

# **The Kenny/Dennis Building: A Critical Site and Major Opportunity**



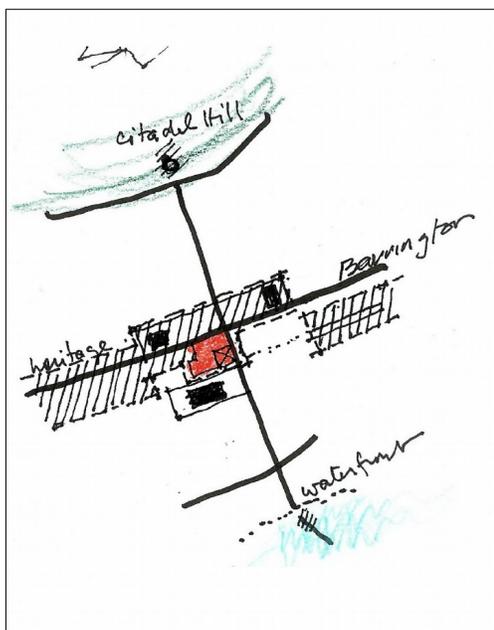
Maritime Institute for Civil Society  
[www.mircs.ca](http://www.mircs.ca)

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## Introduction

In February, 2018, the *Maritime Institute for Civil Society* initiated a third-party application for municipal registration of the Kenny/Dennis building as a heritage building. The initial building was constructed in 1846-47 by brothers Edward and Thomas Kenny, among the most prominent leaders of the Irish community in Halifax during the middle and latter half of the nineteenth century. The building is situated strategically, on one side opposite Province House where Joe Howe helped win responsible government in 1848, and on the other, opposite City Hall, the Grand Parade and St. Paul's where the civic institutions of the capital city took root. Joe Howe also fought successfully for freedom of the press in the 1830s, paving the way for the rise of independent journalism. It was fitting that the Kenny building was acquired by William Dennis at the end of the nineteenth century as headquarters for the province's leading newspaper. Given this history, the application for municipal heritage registration of the building was unanimously approved by City Council in November, 2018.

This registration will grant some protection to the exterior of the building and will require complementary architectural styles on any new building on adjacent vacant land. The overall scale and height of any new building is also limited by overlapping viewplanes from the Citadel, which ensures that Province House is supported and enhanced, rather than dominated by a neighbouring structure. An application for provincial heritage registration has also been filed, and has just recently been heard. In short, the protection of the heritage values of the property has improved with the municipal registration.



However, the heritage registration of the Kenny/Dennis building raises larger planning and land-use issues about the role of the building and adjacent vacant land in the composition of the city centre. These issues go well beyond the architectural heritage of the building and raise more fundamental issues about (a) the urban design of the district, (b) its essentially political character, and (c) the connecting links which support it. This paper is concerned, therefore, with what is being referred to as the “Capital City District”.

The Capital City District is, naturally, the heart of the government apparatus, the centre of bureaucratic functions and rule-making, but it is more than that. It is, more importantly, the site where civil society expresses its needs, articulates its values and vision, and demands its rights. It is centrally a political space, where ideas jostle against one another and compromises are eked out. The administration of government, in short, is a ‘downstream’ function – distinct, derivative, and secondary. It is the higher political purpose of civil society – “a making common of” – which is fundamental to the Capital City District and constitutes the imperative for development in that precinct.

## **Urban Design Issues**

The site of particular concern here is the group of properties which has been up for development by the Province, now under a lease to Dixel Developments: the Kenny/Dennis building itself at the corner of George and Granville; the Acadian Recorder building, farther south on Granville Street; and all of that vacant land between and behind them, extending from Granville to Barrington Street – something we will refer to as the “Kenny/Dennis Site”. It is a site of transformative potential.

Three urban design issues need to be confronted with this site: the political preeminence of the Capital City District; the subordinate role of the Waterfront; and the attraction and draw of the Barrington Heritage District.

(a) The Political Preeminence of the Capital City District

Much of the planning work for this area has focussed on the significance of the Parade Grounds, linking St. Paul's Church with City Hall, and the perpendicular axis from the Citadel's Clock Tower straight down Carmichael and George streets to the waterfront (see, for instance, CBCL Limited, 2006). This conceptualization correctly pushes civil functions to the front, but fails to adequately incorporate Province House and the precinct surrounding it. Improving connecting linkages fails to capture the political preeminence of the Capital City District.

