

Appendix A – Report IPGPL25-035

Heritage Designation Brief



The Bell Telephone Exchange

183 Hunter Street West

Peterborough Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee

2025

Heritage Designation Status Sheet

Street Address: 183 Hunter Street West

Roll Number: 040050120000000

Short Legal Description: PT LT 2 S OF HUNTER STAND W OF
GEORGE ST PL 1 TOWN OF
PETERBOROUGH PTS 5, 6, 7, 9, 12 &
13 45R1443 S/T & T/W R280324; PT
LT 3 N OF SIMCOE ST AND W OF
GEORGE ST PL 1 TOWN OF
PETERBOROUGH PTS 8, 10, 11 & 15
45R1443 S/T R168457 ;
PETERBOROUGH CITY

PACAC Application Review Date: May 6, 2025

Heritage Type: Built Structure

Designation Type: Ontario Heritage Act – Part IV

Designation Brief Completed by: Emily Hamilton

Comments: Revised June 2025

STATEMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE VALUE OR INTEREST

The subject property has been researched and evaluated to determine its cultural heritage significance under Ontario Regulation 9/06 of the Ontario Heritage Act R.S.O. 1990 (the Act). A property is eligible for designation if it has physical, historical, associative or contextual value and meets **any two** of the nine criteria set out under Regulation 9/06 of the Act. Staff have determined that 183 Hunter Street West meets criteria and has cultural heritage value or interest and merits designation under the Act.

1. The property has design value or physical value because it:

a. is a rare, unique, representative, or early example of a style, type, expression, material or construction method:

183 Hunter Street West is a representative example of the Stripped Classicism style in Peterborough. The style was popular for public buildings in the early to mid-twentieth century. Certain decorative elements on this building are borrowed from the Art Deco style.

b. displays a high degree of craftsmanship or artistic merit:

183 Hunter Street displays a high degree of craftsmanship in its exterior details which are executed to a high standard of quality. Notable elements of particular merit include the decorative brickwork, wrought iron details, Indiana limestone accents, entryways, fenestration, and decorative tiles.

c. demonstrates a high degree of technical or scientific achievement:

There are no specific technical or scientific achievements associated with this property.

2. The property has historical value or associative value because it:

a. has direct associations with a theme, event, belief, person, activity, organization, or institution that is significant to a community:

183 Hunter Street West has direct association with the Bell Telephone Company of Canada, an institution of both local and national significance. Bell first brought the telephone to Peterborough in the nineteenth century and continues to provide services to the community to this day.

b. yields, or has the potential to yield, information that contributes to an understanding of a community or culture:

This property has the potential to yield information that contributes to an understanding of telecommunications in Peterborough in the mid-twentieth century. It contributes to our understanding of Peterborough's role as the 'Electric City' which welcomed new technologies.

c. demonstrates or reflects the work or ideas of an architect, artist, builder, designer, or theorist who is significant to the community:

183 Hunter Street West reflects the work of its architect, F. J. Macnab, chief architect for the Bell Telephone Company of Canada. Though of little significance to Peterborough, Macnab's early twentieth century designs for Bell can be seen throughout Canada and left a lasting impact on the streetscapes of towns and cities across the country.

3. The property has contextual value because it:

a. is important in defining, maintaining or supporting the character of the area:

This property is important in maintaining the character of Hunter Street West and of the downtown area as a whole. With the other late nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings on this stretch of Hunter Street, this building demonstrates the growth and development of the downtown core.

b. is physically, functionally, visually, or historically linked to its surroundings:

183 Hunter Street West is both historically and functionally linked to its surroundings as the first Bell Telephone Exchange, a building which shares the Stripped Classicism style, is located across the street at 192 Hunter Street West. It visually continues the row of two and three storey brick commercial buildings typical of this area.

c. is a landmark:

This property is a landmark within the Hunter Street West area of downtown Peterborough. Its large scale and refined Stripped Classicism design makes it a well-known landmark on the street.

Design and Physical Value

The design and physical value of 183 Hunter Street West lies in the first two stories of its main façade and the northernmost structural bays on the east and west façades. These façades are a fine representative example of the Stripped Classicism style. It has rectangular massing with significant frontage on Hunter Street West. Its



decoration is mainly concentrated on the street facing façade with the principal entrance. The building was built to house the necessary infrastructure for the expanding telephone network and technology for the new automatic dialing system.

Constructed between 1938 and 1939 for the Bell Telephone Company of Canada, the building is of red brick construction with stone accents, executed in the Stripped Classicism style. It is the work of Bell's chief architect, F. J. Macnab.

