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***Preserving the Past  
for Canada's Future***

# Preserving the Past for Canada's Future

By: Kate Richardson

**F**ine old buildings that seem to hold the secrets of human history in their walls are part of the fabric of culture in Europe or Asia. In North America, old buildings that reflect a more youthful but nonetheless proud heritage are often lost to the march of progress. Colonial Building Restoration is a unique business that takes special care to preserve history in the modern world. From the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, to the Brockville Courthouse, and the award-winning restoration of Toronto's 51 Division Police Station, Colonial Building Restoration's team of professionally-trained experts pour pride and excellence into their work. Andrew Lough, CEO of Colonial Building Restoration, founded the company after watching in dismay as historic buildings were destroyed to make way for new developments. The company motto, "Preserving the past for Canada's future," is clear testament to his vision for the company.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Andrew had a choice of apprenticing as a bricklayer or stonemason in 1967. He chose a stone restoration company and worked there before moving to Canada. He continued developing his skill until he was ready to open his own company in 1984. Colonial Building Restoration has grown steadily and now has locations in Toronto and Ottawa, with 50 employees and up to 25 sub-contractors. Its projects have ranged in locations from Ottawa, to Barrie, to Windsor.

In the last 22 years, the workforce of Colonial Building Restoration has accumulated unmatched experience in the preservation industry. That expertise led the company to be chosen to restore Canada's



Library of Parliament, the only building to survive the fire of 1916 that destroyed most of the structures on Parliament Hill. The restoration process took two and a half years, 20,000 metres of masonry joints (enough to span 20 kilometres), approximately 70 tons of steel in the scaffolding alone, and 5,817 square metres of architecture fabric equal to three hockey rinks in size. The Library was the third project that Colonial Building Restoration has restored on Parliament Hill, after the Peace Tower and the Centre Block. The company's work on Parliament Hill is a source of pride for Andrew. "We were chosen to work on the Library of Parliament because of our reputation for providing specialized, highly qualified and experienced stonemasons and restoration mechanics. They are loyal to the company and are very good at their trade in all levels of restoration."

The company is also just finishing the MacDonald Block and Ferguson Block in the Queen's Park Complex in Toronto. They have now started the Whitney Block, which houses the office of Premier McGuinty. Andrew markets the company's work through its website, [www.colonial.on.ca](http://www.colonial.on.ca), and in trade publications, but most of his work comes through referrals, repeat clients and word of mouth. The company's reputation continues to soar after receiving the "Best of the Best Award" from the Toronto Construction Association for the Toronto Police Service 51 Division.

The restoration of a historical building goes far beyond repairing the stone or



brick. The construction materials of older buildings differ from today's materials and need to be handled with special care. The Harris Treatment Plant in east Toronto, for example, was a unique project. The nationally protected heritage facility included massive steel window frames. Colonial experts removed the huge windows, sandblasted the frame, repaired the damaged parts of the steel, primed and painted, and finally installed a high security glazing. This ability to adapt and work with many different types of materials has set Colonial Building Restoration apart from the competition.

Each project starts with discussions with an architect. "Working hand in hand with an architect is essential," Andrew explains. "It is not easy to predict what situations

will come up when dealing with aging structures. Everything from carcinogenic pigeon droppings, to lead in the paint and mortar is considered at the planning stage. A simple project can easily grow into a complicated operation with the need for negative air pressure, breathing apparatus for the mechanics, or dustless grinders." After talking with the architect, Andrew's team will identify the materials the building is composed of and determine what specialized tasks are required, from rehabilitation of damaged stone, brick or joints, to preservation of existing components or upgrading the building to current building codes. Colonial Building Restoration has the experience, skills and means to overcome the unforeseen issues that can plague a project.

Over the years, the processes used to restore a building have changed dramatically. When he first started, Andrew explains, the normal procedure was to sandblast a building with as much course sand and pressure as possible. When the process proved to be destroying the brick or stone, milder techniques emerged. Colonial has been at the forefront of adopting techniques such as a non-invasive abrasive cleaning process. Since most of the advances in stone preservation are made in countries where the buildings are much older, Andrew keeps close tabs with the preservation society through similar companies from France, England and Germany, looking for innovative



techniques to bring to North America.

Colonial, for example, was the first to use a technique called micro-abrasive cleaning, which removes a build-up of dirt and soot from fine statues and carvings by firing aluminum oxide through a tool the size of a pen. Colonial was also the first company in Canada to use a mortar mill for restoration. Purchased in Europe, the mill can produce cement with the same qualities as 100 years ago. "Today, the standard mix is three to one sand and cement on non-historical buildings," Andrew explains. "We use the original mix of 1-1-6. This ensures that the mortar joint is weaker than its surrounding brick and stone. Therefore, neither the stone nor the brick will be damaged."

Dedication to the trade has made Colonial the front-runner for bids on many of the most respected structures in Canada. This same dedication has made Colonial take on the role of training new apprentices and retraining stonemasons and restoration mechanics in the new innovative practices. The future success of the industry depends on more people becoming involved in the restoration trades. "A problem that afflicts many of our trades in Canada is that not enough young

people are adopting or taking up the trade," Andrew says. "It's a good, honest trade and if young people work hard and think smart they can own their own business. We are working directly with the union to rectify this issue. We have purchased a 7,000 square foot building, specifically to conduct restoration training sessions." Andrew is Chairman of the Local 598 Training School. He is also President of the Steeplejacks and Masonry Restoration Contractors Association.

Andrew is clear that in Canada, progress in restoration and preservation of historical buildings still lags 10 to 15 years behind where it should be. Rather than being proactive and repairing a building before it deteriorates, decision-makers tend to wait until the repair work becomes much more difficult and costly. He is encouraged, however, by the appointment of a new Heritage Minister and the increasing contributions from all levels of government that put a higher focus on the restoration and preservation of historical buildings across Canada.

With his dedication to the continuous development of skills and techniques and his farsightedness in helping to train new trades people, Andrew has worked hard to

preserve this country's heritage buildings. He generously credits his team of trades people as well as his field management and office personnel with helping him create a company that is ranked among the top of its class. The help of qualified people is critical, according to Andrew. Andrew's undisguised passion for his work is probably the single most important factor in winning people over to his dream of preserving the past for Canada's future. "I am inspired every day as I drive around, seeing the work that our company has accomplished," Andrew says. "We are restoring pieces of history for the future generation. It is still fascinating to me and I can only hope that this work will continue to save our heritage buildings."

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