

ONE60 ELGIN

A HISTORY OF CHANGE AND STABILITY



ONE60 Elgin, Ottawa (CNW Group/Groupe Mach Inc.)

Whether you call it 160 Elgin Street, One60 Elgin, or Place Bell, the building across the road from the Ottawa Courthouse is among the more recognizable commercial landmarks in the downtown core. It was built in the early 1970s to serve as the Ottawa headquarters for Bell Canada and has been subject to a number of notable changes since: to its name, its ownership and even its façade.

The building was designed in 1969 by American architect Edward Durell Stone. At the time, Stone led one of the largest architectural practices in the United States, and had a list of accomplishments to match. Works to his credit included Radio City Music Hall and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and the Embassy of the United States in New Delhi, India – a building that Frank Lloyd Wright called one of the most beautiful he had ever seen.

The Elgin Street commission came to Stone via developers Olympia and York, which themselves had been commissioned by Bell Canada to build a dedicated office tower on the site. The building was Stone's first Canadian commission and, as it turned out, only one of two he would ever design in this country – the other being Toronto's First Canadian Place tower.

Place Bell, as it was known at the time, opened in 1971. At 27 storeys and roughly 94 metres tall, it was the 12th tallest in the Capital Region. (It is currently the 16th tallest in the region and, by the end of 2027, it will likely occupy number 18 on that particular list.)

The site itself carried its own history before Stone's tower ever broke ground. It had originally held a scattering of small commercial buildings along with the large Gloucester Street Convent.

The original plans for the site development were far broader in scope than what was ultimately built. They called for a much larger complex that would have consumed the entire block to the north. That scheme, however, would have required demolishing several heritage structures, including the First Baptist Church on Laurier Avenue West. Because that expanded plan was never carried out, Stone imagined a new concept for the tower that led to unusual proportions.



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Part of what makes Place Bell architecturally distinctive is its width. The tower's floorplate is unusually large relative to its height. The footprint stretches the entire width of the block from Nepean Street to Gloucester Street and covers more than half the block's depth between Elgin and Metcalfe Streets. Stone's deliberately wide massing respected Ottawa's long-standing tradition of avoiding buildings tall enough to overshadow the Peace Tower. For Place Bell, it meant that Stone's design spread the same amount of office space that would normally be placed in a building of 50 or more storeys across a space that spanned almost an entire city block.

In any discussion of an office tower, its parking garage is not usually a point of focus. Place Bell's, however, is an exception. The facility, which is located at the rear of the structure, was the focal point of a legal dispute in the 1980s. Bell Canada, which owned the building at the time, launched proceedings against the City of Ottawa after it discovered that road salt had seeped into the garage and corroded its steel structure so badly that the garage had to be closed for reconstruction for several years. The dispute would go on to become a textbook engineering case study that would later change how parking garages were built and waterproofed.

Bell Canada, for its part, retained ownership of the tower until 1998. It sold the building to TrizecHahn for \$17 million, and TrizecHahn went on to sell the building to H&R Real Estate Investment Trust in 2002 for \$21 million.

Under H&R's ownership, the tower underwent an extensive renovation between 2015 and 2017. The overhaul added new energy-efficient systems and a three-storey curved glass lobby entrance that gave the tower a fresh face. A later addition, in 2019, added a curious element. Beehives were installed on the rooftop as part of an effort to help counter declining honeybee populations in urban environments.

The renovation helped the property achieve LEED Gold status and led to its rebranding as One60 Elgin.

At just under one million square feet, One60 Elgin is the largest standalone office building in Ottawa by floorplate size, and the sixth largest workplace complex in the city. In 2023, it was the subject of one of the largest commercial real-estate transactions in Ottawa's history when H&R REIT sold the building to Montreal's Groupe Mach for \$277 million.

Although the company's name no longer adorns the building, Bell Canada remains the largest tenant in One60 Elgin. It is joined by an array of public- and private-sector occupants, including Telesat, Public Services and Procurement Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Department of Justice, and law firms Gowling WLG and Kelly Santini LLP.

Much has changed about One60 Elgin – or Place Bell, if you prefer – since its original design and construction. But across those 50-plus years, the building has remained a commercial landmark in the downtown core and an important fixture of the city's business community.

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