The city as a *body politic* gains its true stature from its function as the "capital city", in which its own glory is derived from the kind of support and uplifting which it provides to Province House as the seat of democracy for the people of Nova Scotia. The city's greatness is not in the services it provides, or the engineering it accomplishes, but is in the uplifting of civil discourse as the heart and soul of politics. The central planning problem is re-establishing the political preeminence of the Capital City District.

(b) The Subordinate Role of the Waterfront

The *Waterfront Development Corporation*, now re-constituted as *Develop Nova Scotia*, has invested large sums of provincial tax money in redeveloping the Halifax waterfront. It has done so, however, not by surcharging and propelling producer services and industrial infrastructure, but through a conversion of a working waterfront to a consumer *dépôt*, serving visitors, tourists, and the privileged with picturesque views of the harbour and its boat traffic.

Most recently, a plan has been developed to recruit the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia to a new waterfront location, inevitably reducing art to a consumer value and disabling its central meaning-making function. However interesting and fun, even important, both producer and consumer functions of the waterfront sometimes are, they are subordinate to the political functions centred on Province House.

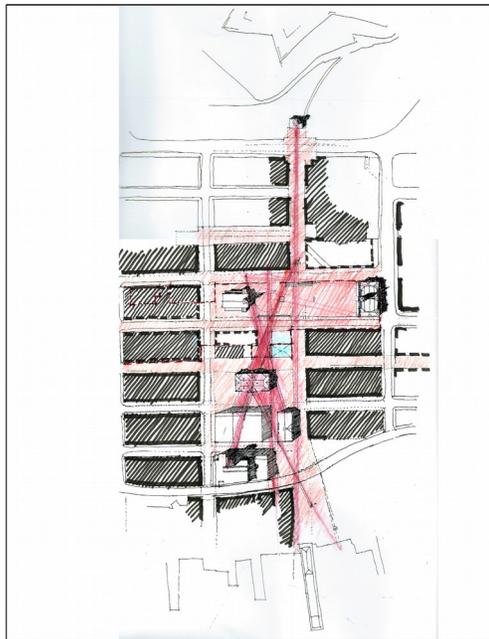
(c) The Attraction and Draw of the Barrington Heritage District

The institution of the Barrington Heritage District is a means of protecting and celebrating the heritage architecture and design values of the city's downtown quarter. While the maintenance of these values creates an interesting and enticing environment, the quarter remains unfulfilled as a destination and needs to be further activated with uses, particularly at its central hub. Highlighting the corridor along Carmichael and George streets, and building a coherent Capital City District through the axes at Barrington and George can focus and activate the whole area.

The new central library has anchored and strengthened Spring Garden Road in a way that none of the commercial developments on the street could do. It was the result of thinking more deeply about the functions of the city. The "Kenny/Dennis Site", with its opening to both Province House and City Hall, provides an opportunity for just such a positive development in the Barrington area, a magnet and attraction for the district.

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In short, the resolution of these urban design issues must satisfy three goals: (a) to re-establish the political preeminence of the Capital City District and the priority of political life; (b) to connect and subordinate the Waterfront, re-establishing the Capital City District as the ideological centre and beating heart of the province, and (c) to re-focus Barrington Street with a central destination and activity generator. The "Kenny/Dennis Site"



development and related improvements, have the transformative potential to drive these goals forward.

## **Re-Establishing the Priority of Political Life**

The first effort must be to re-establish the political preeminence of the Capital City District and the priority of political life. It requires uses which are public and quasi-public.

### (a) Activities of the First Order

The debates of the Legislative Assembly and City Council are primary forms of political discourse, and must, as a first priority, be protected. While there is considerable machinery which supports the vitality and integrity of this order – such things as legislative committees, rules of debate and decision, independent auditors, and the like – this machinery may be, and is, from time-to-time variously improved or weakened. While the courts routinely “supervise” the juridical quality of legislation and will in rarer circumstances adjudicate the adequacy of political mechanisms, it remains that the improvement or weakening of the machinery of politics is largely the responsibility of the political actors themselves. This is the *first order* of responsible government.

As a result, any external activity to improve the political character of the Capital City District must aim at strengthening other orders of political society.