Stripped Classicism, or Modern Classical Style or "Starved Classicism", as it is sometimes referred to, was a take on the Neoclassical style often used in public buildings. It became popular after World War I when architects' clients were looking for a restrained look in contrast to the extravagant Beaux-Arts style popular in the pre-war years. With the onset of the Great Depression, the focus shifted to buildings where taxpayers' money was not wasted, allowing the refined Stripped Classicism style to thrive. The main characteristic of the style is a symmetrical main façade with classical-order pilasters. Most buildings in this style were constructed of white stone, but, conscious of costs in the Great Depression, some public buildings were faced with brick and contrasting stone trim, such is the case with 183 Hunter Street West.

Some of the decorative elements on the building, particularly around the entryway, are characteristic of the Art Deco style. Art Deco rose to global popularity in the 1920s and continued until the end of the 1930s. The style marked the end of the decorative styles and the beginning of sleek modern styles of architecture. The Art Deco style favoured the use of new building materials in decorative elements, including reinforced concrete, glass and steel. It is characterized by geometric shapes, sleek lines and symmetrical patterns.

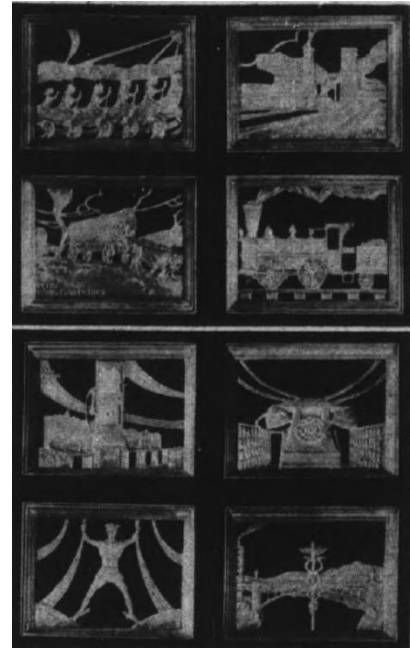
Peterborough's Bell Telephone Exchange has many elements characteristic of the Stripped Classicism style. The north façade is largely symmetrical, except for an offset doorway, with five bays of windows separated by six classical order pilasters supporting a stone cornice. On the lower level, the hung windows with muntin bars seen in the original design remain. There are decorative tiles between the windows on the first and

second storey windows. Originally green, they have since faded yet the original colour can be seen on the western façade. On the second storey, there are Indiana limestone surrounded windows with a wrought iron faux balcony with a stylistic bell.



The Art Deco influence is seen in the entryway. Above the door there is decorative ironwork on the transom and the words “Bell Telephone”. The heavy wooden door features six, originally eight, bronze plated panels which tell the history of Peterborough. The panels were detailed in a March 30, 1939, article in *The Peterborough Examiner*. The panels were broken up into pairs to contrast how the city has developed overtime. The pairings were listed as, water transportation, land transportation, technological advancement, and Mercury, the ancient Roman god of trade and messenger of the gods.

The water transportation panels contrast a canoe being paddled down the Otonabee River, and the Peterborough Lift Lock. The second pairing, land transportation, contrasts an ox and cart with a steam engine train. The third pairing, technological advancement, contrasts the manual dialing switchboard with the automatic dialing telephone. Lastly, the Mercury panels contrast Mercury delivering messages to Peterborough with the caduceus on the Otonabee River. This attributing Peterborough’s industrial and commercial success and status as the ‘Electric City’ to the Otonabee River. Only six of these panels remain today with the caduceus and the steam engine panels missing.



Historical and Associative Value



183 Hunter Street West has strong historical and associative value as a longtime communication hub as Peterborough's Bell Telephone Exchange. Built in 1939, it was constructed to accommodate the technology required to bring a new advancement – the automatic dialing system – to Peterborough. 183 Hunter Street West played an instrumental role in the technological advancement of Peterborough's telephone system.

The telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell at his family's homestead in Brantford, Ontario, in 1874. He later cofounded the Bell Telephone Company in 1877, and his invention began to spread across North America. The telephone first came to Peterborough in 1881. The Bell Telephone Company constructed an office building at 192 Hunter Street West in 1908. For much of the twentieth century, Bell had such dominance over telecommunications in North America that it was nicknamed "Ma Bell" (or "Mother Bell").

By the 1930s, service was expanding, telephone technology was evolving and Bell's facilities in Peterborough proved inadequate. On April 22, 1937, in an interview with *The Peterborough Examiner*, J. Brace, a Bell Telephone Company of Canada executive, announced that Bell would be investing half a million dollars in upgrading Peterborough to an automatic dialing system in the upcoming year. This new system allowed users to dial directly and have their call automatically connected by a local switchboard, rather than having to call the operator and asking to be connected. First patented in 1891, the first new telephone exchange built to house this technology was in Toronto in 1924. It quickly swept across the country but some areas, particularly rural areas, retained manual dialing until the 1970s.

