

Air and Space Museum prepares for final 'Last Post'

By ANNA MEHLER PAPERNY, Globe and Mail

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Permission given to stage annual observance for last time in 82-year-old building in Downsview Park

The Canadian Air & Space Museum is preparing for its last "Last Post" this Remembrance Day. Friday's ceremony comes weeks after its lease termination, and less than five months before it has to pack up its old aircraft and ship out.

The reasoning by its landlord, Crown corporation Parc Downsview Park, is pragmatic: The volunteer-run museum was about \$100,000 behind on its rent; the 82-year-old building needs repairs. The park found someone to pay for that work in exchange for operating a private ice rink.

The ensuing *melée* is quintessentially Canadian: It's a skirmish pitting the need for ice time against valuable artifacts, involving a building designated historically valuable by Ottawa almost 20 years ago, then unlisted thanks to a procedural loophole.

Whatever the final fate of the Air and Space Museum, heritage advocates hope this debate shines a light on the way Canada protects its dwindling stock of the old and the valuable. Or, fails to do so.

According to the Heritage Canada Foundation, the federal government listed the building as historically valuable in 1992. But the building lost its heritage designation almost by accident: When it was transferred to Canada Lands Co. in 1996 - and to Parc Downsview Park a decade later - it was no longer in Ottawa's inventory and therefore no longer listed as a heritage site.

It wouldn't matter either way, though: Canada doesn't have legislation backing up its federal heritage designation. Even with a formal listing, there would be no restrictions on development or construction, says Heritage Canada Foundation spokeswoman Carolyn Quinn. "This is a serious flaw with the policy," she said. "It really doesn't have any teeth to protect these inventories."

David Soknacki, Parc Downsview chair, is quick to note they're "repurposing" the building, not razing it. They'll preserve two facades and a window treatment, he said - the parts they feel are most historically significant.

"The reason we acted is because we recognized that building is in significant need of repair, and neither us nor all of the tenants could provide the funds."

As well, he said, the museum is welcome to propose a return to its current home after construction. Problem is, said museum chair Ian McDougall, "we can't back anything with cash."

The museum is up in arms about its pending eviction. But those arms are few and of questionable efficacy. They have a petition. They're talking to any media outlet who'll listen. They're selling "Mayday" memberships for \$20 apiece.

"We want the federal government to stop this. That's what we want." But chances of federal intervention appear slim. Heritage Minister James Moore wouldn't comment Thursday. Press secretary Sébastien Gariépy referred questions to Parks Canada. Parks Canada, which is responsible for federal heritage designation, did not respond to a query.

Mr. Soknacki said the park's board authorized a deal with Chesswood Arenas over the summer. As far as he's concerned, it's binding, and the operator will get access in April.

Mr. McDougall knows all too well the vitriol ice-time tussles cause in Toronto. He'd just rather not be at the centre of it. "The need for rinks, if you're a parent, that's real," he said. "But you don't need to pit a hockey rink against a museum."