### (b) Activities of the Second Order

Political discourse and engagement can be improved by strengthening the social layer concerned with reporting, commentary, and response to the activities of the first order. Three *kinds* of initiatives can advance this goal: improving education about political history and civics, strengthening the capability for reporting and commentary, and enhancing the capacity for policy analysis.

The education of citizens about the political history and civics of responsible government can be advanced by establishing an ‘Historical Centre’, devoted to improving political literacy. Developed perhaps through a considerably expanded role for the Provincial Library, such a Centre would engage the public in a new space, and educate residents and visitors about our historical accomplishments, the mechanisms of government, and the role of civil society. This kind of institute would need to engage with the colonial history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the relation with indigenous culture and Mi’kmaw society. Along with the new Mi’kmaw Native Friendship Centre which is planned, it would contribute to the re-imagining of relations between our peoples and could make an important contribution to further reconciliation.

The development of a ‘Media Laboratory’, perhaps in partnership with organizations like Kings Journalism, the Herald, and CBC, where reporters could work together to develop news and opinion pieces, engaging with apprentice-student journalists, would put upward pressure on the quality of Nova Scotia media in its reporting and commentary, increase experiments with the use of digital services, and might develop new practices which would reduce the risks of ‘fake news’ and the manipulation of media instruments.

The capacity for policy analysis can be enhanced by supporting the development and public role of a ‘Policy Institute’. The presence of such an institute in the “Kenny/Dennis Site” space, with a wide mission and an endowment for Graduate and PhD fellowships, would inject new policy analysis and commentary directly into the Capital City District. It might also look at new ways of bridging the rural-urban divide in the province, could help create new mechanisms for participation and the renewal of civil society, and might share our own knowledge and achievements with those in other countries.

These kinds of initiatives to strengthen the social layer concerned with reporting, commentary, and response offer great potential for the revitalization of political life. This social layer is the *second order* of responsible government.

### (c) Activities of the Third Order

The character and quality of political discourse is itself dependent, though, on the vitality and strength of the meaning-making institutions of society, institutions which are not themselves directly

political. Politics draws its meaning from outside of itself. As Michael Oakeshott has told us: “Political activity may have given us the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, but it did not not give us the contents of these documents, which came from a stratum of social thought far too deep to be influenced by the actions of politicians” (Oakeshott, 1993: 93).

It is just for this reason that there has been so much attention to the role of civil society since the fall of communism. The associations of civil society in the arts, in education, and in religion comprise the bedrock on which politics organizes its meaning. The higher-end of work in arts, education, and religion, causes us to reflect on the meaning of our lives, informs us of the suffering and evils of the world we live in, and suggests how we can make a difference in the lives of others. It is from these wells of meaning our values are formed and reformed, we engage in public service, and struggle to conduct lives with our neighbours. It is in this manner that politics is given its content and direction.

The rebuilding of meaning-making institutions is undoubtedly the most difficult task of all. The most obvious opportunity, at this moment, requires rethinking the relocation of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The relocation of this critical institution to the Kenny/Dennis site would offer a new symbiosis between politics and art in the Capital City District.

## **The Connecting Linkages of the Capital City District**

The “Kenny/Dennis Site” connects the institution of responsible government in Nova Scotia to the rising economic strength of early business contributions, Joe Howe’s freedom of the press, and the important institutions of the capital city itself. The majestic historical buildings which remain around Province House Square provide palpable evidence of that economic capability, while the Dennis and Acadian Recorder buildings indicate where the press met its indispensable obligations. It is this context which surrounds and holds up Province House itself, the seat of democratic authority in Nova Scotia, and testifies to the “intellectual awakening” which occurred in the early nineteenth century (Harvey, 1933/34; Murphy, 2015).

The topography of the “Kenny/Dennis Site” itself, therefore, should be seen as central to the identity, freedoms, and historical

understanding of all citizens in the province, and the role our ancestors played in transmitting these advances through the Commonwealth to the world. Indeed, this understanding of the world-historical achievement of Nova Scotia has already been recognized at Sir Sanford Fleming Park and the Dingle Tower (Cuthbertson, 2009; Maitland, 2010).