In his interview with *The Examiner*, Brace announced that the company had bought land on Hunter Street West to build a new exchange to house all the necessary automatic dialing equipment, including automatic long distance dialing equipment. A call for tenders for this new facility was published in June 1938. The building was built with provisions for an extension to the rear and a third floor. The architect was F. J. Macnab, chief architect for the Bell Telephone Company of Canada.



Frederick John Macnab was born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1885. He apprenticed with a Dundee-based architectural firm before immigrating to Canada in 1906, settling in Montreal. He first worked as a draftsman for the Bell Telephone Company under then chief architect, W. J. Carmichael. He succeeded Carmichael as chief architect in 1927 and remained in the position until his retirement in 1953. As Bell's chief architect, he designed telephone exchanges across Canada including in Toronto, Montreal, Kingston and Sudbury. He

returned to Scotland after his retirement and died in Ayr in 1961.

Ground was broken on the new telephone exchange in 1938. Besides the construction of a new exchange, necessary updates to Bell's infrastructure to accommodate this new technology were made, included moving telephone poles, laying thousands of feet of cable, and selecting new telephone numbers for each subscriber. C. B. Shaver, the local manager, began a campaign educating the public on this upcoming change. Bell detailed the change in the newspaper, distributed pamphlets and staged a demonstration at the Peterborough Exhibition. The building was completed in February 1939. The automatic dialing equipment arrived on June 24, 1939.

The change to automatic dialing came at midnight on September 30, 1939. Shaver asked the public to avoid making calls as soon as it launched as it may interfere with normal telephone traffic. An advertisement was placed in *The Peterborough Examiner* reminding the public to use the telephone directory. It also asked the public not to immediately place calls. The first phone call utilizing the new system was between Mayor James Hamilton and the Vice-President of the Bell Telephone Company of Canada. The switch from manual to automatic dialing system took exactly 146 seconds.

As service expanded and technology advanced, an addition was built on the back of the exchange in 1948. The third storey was added in 1957, employing many of the design elements from Macnab's original design.



Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Archives Services

Contextual Value



Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Archives Services

The Bell Telephone Exchange at 183 Hunter Street West has contextual value as a part of the diverse Hunter Street West streetscape. The street includes a wide range of mid to late nineteenth century to early to mid twentieth century buildings. Though one of the more modern buildings in this area, its features are sympathetic to its surroundings and maintain the character of the area.

The building is a well-known landmark in downtown Peterborough. With its three-storey red brick construction, it maintains the streetscape. It was a Bell policy that an exchange should fit in with its surroundings. Though now the building stands out with a large parking lot to the east, originally, it would have blended seamlessly with the massing of the now largely demolished Oriental Hotel (demolished 1974).

The building contributes to our understanding of the history of telecommunications in Peterborough. It is historically linked to its surroundings, located just across the street from Peterborough's first telephone exchange at 192 Hunter Street West. These two buildings are historically, functionally, and visually linked, both being examples of the Stripped Classicism style. Telephone exchanges are often found in city centres in Ontario, integrated in the commercial core, to showcase the telephone's importance. The building's Art Deco decorations are rare in Peterborough, but another example can be seen on the nearby Belleghem Building at 188 Hunter Street West.

"The short statement of reason for designation, including a description of the heritage attributes along with all other components of the Heritage Designation Brief constitute the "Reasons for the Designation" required under the Ontario Heritage Act. The Heritage Designation Brief is available for viewing in the City Clerk's office during regular business hours."

SHORT STATEMENT OF REASONS FOR DESIGNATION

The Bell Telephone Exchange at 183 Hunter Street West has cultural heritage value as a landmark building on Hunter Street in Peterborough's downtown core. It is a representative example of the Stripped Classicism style, commonly used for telephone exchanges but rare in Peterborough. It utilizes key stylistic elements such as pilasters, decorative brickwork, tiles and ironwork. The bronze plated panels on the door display a high degree of craftsmanship and visually represent Peterborough's history and role as an industrial centre.

The building has historical value as a reminder of technological advancements in the early twentieth century, namely the introduction of automatic dialing telephones, and the impact these inventions had on people's lives.

The building is a landmark thanks to its unique architecture, fine decoration and historical associations with the Bell Telephone Company of Canada. It remains widely recognized in the community as the "Bell Telephone Exchange".

SUMMARY OF HERITAGE ATTRIBUTES TO BE DESIGNATED

The Reasons for Designation include the following heritage attributes and apply to all elevations and the roof including all façades, entrances, windows, chimneys, and trim, together with construction materials of wood, brick, stone, plaster parging, metal and glazing, their related building techniques, and landscape features:

Exterior Elements:

- Original façade from grade to second storey, northernmost structural bays on east and west façades
- Two storey red brick construction
- Decorative brickwork
- Indiana limestone details
- Pilasters
- Cornice line
- Fenestration
- Wrought ironwork
- Entrance
 - Original door with bronze tiles