

THE CONNAUGHT BUILDING

UTILITARIAN IN PURPOSE, EXCELLENCE IN DESIGN

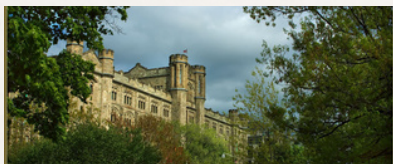


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The Connaught Building on Mackenzie Avenue is another downtown building inspired, in part, by Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier's vision to transform Ottawa into "the Washington of the North".

In the early 20th century, the Prime Minister was taken by the notion of creating a grand design for the capital. Its muddy streets and utilitarian buildings were earmarked for replacement with grand architecture, green spaces, and ceremonial boulevards that were inspired by the City Beautiful movement.

At the same time, Ottawa's civil service was booming. The original Parliament Buildings and the neighbouring East and West Blocks were rapidly running out of space to house the growing bureaucracy; staff were scattered throughout the downtown core in various rented spaces. A new solution was needed.



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In 1906, Laurier's government published its intent to acquire the western side of what was then known as Sussex Street from Rideau Street to Bruyère Street. (It had already purchased the neighbouring block from Bruyère Street to Cathcart Street the previous year as the site for the Royal Mint.) The new site was originally planned to house two massive departmental buildings that would accommodate public-service staff. Although those plans were eventually shelved and later modified, with the resulting buildings constructed after the First World War and in an altogether different location, the Sussex Street site was repurposed and designated the new site for the offices of Canada Customs.

The assignment to design the new building was handed to David Ewart, Chief Architect of the Department of Public Works from 1897 to 1914. Ewart's portfolio at the time already included works on several notable buildings across the capital, including the Dominion Observatory, the Royal Canadian Mint building, and the Victoria Memorial Building.

Ewart's choice for the design: a scaled-down version of one he had imagined for the two previously planned buildings. Its Tudor-Gothic style with castellated turrets and textured stonework was very much in keeping with the desire to mirror the Gothic Revival style of the Parliament Buildings, and in keeping with Canada's ties to the British Empire.

Not everyone was supportive. In a 1910 review, the trade journal *Construction* argued the plans resembled either "a packing box" or "a cross between a fancy jail and a chocolate factory with a dash of high school thrown in."



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One of the largest buildings in Ottawa

Excavation work on the new building started in the spring of 1912. Early progress was anything but smooth. The team of day labourers who were digging the site by hand couldn't find bedrock. That plan was abandoned and the Public Works Department was forced to call in the Foundation Company of Montreal to take over the work. In its initial exploration of the site, the company found several major problems with it: large boulders, sand, gravel and water. For its services, the company was happy to propose a contract fee of cost plus 12% to complete the foundation work.

The building, named after Governor General HRH the Duke of Connaught, opened as the home of the Ottawa Customs Examining Warehouse and the principal offices of Customs and Inland Revenue.



The main construction tender was awarded in 1913 to the Simcoe Construction Company for \$993,000 – much less than Ewart’s projected budget of \$1.4 million. Not long after the contract award, Simcoe transferred the project to Crockett and Tharle – themselves contractors based out of Rivière du Loup and Fort William.

By 1914, staff at the Public Works Department were fed up. The new contractors had completed very little work on the project. Their contract was cancelled entirely, and the project was awarded to one of the losing initial bidders, Montreal’s P. Lyall and Company, at a revised cost of \$1,173,000. After further delays caused by the First World War, the building finally opened its doors in July 1916.

The finished product was striking. At more than 300 feet in length, 88 feet in depth and six storeys tall (with an additional two in its tower and another underground), it was one of the largest buildings in the city at the time. Its imposing outer walls were clad in brick and lined with terracotta blocks. The interior floors were made of concrete, while the hallways and staircases were clad in marble and marble mosaic. Clearly, damage from fire would not be a problem.

A further example of Laurier’s vision

The building, named after Governor General HRH the Duke of Connaught, opened as the home of the Ottawa Customs Examining Warehouse and the principal offices of Customs and Inland Revenue. It would go on to receive what the Ottawa Journal termed “a facelift” between 1971 and 1973. The nearly \$3-million project saw extensive renovations to the building’s interior, including the addition of two new levels inside the high ceilings of the basement and ground floors.

Again, the choice of design was not universally applauded. When the building was designated as a heritage structure in 1988, the supporting heritage character statement called the renovations “generally unsympathetic to the heritage character of the property”. It further recommended that “every opportunity should be taken to reintroduce a more compatible continuity between exterior and interior, particularly in the lobbies and circulation areas, and to enhance the symmetrical, Beaux Arts intentions of the original design.”



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Further, and arguably more aesthetic, renovations began on the building in the early 2010s. Public Services and Procurement Canada commissioned a project to modernize the building’s interior and convert it into usable office space for Canada Revenue Agency staff. (Worth noting is the work done by the design team to restore elements of Ewart’s original Beaux-Arts layout.) It remains home to a portion of the headquarters of the Canada Revenue Agency.

Over the years, the Connaught Building has come to be known as among Ewart’s finest achievements in design. It is a federally recognized heritage structure that carries “classified” status – the highest level of protection assigned to federally owned buildings – due not only to its remarkable architecture but also as among the more significant expressions of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier’s vision of a beautiful and vibrant capital city. fire.