

THE WELLINGTON BUILDING

A SYMBOL OF TRANSITION



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The Wellington Building on the corner of Bank and Sparks streets stands out as much for its history as it does its design.

Built between 1925 and 1927, it was conceived not as the political hub it serves as today, but as the Canadian headquarters of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, which was, at the time, the largest firm of its kind in the United States.

The middle 1920s were a time of further transition in downtown Ottawa. Politics had replaced lumber as the principal industry in town. That transformation brought with it a move toward greater commercialization. In particular, Banker's Row was the name given to the stretch of Wellington and Sparks Streets that was, in those days, lined with the modest offices of several financial institutions. By the 1920s, those buildings were steadily being replaced by grander Beaux-Arts-style headquarters buildings that were considered to better fit the image and growing prestige of the capital. Metropolitan Life's new Canadian office ranked among the last and grandest of these replacements.

A monument to solidity and stability
Design of the building was tasked to Everett Waid, Metropolitan Life's chief architect in New York, working in partnership with Ottawa associate architect J.A. Ewart. Waid was a man of grand ambition. He and Harvey Wilel Corbett were the visionaries behind the company's landmark headquarters in New York City. The architects' original plans called for a tower on Madison Avenue that would stand 100 storeys tall, making it at the time the tallest in the world. Later versions of the design, influenced by the austerity of the Great Depression, scaled back the structure to a mere 30 storeys.

Back in Ottawa, Waid and Ewart imagined a monumental, symmetrical Beaux-Arts composition with exposed façades on Wellington, Bank and Sparks streets. The building would be anchored by a giant order of Corinthian columns rising three storeys on the Wellington Street front and a granite base pierced with round-headed openings.

The building's main entrance was originally sheltered beneath a steel-and-glass canopy. The interior featured smooth Indiana limestone cladding, marble walls and floors, bronze fittings and coffered ceilings. The final design exuded solidity and stability – exactly the image that Metropolitan Life wanted to project to the public.

Although architecturally stunning, the building boasted an even-greater feature inside. Its entrance vestibule was fitted with a dramatic Byzantine-style ceiling mosaic designed by celebrated American muralist Barry Faulkner. The composition, which is still very much present today, includes almost one million individually set pieces of coloured glass tile. Faulkner, whose CV included similar contributions to the Rotunda of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., imagined the Ottawa mosaic as an advertisement for the insurance company itself. The imagery sent a strong message: the Great Metropolitan Mother would protect her policyholders from earthquakes, fires, floods, and even serpents, rendered in brilliant colour against a shimmering field of gold.



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BOMA
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At the time it opened, the Wellington Building was hailed for its efficient office layout and the designers' concern for workplace health. Notably, and in an early nod to work-life balance, the building featured a rooftop tennis court for employees.

The federal government takeover – and a portent of things to come

Metropolitan Life would go on to occupy the Wellington Building for roughly 50 years. As the company grew, so did its headquarters. Two additional storeys were added in 1957 and 1958; a six-storey east wing was completed in 1959, although none with nearly the same flair as originally imagined by Waid and Ewart.

Ownership of the Wellington Building changed hands in 1973. Metropolitan Life had vacated the building in 1970, and the federal government turned its attention to the property with the view of adding it to its growing portfolio of buildings around Parliament Hill.

In the decades that followed, the Wellington Building served a variety of office functions for the federal government. The Canadian Postal Museum, for example, called the building home for a short period of time. In 1984, the building became the first outside Parliament Hill to house offices for Members of Parliament – owing to a chronic shortage of office space on the hill. In hindsight, that decision may have been a portent for things to come.

An extensive renovation restores Waid and Ewart's Beaux-Arts grandeur

Between 2010 and 2016, the Wellington Building underwent a sweeping, \$425-million rehabilitation, one of the most extensive heritage restoration projects undertaken in the capital in decades. Engineers and contractors were tasked with nothing short of bringing the aging structure up to modern standards. The scope of the project included not just a seismic retrofit, but also spanned asbestos abatement, a complete replacement of mechanical and electrical systems, and demolition and reconstruction of the central structural core – all while painstakingly conserving the building's defining heritage features.

Faulkner's glass mosaic was given particular attention. Crews replaced missing tiles, one by one, with the aim of reconstructing the entire Wellington Street entrance canopy as a faithful replica based on period photographs. (The original had been destroyed sometime in the 1960s.) Impressively, the construction team was able to recycle or repurpose as much as 97 per cent of the material removed during demolition. Copper salvaged from the original 1927 roof, for example, was reworked into an acoustic feature within the building's new satellite Library of Parliament, a project that went on to earn a 2017 North American Copper in Architecture Award.



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The building reopened to celebrations in 2016. The updated structure restored the Beaux-Arts grandeur of Waid and Ewart, while its interior had been reimagined for twenty-first-century parliamentary work.

Today the Wellington Building serves as designated swing space for the House of Commons, housing offices for roughly 70 Members of Parliament, 10 committee rooms, and the satellite library facility. Each, in turn, supports the broader multi-decade rehabilitation of the Centre, West, and East Blocks on Parliament Hill itself.

In January 1987, the building was officially named a Recognized Federal Heritage Building in part because of its historical associations, but primarily because of its architectural and environmental value. In its assessment of the building, the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office praised the building for, "the manner in which [it] contributes to the prestigious institutional character of the area, and helps define the transition from the Parliamentary and institutional character of Wellington to the more civic and commercial character of Sparks."

That fact remains one of the more significant contributions made by the Wellington Building not just to Ottawa's downtown core, but also to the city's evolution.