

CONFEDERATION HEIGHTS

A CAMPUS IN EVOLUTION



Situated roughly five kilometres south of Parliament Hill, the collection of buildings at Confederation Heights is another distinctly Ottawa answer to a practical problem: what to do when a growing federal bureaucracy simply cannot fit downtown anymore.

At the time of its proposal, the suburban campus was conceived as a secondary employment node for the federal government. Over the years, it would host a broad mix of federal functions, from public works administration to national broadcasting to signals intelligence. Its three signature buildings, the Sir Charles Tupper Building, the Edward Drake Building, and the Sir Leonard Tilley Building, stand today as examples of how the public service grew and evolved during the post-war era, and how current thinking may lead to even-greater change.

Plans laid for an office campus outside the downtown core

Settlements on the Confederation Heights site date back well into the early 19th century. Among its more prominent early-day occupants was lumberman Braddish Billings – after whom the bridge and the neighbourhood would be named. At the time, the land was mostly wild, and part of the traditional Algonquin territory.

By the 20th century, the land had become a working landscape of woods, farmland, a stone quarry, and a brick yard owned by the Merkley family. Known then as Rideau Heights, two important developments shaped the site and character of the site as we know it today.

The first was the 1915 Report of the Federal Plan Commission on a General Plan for the Cities of Ottawa and Hull, or the Holt Plan. The plan set out a blueprint for transforming the capital region into a majestic “Washington of the North”. (It even proposed the creation of Ottawa’s first underground subway line.) And although it was never fully implemented, in part due to the financial and social upheaval caused by the First World War, the Holt Plan did carve out and reserve several large portions of land along the Rideau River for parkland use. In so doing, it gave rise to Vincent Massey Park, Hog’s Back Park, and Mooney’s Bay Park.

More significantly, the area was identified by Jacques Gréber in his influential 1950 Plan for the National Capital as an ideal location for a decentralized federal employment centre. In a similar fashion to the planning rationale behind Tunney’s Pasture, the plan imagined a distinct campus of office buildings outside the crowded downtown core, and surrounded by generous parking lots and landscaped grounds.



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By this time, the federal government had already signalled its intent. It began purchasing farmland on the site in 1949 through acquisitions from the Heron and Billings families. It completed the assembly in 1954 with the expropriation of the Merkley brickyard property.



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BOMA
Ottawa

A diverse collection of buildings serving equally diverse functions

The Sir Charles Tupper Building was among the first anchors of the new campus, and was built between 1955 and 1960 to serve as the headquarters of the Department of Public Works. The building was designed by the firm of Hazelgrove and Lithwick in the International Style of architecture, with five thin, interlocking rectangular office blocks of between four and five storeys each, and arranged to maximize natural daylight inside.

The next of the major buildings added to the site was the Sir Leonard Tilley Building. Completed in June 1961, it was purpose-built to house the Communications Security Establishment, Canada's signals intelligence agency.

Two further anchors followed: Sir Alexander Campbell Building, which opened in September 1961 and served as the headquarters of the Post Office Department, and a single-storey cafeteria building that was designed as a break space and cafeteria for campus workers. Connecting these buildings was a courtyard plaza with a large water fountain, reflecting pond and landscaped greenery – all created to offer employees an oasis away from their working days. A Centennial Sundial was introduced to the site in 1967 as a way of further adding to the aesthetic of the site. Of these, only the cafeteria building remains today.

Built between 1961 and 1964, the crowning architectural jewel of Confederation Heights was the CBC Building at 1500 Bronson Avenue. The origins of the building date back to the middle 1950s. Davidson Dunton, then chair of the CBC's Board of Governors, launched an initiative to consolidate the broadcaster's Ottawa operations from across seven separate buildings throughout the city. The task of designing the building fell to David Gordon McKinstry, the CBC's own chief architect and, critically, a recognized acoustics expert.

The finished structure took the form of a flared, Y-shaped footprint with three wings. The exteriors of each were clad with dynamic glass curtain walls, and shaped as sweeping parabolic curves. Ever a man for details, McKinstry engineered the building with a deliberately quiet ventilation system that was ideally suited to broadcasting work.

Together, these four principal buildings lent a distinctly modern and federal presence to a corner of the city that, only a decade earlier, had been distinctly rural.

As with all things Ottawa, not all were entirely supportive of the wave of development. In 1959 – even before any of the first buildings on the campus were completed – the fire chief of then Gloucester Township issued a formal warning. He judged that the additional commuter load of the campus would bring an estimated 3,500 additional vehicles to Riverside Drive each day. This, he warned, would seriously impede local firefighting response times.

The campus evolves – and may evolve again

The campus's institutional occupants have changed notably over the decades since early occupancy. The CBC, for example, vacated the property at 1500 Bronson Avenue after budget cutbacks in the 1990s forced the broadcaster to move its head-office staff elsewhere. Replacing the CBC was the Communications Security Establishment, and with the change came a new name: the Edward Drake Building.



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The Tilley Building likewise served as CSE's headquarters for years, until the agency fully relocated to a purpose-built facility on Ogilvie Road in 2016.

The Tupper Building, meanwhile, continued to serve federal functions. It briefly housed Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency, for example. But even it outgrew its useful lifespan as a home for the civil service. In 2023, after the Department of Public Works had relocated its own headquarters across the river to Gatineau, the federal government signalled its plans to dispose of the building altogether. This decision was taken as part of a broader reassessment of underused federal real estate across the capital.

That reassessment culminated in June 2026, when the board of directors of the National Capital Commission approved a master plan to transform the entire Confederation Heights campus into a high-density, mixed-use, transit-oriented community with as many as 16,000 residential units on site. While the plan called for the disposal of seven surplus buildings on the site, it also outlined strategies to redevelop three of the site's heritage properties: the Edward Drake Building, the Sir Charles Tupper Building, and the Canada Revenue Agency Headquarters/Taxation Data Centre building on Heron Road. (The Sir Leonard Tilley Building is not included in the disposal plan.)

Confederation Heights today stands on the cusp of its most significant transformation since the Gréber Plan first brought it into being. Its three signature buildings – one an exercise in daylight-seeking modernism, one a sculptural celebration of broadcasting's postwar confidence, and one a quiet outpost of Cold War-era intelligence work – stand as a physical record of why this site became a federal address in the first place, as clear examples of how the federal public service grew and evolved during the post-war era, and as a testament to the changing nature of work – and life – in the capital.