloped roof "in the form of a crystalline composition would be understood as something that was evocative of the landscape."

Inside, limestone and torrefied ash continue to be dominant elements. A long floating stone fireplace that marks the grand entrance can also be seen from each of the formal spaces, including the sunken living room and den.



■ **Left** The design features a peaked roof and lots of windows on the river side of the building, allowing views of the Gatineau Hills

■ **Below** This side of the building faces Sussex Drive. The roof line is meant to evoke a sense of Canadian geography

■ **Opposite** Large formal spaces within the design all have a river view. The dining room (top) leads down to a sunken lounge and living room (centre and below) marked by a massive floating fireplace



“The values we are trying to embody are interconnection and respect for the environment and openness, transparency and communication ... using materials in honest, communicative ways”

Christopher Simmonds, architect

COMPENDIUM

Living Space: 7,050 square feet on the ground floor plus 6,350 square feet in the basement.

Cost: \$3.877 million, not including extraordinary security measures.

Materials: Canadian elements predominate. The dramatic roofline is clad in long-lasting zinc and faced on the underside with torrefied ash. The limestone base is re-dressed stone from the original building.

Environment: The roof projects to the south and folds along the west side to increase shading, ground-source heat pump for heating/cooling, triple glazing in windows, possible thin-film solar cells on metal roof.

Outbuilding: The design assumes an outbuilding that serves as a garage and service quarters. A 2,000-square-foot outbuilding would add \$900,000 to the budget. A basement provides space for storage and mechanical services.

