

# PLACE DE VILLE

## A GLITTERING, OFTEN CONTROVERSIAL, OFFICE COMPLEX



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The site where Ottawa's streetcars once rumbled home to rest for the night now hosts Place de Ville: two full blocks of soaring office towers, hotels, and one of the city's largest underground parking garages.

Place de Ville represents a distinctly different kind of Ottawa story than the stately buildings and federal campuses that populate so much of the capital. It began life not as a government commission, but as the vision of a single, ambitious developer who was determined to redefine Ottawa's skyline – often against considerable resistance.

### Ottawa's glittering answer to Toronto and Montreal

The land that is Place de Ville today served an entirely different purpose prior to its development. Here was the terminus for the city's streetcars, and served as such for nearly a century. But in 1959, after the last car ran on the Britannia line, the system shut down.

Developer Robert Campeau, who at the time was enjoying immense success building homes to accommodate Ottawa's booming public service, saw an opportunity. He snapped up the property with a vision to create something never before seen in the downtown core. His vision: a modern shopping, office, and retail district built to the most current standards of 1970s urban development. His goal: to create a glittering response to Toronto's Toronto-Dominion Centre and Montreal's Place Ville Marie – projects at the time that were defining their respective downtown cores.



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Neither the purchase nor the plan was without controversy. Rather than auction the property to the highest bidder, the Ottawa Transportation Commission negotiated directly with Campeau for the sale. Campeau ended up acquiring the land for far less than its actual commercial value, while the city threw in a variety of financial concessions to further sweeten the deal. This included absorbing infrastructure adjustment costs and giving Campeau adjacent city-owned parcels to create a unified mega-plot. There was no doubt about it: the developer got a bargain.



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Campeau's plan, meanwhile, flew directly in the face of one of the city's longest-standing planning principles. For 50 years, municipal zoning by-laws held that no building in the downtown core would exceed 45.7 metres, or 150 feet – a rule put in place to preserve the visual dominance of the Peace Tower over the capital's skyline. The developer had loftier ambitions. His initial proposal called for towers A and B to soar as high as 137 metres, or 450 feet. This placed Campeau directly at odds with then Mayor Charlotte Whitton. Whitton, who had fought tooth and nail against the decision to sell the lands to Campeau, further dug in her heels over the proposed buildings' heights.

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The dispute between the two figures – which was punctuated by Whittton ordering Campeau's limousine to be towed from the grounds outside City Hall, while the developer sat in council chambers waiting for a vote on one of his subdivisions – would eventually be resolved at the Ontario Municipal Board, which sided with the developer. In the process, Campeau conceded ground and ultimately accepted a limit of 80 metres, or 263 feet, for the buildings. Completed in 1968, Towers A and B at the development therefore became the first buildings to break through Ottawa's traditional downtown height ceiling.

Having cleared that hurdle, Campeau set his sights even higher for a third tower – and launched himself headlong into another battle with public planners. His proposal for Tower C at Place de Ville called for a height of 145 metres, or 475 feet. That would have made the building a whopping 42 storeys. And while a decidedly pro-development Ottawa city council approved the proposal, Campeau met resistance from another source: the National Capital Commission. The NCC argued that a tower of that scale would set an unwelcome precedent and could invite even taller proposals elsewhere in the capital. The dispute landed in the lap – again – of the Ontario Municipal Board, with the board this time siding in favour of the public sector. Tower C's height was capped at 112 metres, or 367 feet, a height it reached upon its completion in 1971. It opened in 1972 to receive its primary client, Transport Canada, which still occupies much of the building today.

Even reduced from Campeau's original ambitions, Tower C still claimed the title of tallest building in Ottawa. It held that crown for nearly five decades, until it was finally surpassed in 2019.

Offices, yes, but also shopping, food, movies – and contamination. The completed complex would grow over the years into something considerably broader in scope than three office towers alone.

It ultimately encompassed Towers A, B, and C, a four-storey structure known as the Podium Building, two major hotels – the Delta Ottawa City Centre and the Ottawa Marriott, with its top-floor, signature revolving restaurant – and the largest underground parking garage in the city, with space for 974 vehicles.

Hidden within the complex were two gems. One was an underground pedestrian tunnel network that connected the buildings throughout the site. Campeau's design took inspiration from the Underground City trends that were developing in Montreal and Toronto, and his goal was to shelter occupants from Ottawa's harsh winter. During the 1970s and 1980s, the tunnel system was a thriving retail mall with a food court, hair salons, tailors, drug stores and clothing boutiques – everything the modern office worker needed to get on with his or her day.

The tunnel system also linked to the Famous Players Place de Ville Cinema – the other of the complex's hidden gems. Opened in 1971, the theatre allowed civil servants to work late and linger downtown to catch a film before heading home. It was a novelty, and attracted visits from such notable figures as Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, who lined up for a screening of *The Godfather* in 1972, and singer Tom Jones, who is said to have rented out the entire cinema for a screening of the same movie.

Campeau, meanwhile, had even grander visions for the complex. Why stop at three towers, when a fourth could be added? He made exactly that proposal in the early 1980s, imagining an even-taller structure. That may have been a bridge too far for a man of even Campeau's ambitions. Ottawa in those days was in the throes of a deep economic recession. The glut of available office real estate in the downtown core further hampered his plans.

This wasn't the only setback in what would become the final years of Campeau's empire. The original towers were not in good condition. Asbestos contamination, mould, a building fire, and complaints amounting to allegations of sick building syndrome among tenants eventually forced the gutting and complete renovations of Towers A and B in the late 1980s.

Meanwhile, the developer's enterprises in the United States were falling on hard times. A series of ill-timed acquisitions were bleeding his corporate asset dry. Campeau's company eventually collapsed, and its remnants – including Place de Ville – were acquired in 1996 by Olympia and York, the real estate empire controlled by the Reichmann family.

O&Y would go on to propose a third-phase expansion of the complex in 2000, but this too never launched. It would go on to sell off its Canadian holdings entirely in February 2005. Ownership changed hands again in November 2021, when Crown Realty Partners – now Crown Property Management – acquired the 1.2-million-square-foot complex alongside Crestpoint.

## A thriving office node, with an enduring legacy

Today, Place de Ville remains a fully active Class A office complex, home to more than 7,000 federal employees. The Podium Building now also serves as the entrance to Lyon Station on the Confederation light rail line. This makes Place de Ville one of only a handful of buildings in the city that offers direct concourse access to the O-Train network. (Credit Campeau for this opportunity. His original blueprint for the underground complex at Place de Ville called for the eastern edge of the tunnel network to end at a blank concrete wall – ready to connect the complex to an imagined underground subway system.)

The complex holds BOMA 360 and WELL Health-Safety certifications and continues to be managed on behalf of its current owners. Although no formal heritage designation has been confirmed for any part of Place de Ville, Tower C and the Podium Building are both catalogued within the Capital Modern inventory documenting Ottawa's significant modernist architecture. This, perhaps, is a fitting, if understated, recognition for the complex that first proved the Peace Tower's shadow did not have to define the limits of Ottawa's skyline forever.