Carleton University Amphitheatre – History and Significance

The purpose of this draft statement on the history and significance of Carleton University's amphitheatre is to inform the current planning for a new Indigenous learning place in this space. The statement has been prepared by professor Susan Ross of the School of Indigenous and Canadian Studies, an architect specialized in heritage conservation. Although the history of Carleton University is well studied in many aspects, the campus and its buildings and landscape have not been officially evaluated for their heritage significance. This draft text is based on very preliminary research on the site, some available existing documentation, and limited research on the amphitheatre as a modern landscape typology. More detailed study and analysis would be recommended over the longer term.

The potential heritage significance of the amphitheatre can be summarized in terms of campus history, landscape design and ecological features, that is: as increasingly rare evidence of the earliest campus planning ideals; a lasting but less known work by a prominent Canadian landscape architect; and a healthy arrangement of soft landscaping framing the Rideau River that provides important relief to the increasing density of the campus.

Description
Carleton University's amphitheatre is an outdoor green space with permanent stepped seating around a lawn covered stage area. It is situated between Patterson and Southam Halls in the core area of the campus located around the "Quad." Its main access is from the North end, by a stairway from the pathway that runs along the south side of the Library towards the main Quad. The central axis of the stairs and benches that frame the stage on two opposite sides is shifted off the campus grid, appearing to guide the view from higher up down towards the central space and to the Rideau River beyond.

The central stage space of the Amphitheatre starts out just above the lower level that wraps around the base of Patterson alongside the quad. The appearance of a depressed outdoor space was created by a grass-covered hill on the South side, towards the River, and a contrasting hard-edged cascade of planters on the North side. Mature evergreen trees and bushes frame this space. The seating consists of wood decking resting on continuous poured in place concrete walls that retain the soil. Concrete walls also form the containers for the sidewalls and planters that frame the access from the North via a stair that is broken by a wide landing.
Construction History
The earliest campus plans (1960), showed only a few buildings around a courtyard facing towards the Rideau Canal; there were no specific plans for this area which would have then still connected directly with the Rideau River. Site conditions of the early campus can be seen in an aerial photograph taken in 1961 during construction of Southam Hall and an addition to Paterson Hall. The amphitheatre first appears on a 1968 Murray and Murray plan.

The amphitheatre was built ca. 1968, according to plans by D.W. Graham and Associates Ltd Landscape Architects. A preliminary comparison with the site today, suggest that these plans generally reflect the current conditions, although some of the retaining walls to the west of the stair have been altered and replaced by concrete blocks. The DWG plans indicate specific species of trees (e.g. Scotch Pine) and bushes (e.g. Juniper), which are largely in place, to be verified by an arborist. Two larger deciduous trees were removed and replaced since 2014.

Built in the initial period of increased campus development, the DWG plans for the amphitheatre also show proposed vegetation for the “Quad.” The quad is itself is no longer as intact, although some of its mature trees may relate to that period of planting. Rectangular planter/benches along the library path are also likely from this earlier period.
The amphitheatre landscape is thus a noteworthy example of the earlier approach to the campus design that has been much altered in other parts of the campus (Bouse).

Don W. Graham, Landscape Architect
The designer of the amphitheatre, Don W. Graham (1930-...), is considered “a key member of the pioneering generation of Canadian-born landscape architects who brought modern design to Canada in the post war years” (Williams). After studying agriculture at McGill University, the Montreal born designer worked from 1953 with the Federal District Commission with Ed Wood, another important pioneer, before pursuing graduate studies in landscape architecture at Harvard University, to return in 1958 to the FDC (later NCC), and then opening his own firm in 1964. While with the NCC Graham designed the prestigious Garden of the Provinces built opposite the National Library and Archives on Wellington Street (Zvonar). As an independent designer he was responsible for important commissions like the landscape of Expo 67 as well as more popular local sites like the Andrew Haydon Park. The Expo 67 work is considered a defining period of development in Canadian landscape history and Graham’s work was noted for his emphasis on natural elements and social exchange (Valois).

Modern amphitheatres
Outdoor amphitheatres have a long history in architecture, but their more recent use in public parks and spaces in North America has been connected with a reaction against the commercial indoor “atmospheric theatres” popular in early 20th century cities. As such, they were usually designed with simple organic materials that maximized the relationship to natural features, often using a dramatic landscape as a backdrop. Often located in parks or associated with other cultural functions such as theatres and libraries, in the context of a campus design, they were usually intended to facilitate outdoor learning. The one at Carleton
was located directly adjacent to the Southam Hall theatre.

The approach to design at Carleton in the 1960s put emphasis on collaboration, which may be the reason this work was not listed in a summary of Graham’s projects created as part of a national study of landscape architects. However modern landscape architecture is also less well understood in general, with projects such as this one that bridges modern materials with more traditional forms only beginning to be studied and appreciated.

The following photos were taken by Susan Ross in February 2017:

View from the 8th floor of Loeb Building Tower C towards Patterson Hall

Views towards the North side from the pathway and the base of Patterson Hall
The hillside behind the South side and detail of curved wood and concrete benches

View from the 5th floor of MacOdrum Library – looking towards the South and the River
Grading and planting site plans by D.W.Graham Landscape architect Ltd, Ottawa, 1968:
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