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In Ottawa, the federal government is chipping away at the country's most complex renovation project. As of this month, both legislative bodies have left their regular homes in Parliament to settle into temporary chambers for the next decade or so.

These temporary chambers are stops in a complex game of musical chairs, a \$4-billion, generation-long megaproject that will rebuild the three main structures on Parliament Hill. When the House of Commons resumed Monday, followed by the Senate on Feb. 19, they began at least a decade in exile.

They are leaving behind the Centre Block, rebuilt in 1916 as a spectacular wonderland of nationalist imagery and post-Victorian flourishes. Designed by John Pearson and Jean-Omer Marchand, it's a building very un-Canadian in its showiness, mixing Manitoba Tyndall stone and Quebec limestone, a steel structure and flamboyant stonework.

The temporary chambers are, each, far more boring than the permanent ones. The two temporary projects combine painstaking heritage restoration with a deeply conservative modernist language. Each chamber reflects an admirable reverence for Canada's shared past – but also, equally, a lack of imagination about how the country's identity can or should evolve.

First, the House of Commons. The House is moving about 100 metres west from its usual home in Centre Block into the West Block. That Victorian Gothic building, designed by architects Thomas Stent and Augustus Laver in 1859, has now been totally renovated. The architecture is by heritage specialists EVOQ in joint venture with the Montreal office of Architecture49 (formerly ARCOP).

It's very subtle. "The idea was to allow these buildings to move into a new century," says architect Georges Drolet, who led the project for EVOQ. "We felt we could increase the value without adding architectural gymnastics."

The bulk of the job – which is enormous – is hard for visitors to perceive. Mechanical systems are entirely new. Deliveries and public access are now underground; the way in is through the Visitor Welcome Centre, located underground beneath the Centre Block and West Block. This bunker is a surprisingly elegant sequence of spaces, clad in limestone and white oak, designed by Toronto's Moriyama & Teshima Architects under the direction of Carol Phillips.

But the heart of the \$863-million project is the temporary chamber. Invisible from outside, it has been inserted into the courtyard at the centre of West Block. The fill-the-gap strategy draws on some international precedents, including the British Museum in London. Forming the edges of the new chamber are the original 19th-century polychromatic walls of sandstone, now relaid; these hunks of rock bring a tactile beauty and a welcome roughness to the interior.

The chamber itself lies between these walls, lined on each side by great broad trees of structural steel. "It's about allowing light to come through the branches, providing a good amount of light and yet being true to the architecture of this building," Darrell de Grandmont, chief architect at the House of Commons, told me.

This structural system harks back to the stone flying buttresses in Gothic cathedrals and to their descendants in neo-Gothic buildings, such as the Parliament Hill complex itself. These are devices that work ostentatiously to hold something up – in this case a triple-decker glass ceiling patterned with a

diamond grid. It's an update of late-Victorian metalwork. And also, it must be said, a near-exact quotation of a project by the British High-Tech architect Richard Rogers.

The rest of the chamber has even less drama. Walnut wall panelling and deep-green carpet evoke those in the permanent House. But largely missing is the elaborate, symbolic stonework of the regular chamber. The coats of arms of the provinces and the House of Commons are here. Beyond that is a limited palette of materials meant to allude to the natural world: vertical screens of maple and a few ornaments on the gallery railings that are abstracted floral forms. "It was important for the design team to create a contemporary design that would be Canadian in its spirit," Drolet explains. "Canadian identity has many facets, but one of them is a connection to nature."

That's the blandest possible explanation for what it means to be Canadian, and the chamber's architecture is similarly bland. It takes zero chances: not with colour, not with artwork, not with ornament or form, not even with furniture that reflects contemporary practice in Canada. In a room that is clearly new, and also just a 10-year way station, this staidness seems like a missed opportunity.

Then there's the temporary Senate, where the details are different but the theme similar. Rather than move the Senate into a temporary space within East Block (which is a close sibling to West Block), Public Works came up with an alternative: to move the chamber into what has in recent years been called the Government Conference Centre. This, originally Ottawa's central railway station, stands to the southeast of Parliament Hill, across the Rideau Canal and on the other side of Wellington Street.

That's what has happened, and the architects here are Diamond Schmitt and KWC, with heritage specialists ERA. Their task has been to update the old station, built between 1909 and 1912, to designs by Montreal's Ross & MacFarlane, and adapt it with a new Senate chamber, committee rooms, offices and supporting spaces.

It's not a bad fit. Much of the building was elaborately and beautifully detailed as a railway station and its Beaux-Arts neoclassicism is well suited to public uses. (That style, in fact, has been the primary choice of government in the United States.) You enter through the building's original street entrance and then move downward across the station's old atrium; here, marble-clad walls rise to a high, domed roof that evokes Rome's Baths of Caracalla.

Here and throughout, the stonework has been restored with great care even as the guts of the building are comprehensively replaced. Even the painted faux-finish on the plaster in the public areas – meant, a century ago, to imitate expensive travertine – has been expensively and carefully repainted.

Diamond Schmitt's design of the interior has some beautiful moments. The project's big budget allowed them to specify materials and details that are too expensive for more ordinary buildings. There are three wall-sized bronze screens, printed with images of landscapes from British Columbia and Newfoundland and of a railroad locomotive connecting the two. "The Senate challenged us to reflect their representation of the whole country," Martin Davidson, who led the project for Diamond Schmitt, said during a tour in December.

Elsewhere, door hardware is made of glimmering bronze and floors are clad with terrazzo, into which little baguettes of marble – fragments retrieved from the original floors – have been inserted. The mix of materials and textures is both playful and skillfully handled by the architects. (One surprise: a set of wall panels with an irregular dot pattern, which I first thought were a cheap-architect-chic material called foamed aluminum. In fact, they're bronze.) You can feel the expense and, in a few places, some architectural creativity tentatively raising its hand.

And yet, the Senate chamber itself is ... kind of dull. It's located at the back of the building in what was once the station's departure hall. Again, a restored historic surround (the arched plaster ceiling, originally

studded with horsehair and sawdust and now rebuilt from underneath); again, dark-walnut panelling of no particular personality.

There are a few flourishes. At the end of the chamber, behind the Speaker's chair, one wooden wall bears a three-dimensional relief sculpture of a maple leaf. This was produced with a mixture of computer-controlled cutting and handcraft, a collaboration between the architects, Dominion Sculptor Phil White and a team from Carleton University led by [architect Stephen Fai](#).

"We work in an environment where we have to have cost certainty, and we need to know how things are made," Davidson said. "This," he added with pride, "was uncharted territory."

This is a sentiment Marchand and Pearson would understand. But I imagine that they also would have wondered: "Is that all?" After a century of roiling social and technological change, an era when both Canada's identity and the art of building have been reinvented, this is how you express the boldness of the Canadian spirit in the 21st century? With maple leaves cut out of walnut?

If Canada had a national architecture policy – if the federal government, led by any party, understood the cultural importance of making great new places – this might have been a different project.

It's too late for the architecture of the temporary Senate to be more expressive, but here's a modest proposal: Fix the roads around it. The Government Conference Centre is surrounded by a tangle of roads, Wellington Street, Rideau Street and Colonel By Drive. Traffic moves remarkably fast, thanks to a road design out of the 1970s. Now that the Parliamentary Precinct has effectively expanded, it's time for the city to rebuild all of this asphalt as public space that is walkable, beautiful and safe. The ceremonial heart of the nation may not be a place to spur the imagination, but it should at least be a nice venue for a stroll.

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