

THE VICTORIA BUILDING

A TOWER WITH A COMMANDING PRESENCE AND A VIBRANT HISTORY



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The Victoria Building is another among a series of buildings, the design and construction of which marked another milestone along Ottawa's journey from a lumber town to a business hub. And although the building was not originally intended to become a facet of the capital's political life, its prominence and grandeur captured the attention of several public-sector institutions before the building would go on to become a part of the machinery of parliament itself.

A clear signal of Ottawa's shift from lumber town to business hub

Located directly across the street from Parliament Hill at the corner of Wellington and O'Connor streets, The 10-storey building was commissioned and built by the Wellington Investments Company between 1927 and 1928. Funding the construction was Gordon Cameron Edwards, a wealthy lumber merchant who was seeking to diversify his fortune into real-estate interests.

Its design was led by Ottawa architect John Albert Ewart. Ewart himself was no stranger to urban design in the post-First World War era. His earlier credits in the capital included the Booth Building, the Transportation Building and the neighbouring Metropolitan Life Building. Unlike these neighbours, however, the Victoria Building was not conceived for a political purpose. This was an office building first and foremost.



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The red brick and limestone structure, designed in the Art Deco style that dominated the late 1920s, was among the first high-rises to grace Ottawa's skyline. Its construction sent a clear signal that Ottawa's economy was shifting away from commodity trading and toward the business of government.

A commanding presence – for good and otherwise

The presence and placement of the Victoria Building was such that it couldn't help but command attention from those who worked on and around Parliament Hill. Reactions were not all positive. Such was the size and the sheer mass of the building that the federal government was moved to take a far greater role in local planning and development in Ottawa's downtown core. Private developers in those days had free rein to build whatever they liked directly across the street from the Parliament Buildings. The Victoria Building would go on to become the catalyst for one of the defining principles of modern Ottawa urban planning: the deliberate protection of sightlines and scale around Parliament Hill.

It didn't take long for the Victoria Building to catch the eye of the federal government in other ways. Not long after construction was completed, a remarkable cast of foreign and domestic institutions moved quickly to lease space within it.

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The building served as the first home of the Embassy of France in Canada, hosting French diplomats from 1928 until 1939. From 1931 to 1941, it also housed the Japanese legation. The newly minted Bank of Canada operated from the property for roughly three years, until 1938, when construction finished on its permanent headquarters at 234 Wellington Street.

The birthplace of Canadian broadcasting

That same year, the Victoria Building took on perhaps its most culturally significant tenant. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation made the building the national headquarters of Canadian public broadcasting, a role it held from 1938 until 1964. It was within these offices, under the direction of figures such as Davidson Dunton and Alphonse Ouimet, that the coordination and planning of Canada's first national radio network, and later its first national television network, took shape, making the Victoria Building the birthplace of Canadian broadcasting infrastructure.



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The federal government finally purchased the Victoria Building outright in 1973, folding it permanently into the growing collection of government-owned properties surrounding Parliament Hill. In 1987, the building was designated a Recognized Federal Heritage Building – a status conferred as much for its notable tenants as for its architectural and environmental value as a largely unchanged example of an early Ottawa high-rise. The building underwent renovation in 2003, updating its interior for continued government use while preserving its character-defining exterior features.

Today, the Victoria Building is very much a cog in the wheels of government. It currently serves as a working extension of the Senate of Canada, housing the offices of roughly 40 senators along with four Senate committee rooms and subsidiary offices of the Library of Parliament.

Public Services and Procurement Canada holds custodial responsibility for the property. Its two principal façades, on Wellington and O'Connor Streets, remain essentially unchanged since Ewart designed them nearly a century ago. They are another in a series of examples of Ottawa's transition to a modern, vibrant capital city.