

THE SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD BUILDING

A LANDMARK OF STRENGTH AND SOLIDITY



Colin Rose from Montreal, Canada, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Facing the West Block from across Wellington Street, at the corner of O'Connor and with a third frontage on Sparks Street, the building we know today as the Sir John A. Macdonald Building spent its first eight decades as something far more modest in name, if not in ambition: the Ottawa main branch of the Bank of Montreal. Its history, however, tells a story of transformation – from Depression-era banking hall to a gathering place for the machinery of government, and makes it one of the more significant buildings in the parliamentary precinct.

Enduring style and symbolism

The Bank of Montreal's history in Canada dates back to the pre-Confederation era. Founded in 1817, it is the country's oldest financial institution – and the first to establish a branch in Ottawa. Prior to construction of the Sir John A. Macdonald Building, the bank had occupied a purpose-built building on the same site since 1872 or 1873.

By 1929, however, changing architectural tastes and the bank's evolving needs led it to demolish that earlier Victorian structure entirely, clearing the site for something considerably grander. The bank held a national competition to design its new Ottawa headquarters, with the contest won by Montreal architect Ernest Barott of the firm Barott and Blackader. Construction proceeded from 1930 to 1932 – despite the turmoil created by the Great Depression. This was no accident. The bank was eager to project an image of stability and security during these troubling times. Moreover, and just as importantly, the construction activity provided steady employment to hundreds of workers at a point when jobs were scarce.



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The finished building was nothing short of spectacular. Still today, it is regarded as among the finest Canadian examples of modern classicism, a style that fuses sophisticated Art Deco detailing with traditional Beaux-Arts planning principles. It takes the form of a symmetrical, steel-frame temple, clad in Stanstead granite at its base and Queenston limestone above. Its principal facades on Wellington and Sparks Streets are highlighted by large rectangular windows. Carvings on the panels above the exterior doors and windows depict scenes of Canadian industry and commerce, while its interior decorations include images of Canadian wildlife and nature. This trend, of creating a national iconographical vocabulary, was popular among Canadian artists in the early 20th century.

The building's architectural significance did not go unnoticed at the time of its completion. In 1932, Barott was awarded the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada's Gold Medal for his work – the highest honour the institute can bestow. The building's completion also marked something of an end of an era for downtown Ottawa. It was the last purely commercial, non-government building constructed directly along Wellington Street in front of Parliament.

(Also worth noting is that until the Bank of Canada was established in 1935, the Bank of Montreal effectively functioned as Canada's central bank, lending further historical significance to this particular branch office.)

A sweeping restoration – and a rare discovery

Although the Bank of Montreal continued to operate its Ottawa branch from the building for decades, ownership passed to the federal government in 1973. The bank would remain the building's sole tenant for another 30-plus years before finally vacating the premises in 2005. After the bank's departure, the building was very much at risk if another use could not be found. As it turned out, its grandeur made it the perfect choice to replace the West Block's former Confederation Room that had been used to host Parliamentary events.

Work to rehabilitate the building began in 2010, with construction beginning on site in 2012 – not long after it was renamed in honour of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister.

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The project involved a full heritage restoration of the exterior masonry and windows, structural and seismic upgrades, and a complete replacement of the mechanical, electrical, and life-safety systems. Key to the work was the addition of a two-storey, 3,100-square metre glass-atrium annex atop what had previously been an adjacent courtyard and parking area. The addition was intended to provide a clear transitional space between the historic banking hall and its modern addition.

During the restoration, workers made an unexpected discovery. There, behind one of the walls, was a stone carving measuring roughly 150 by 100 centimetres. The artefact depicted the Bank of Montreal's coat of arms supported by two Indigenous figures, encircled by the bank's motto *Concordia Salus*, meaning "prosperity through harmony", and crowned with a beaver as a symbol of hard-working Canadians. Archival photography suggests that the carving was once mounted on the exterior façade of the original 1872 bank building. It was removed by stonemasons and sent to the Canadian Museum of History for further study and potential future display.

Once completed, the rehabilitation itself would go on to become a showcase for sustainable heritage practice. Among the features introduced to help green government operations were a green roof, energy-efficient LED lighting, water-conserving fixtures, and the reuse of the former marble teller counters as functional counters and benches. The project earned a five-Green-Globes eco-rating – the highest the organization bestows, and one reserved for projects that serve as national or world leaders in energy and environmental performance.



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The renovated building was finally unveiled to the public in June 2015. It reopened as the permanent home for large parliamentary meetings and ceremonial functions, with its former grand banking hall repurposed as a main ceremonial hall connected to the new annex.

That ceremonial role took on profound significance on March 19 and 20, 2024, when former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney lay in state within the building's main hall. The choice was necessary because the Centre Block, which is traditionally used for such ceremonies, remained closed for its own ongoing rehabilitation. The service, which was attended by such dignitaries as then-Governor General Mary Simon and then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, was a further reminder of the enduring nature of this great building and its significance in Ottawa's evolution.