

CENTRAL CHAMBERS

AN ICONIC COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT



The history of the Central Chambers building is unlike many of those that surround it.

The Parliament Buildings were designed and constructed to house the nation's governance; Union Station and the Château Laurier were built to bring travellers to, and accommodate them in, the city. Central Chambers, meanwhile, was the product of entirely different notions: commerce, style and innovation.

The building was designed by Ottawa-based architect John James Browne and commissioned by Edward Seybold and James Gibson, partners in the dry-goods firm of Seybold and Gibson. Together, the men envisioned a building that would combine ground-floor retail space with office space above, all wrapped in a design bold enough to signal the growing capital's grand ambitions.

At the time of the construction of the Central Chambers, Ottawa's downtown core was on the cusp of a notable transition phase.

The City Beautiful movement was beginning to take root across North American cities in the early 1890s – with strong social implications. Supporters argued that augmenting a city with beautiful surroundings and first-class planning would enhance the population's moral and civic virtue and, in turn, raise the quality of life for all. Critics suggested it was more than thinly veiled social reform.

Whatever its intent, the outcome of the movement led in part to the creation of Confederation Square. Construction of the plaza, which was led in phases between 1899 and 1939, saw the expropriation of blocks of private properties – warehouses, shops and hotels – as well as several key public buildings, including Ottawa's second city hall and the Central Post Office. In time, all were demolished to create an open vista that would ultimately become one of Ottawa's most iconic downtown open spaces.

The buildings that today frame Confederation Square include the Langevin Block, the East Block of the Parliament Buildings, the Château Laurier, Union Station (now the Government Conference Centre), the National Arts Centre – and the Central Chambers.

Form and function – ambition and innovation

Browne, Seybold and Gibson were nothing short of ambition when it came to building the Central Chambers. Records from Parks Canada suggest that, at the time, the building was described as “one of the biggest [commercial structures] that has ever been undertaken” and “one of the handsomest in the city”.



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The building was exactly those things – and more. Its six storeys married ground-floor commercial space with office premises above. The lawyers, architects, railwaymen and lumber barons who occupied these spaces enjoyed no end of privileges at the Central Chambers. Their office spaces were flooded with daylight via dozens of bay windows, which themselves opened on an innovative new central-pivot mechanism. Plus, the building was the first in the city to offer an electric elevator that whisked them up the six floors with comfort and ease.

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Meanwhile, the upscale commercial spaces were easily accessible to passing pedestrians, and the massive, round-arched ground floor windows maximized commercial display space. Outside, its red brick and terra cotta panels, accented with white trim and metal, helped make the building a striking example of the Queen Anne Revival Style of architecture – a characteristic that ultimately led to the building's being designated a national historic site in 1990.

NCC acquisition and conversion Ownership of the Central Chambers flipped between a number of entities over years, and fell into the hands of the National Capital Commission (NCC) in 1964.

Much as they were when the building was built in the late 19th century, urban planners at the time were consumed by another movement for change. Under the guidance of the Gréber Plan, the federal government sought to modernize the capital by clearing away old Victorian streetscapes.

The NCC acquired the Central Chambers building – alongside the neighbouring Bell Block and the Scottish Ontario Chambers – not with the intent of preserving the structures. Its vision was to flatten the entire western edge of Confederation Square to add more modern office spaces and create new traffic patterns around the National War Memorial.



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Those plans never bore fruit. In part due to resistance from the local heritage community, the Central Chambers and its neighbours were spared the wrecking ball. Central Chambers in particular sat empty for the entirety of the 1970s and 1980s before an entirely new vision for restoration was rolled out.

In 1992, the NCC worked with developers under a long-term build-lease deal that saw the private-sector firms finance and manage the reconstruction of the entire three-building block. The previously separated buildings were united into a single complex that also included a multi-storey glass atrium and lobby. The complex was supplemented with the addition of a 16-storey office tower behind the buildings and a three-level underground parking garage.

Its role in the deal saw the NCC sign a 25-year lease to occupy the finished complex as its headquarters. It will resume ownership of the entire restored block in 2056.

In many ways, the Central Chambers building has come full circle in its 100-plus year history. Its ground floor again houses premium ground-floor retail spaces. Its upper storeys and modern tower addition have also been returned to their original purpose, accommodating the offices of NCC executive and administrative spaces leased by the Senate of Canada. It is again one of the most photographed and – arguably – handsomest buildings in the city.

In these senses, it is again a fitting tribute to the merchants, railwaymen and architects who first filled its elevator-equipped floors more than a century ago.



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