NEW MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

A QUIETLY ELEGANT STRUCTURE TO THE SIDE OF CENTRE BLOCK IS THE FIRST NEW BUILDING ON PARLIAMENT HILL IN ALMOST A CENTURY.

PROJECT Government of Canada Visitor Welcome Centre,
Parliament Hill, Ottawa, Ontario

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PHOTOS James Brittain Photography
When I was growing up in Ottawa in the 1980s, you could walk straight through the grand neo-gothic front doors of Parliament Hill. With too much dust, you could smell over to the public galleries of the House of Commons and Senate. Or you could head to the parliamentary library and admire the elegant wood-paneled structure that had been preserved from the great 1990s fire by its cast-bone facade. When the Hill was decorated by Christmas lights in the winter, my parents would head up the hill and we'd join other families who drove the loop in front of the East, Centre, and West Blocks, admiring the decorations.

Then, in 1997, a domestic man drove his Jeep up the staircase in front of Centre Block, stopping just short of the main door. A fire, private vehicle access to the Hill was further restricted. In 2014, a lone gunman shot a security at the National War Memorial, then entered Centre Block and was killed in an exchange of gunfire with security personnel.

Public access to the chambers of democracy has been maintained through it all, but with an increasing amount of security at point and security scanning measures, a commensurate presence in those revered buildings.

Now, the first phase of a fully accessible Welcome Centre greets visitors to Parliament Hill. It achieves the delicate feat of including updated, airport-like screening facilities, while presenting dignified, open public access to the seat of Canada’s parliamentary democracy.

This is the first building to be constructed on Parliament Hill in almost a century, and the responsibility to the historic site weighed heavily on designers Hill Group and Musmeci + Tschuma Architects. In response, to a remarkable degree, they've made the four-story building disappear.

Three of the stories are sunk underground, with only the entrance making an appearance at grade. Even the entrance is not immediately visible.

A stone retaining wall designed by Colivet Vase strongly elevates Centre Block above the Great Lawn, that wall has now been extended to cap a new courtyard next to West Block. Arch-like overpasses from porches in the stonework, with recessed doors crafted in a weather-patterned bronze. Inside, visitors enter a cross-vaulted entry area that overlooks the concourse, a level below. After passing through the scanning areas, they descend to the concourse—a double-height space that includes interpretive projections, a boutique, and a gathering point for guided tours. A barrel-vaulted passageway leads to the renovated West Block. Additional phases will eventually expand the facility to connect with East Block and with Centre Block, currently under renovation. The building’s main spaces are topped with a shallow cross-vaulted ceiling, resplendent in acoustic plaster.

The ceiling design—a contemporary version of a shallow groin vault—gives a traditional inflection to the minimalist building. Early on the commission, architect Martin Minardis concepted Carol Phillips, FRAIC, the architects decided to make a full inventory of the provisional spaces and façades throughout Parliament Hill. What emerged was a new interpretation of the Hill’s vaulted hallways and hierarchy of arched windows—arches, doorways higher on walls, unequal arches lower down. They also developed a detailed understanding of how these arches were geometrically generated.

The main concourse of the Welcome Centre is topped by bronze screens and vaulted ceilings whose forms derive from the gothic geometries used throughout Parliament Hill. The screens that run from the security screening level down to the concourse, the interior’s minimal palette includes white oak walls and Onyx marble columns.
To fine-tune the entry archways through the stone wall, the design team looked to Van’s bridge and tunnel in Central Park, whose forms also derived from Gothic principles. The logic of using different arcade types to denote the relative importance of spaces informed the interior geometry of Welcome Center elements ranging from the broad, enclosing arches to details such as the patterning of the grand stair’s bronze screen. The latter is a filigree of cascading pointed arches, in equal part neo-gothic and Art Deco.

A simplified material palette—ceramic floor, honed Danby marble columns, terrazzo Adirondack walls, white oak partitions, bronze fittings—makes the building feel exceptionally calm and composed. This restraint is also shown in a series of sensitive details. For instance, to diminish the visual weight of the large square columns—a heritage needed to keep the facility secure and carry the landscape above—slight V-grooves are cut into the column profiles on all four sides. At the top of the columns, three plates accentuate the spring point of the vaults. Similar folded details appear on the deeply chamfered stone frames at the front arches, a fold in the bronze stair railings, and pleated millwork on the front doors and at the reception desks.

“Our building is so subtle,” says Phillips. “Introducing grace to its spaces was always part of the mandate.” The commitment to making a building that feels elegant and spacious—despite being largely underground—is also evident in the planning. In most airports, screening processes entail maze-like routes. Here, however, the visitor spaces are purposefully expansive and intuitive to navigate, with overheads and glass walls allowing glimpses into the rooms ahead. Back-of-house spaces are almost invisibly integrated, including access to the secured lower-level levels, which are used for mechanical systems and materials handling.

An exterior aspect that Phillips is especially proud of is the new guardrail that tops the extended Vaux wall. At first, this seemed a minor detail—but then, the team realized that it would set a precedent for retrofitting the original Vaux wall along the entire forecourt of Centre Block, which currently lacks a guard rail. “It started to take on much more weight,” says Phillips. “It became this little piece of sculpture that had to work seamlessly with the gothic language—it had to look like it could have always been here, but it had to be contemporary, of its time, and had to have movement.” Turning to the gothic geometries they had studied, they created a series of double-bullnose that interweave in three dimensions to form pointed arches.

The resulting railing—understandably, elegant and timeless—is a microcosm of the project’s success as a whole. “When we tour MPs through the Visitors Center, they often ask, ‘Is this new?’” says House of Commons Chief Architect Darrell de Grandpré. “It’s telling of our creating a design that integrates what they think is heritage architecture and a modern intervention. This is all new, but it looks as if it may have been here before.”