The suggestions in this section are aimed at strengthening the physical character of the Capital City District with new architectural elements, better circulation, and pedestrian amenities – in short, better connecting linkages. We have identified eight mechanisms for the Kenny/Dennis site which would strengthen the salience of the Capital City District, support political assembly and discourse, and provide connecting linkages to draw people up from the Waterfront and down from the Citadel. This would centre the District around Province House and City Hall, connecting the east-west and north-south axes of the city centre:



- ◆ create significant pedestrian nodes along the George-Carmichael corridor, one at Barrington Street which links Province House with City Hall, one at Upper Water Street-Bedford Row which links Province House with the Waterfront, and one at Brunswick and Carmichael which links the Citadel with the corridor leading down to the Capital City District;
- ◆ advance the entire pedestrian corridor from the Citadel's clock tower to the Waterfront – with narrowed streets and widened sidewalks, pedestrian amenities, and interpretative signage – something already beautifully highlighted by the Joint Public Lands Plan (CBCL Limited, 2006);

- ◆ open the north end of Province House with pedestrian amenities and interpretative signage by relocating all legislature parking to an underground facility on the “Kenny/Dennis Site”, and by improving access to the pedestrian space from George Street;
- ◆ further improve the park-like qualities of the Parade Ground with seating and interpretative materials, giving it over further to rich public use;
- ◆ build the connection of the Province to its Capital City through the creation of an open-air passage from the Granville stairs of Province House to the Grand Parade;
- ◆ create a small plaza at the Granville end of the passage where people can congregate and assemble, a piazza surrounded by cafés and bars where people can exchange ideas, meet with political representatives, or organize a political rally;
- ◆ install a linear plaza or arcade along the sidewalk of the new building on Barrington street, highlighting the significance of the space; and
- ◆ re-develop the vacant lands on the “Kenny/Dennis Site” with proportions, massing, and an architectural style which will complement Province House and add substance to the district.

Together, mechanisms of this kind can convey a new identity for the Capital City District, strengthen the understanding of this domain as central political space, and support its political use and function.

## **The Renewal Process**

Initiatives along these lines would inject great energy into the Capital City District. We believe these initiatives would satisfy the large planning goals we identified: (a) to re-establish the political preeminence of the Capital City District and the priority of political life; (b) to connect and subordinate the Waterfront, re-establishing the Capital City District as the ideological centre and beating heart of the province, and (c) to re-focus Barrington Street with a central destination and activity generator. In short, this kind of approach would light a fire under the political functions that are central to this

space, and justify our contention that the “Kenny/Dennis Site” development and its related improvements, have transformative potential.

The question, then, is how this might be brought about. This kind of development is wholly beyond the capability of any private developer to accomplish, although the construction and leasing itself could be privately run. The planning and organization of such a venture, though, would require a quasi-public body to provide leadership. The success of the Central Library had much to do with the distance of the lead organization from government: close enough to work easily, far enough away to innovate. The N.S. Department of Transportation & Infrastructure is not now, and was never, therefore, the appropriate body to lead the re-development process. The issues at stake do not constitute an engineering problem. What is required is a third party partnership which supports sophisticated institutional design, consultation, and funding activity, a catalytic process which would ignite the whole site.

Moreover, we believe significant legacy benefactions and non-profit and corporate donations could be attracted to help finance these initiatives. The need is for a quasi-public agency with the talent, drive, and capability to put together funding arrangements across multiple sectors. It will require an entrepreneurial step by the provincial and municipal governments to provide the terms of reference and fund the design process. In every Nova Scotia community, furthermore, there is a Kenny/Dennis building, or a “Kenny/Dennis Site”. We believe this opportunity at the centre of provincial political life is one which can create a model for political engagement and revitalization throughout the province.

## **Conclusion**

This is a bold and original vision for the Kenny/Dennis building and the larger “Kenny/Dennis Site” development, but it is one which would re-awaken the central political function of Province House and City Hall, and the complementary quasi-public and civil society activity which is needed in the Capital City District. This political function is not essentially an administrative function. Rather it lies in the discourse and meaning-making functions where a consensus is established regarding the values and priorities which guide common action: politics as “a making common of”.

As discourse in recent years has become centred in digital space, the political functions of Province House and City Hall have been eroded, and the meaning-making institutions of the capital city have been diminished. We believe there is an imperative to re-establish politics at the centre of public life.

We suggest that the steps we have laid out here would renew political engagement and strengthen political discourse. It is the kind of contemporary political paradigm which Joe Howe might have recognized.

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