

Confederation Centre of the Arts—Canada's National Memorial



"[The Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building] is a tribute to those famous men who founded our Confederation. But it is also dedicated to the fostering of those things that enrich the mind and delight the heart, those intangible but precious things that give meaning to a society and help create from it a civilization and a culture."

Prime Minister L.B. Pearson , Opening Ceremonies for Confederation Centre of the Arts, October 6, 1964

Canada's National Memorial to the Fathers of Confederation

Confederation Centre of the Arts was founded in 1964 as Canada's National Memorial to the Fathers of Confederation, who gathered at Province House in 1864 to discuss the creation of our country.

The Charlottetown Festival

- "a Festival of Music and Laughter" - was created in the spirit of the 1864 meetings of the Fathers whose deliberations were highlighted by numerous gala balls, social events and one of the few circuses to visit the Island in that era.

Held each summer since 1965, the Festival is anchored by the international sensation *Anne of Green Gables-The Musical*TM, which has played every summer since for millions of visitors from around the world. Additionally, the Festival has launched more than 80 original productions, touring many across Canada and beyond.

All-Canadian Effort

Every Canadian played a part in the establishment of the Centre: each province and the federal government committed 15 cents per capita for a total of \$5.6-million to construct the huge building. In other words, each Canadian contributed 30 cents each. This was the first time that all provinces agreed to give money for an institution outside their boundaries.

Covering an entire city block, the Centre stands on what was the site of the old Charlottetown marketplace. It houses several theatres, an art gallery, restaurant, and a gift shop. Open year-round, it showcases the best in Canadian visual and performing arts.

The Dream Unfolds

In his book *Honour the Founders! Enjoy the Arts!*, Dr. Frank MacKinnon, who led the movement to create the Memorial, wrote: "Confederation Centre commemorates all Canadian achievements and potential featuring the cultural frontier and those engaged in pushing it back. ... The building stands as an architectural work of art and showcase honouring Canada's traditions."

Confederation Centre is the result of a dream shared by all Canadians - to create a place where our country's history and multicultural character is celebrated, and where the talents of its people are nurtured and showcased.

It was an ambitious project, with a lofty mandate “to engage and empower the imagination of our youth; to honour the vision of the Founders of Canada; to strengthen our national identity; and to increase the cultural wealth of all Canadians.”

There is no doubt that over the past 49 years, Confederation Centre has successfully fulfilled this mandate. What lessons does it hold for us, as Confederation enters its fourth half-century and the Confederation Centre of the Arts its second? In his forthcoming book *Cradling Confederation: The Founding of Confederation Centre of the Arts*, historian Dr. Ed MacDonald says, “Contrary to the famous quote, (history) does not actually repeat itself. But it teaches and informs, entertains and explains, and, now and again, it even inspires.”

MacDonald recounts a now sacred Island story of how on October 6, 1964, Queen Elizabeth II herself, “looking like a fairy tale Queen,” (as described by the *Island Magazine*) came for the Royal opening of Confederation Centre. Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson escorted HRM through a regal night of Canadian musical entertainment, including a taste from the Centre’s soon-to-be crown jewel musical, *Anne of Green Gables—The Musical™*. During the official remarks, Pearson declared the complex to be “a tribute to those famous men who founded our Confederation. But it is dedicated also to the fostering of those things that enrich the mind and delight the heart, those intangible but precious things that give meaning to a society and help create from it a civilization and a culture.”

MacDonald remarks, “It was the conjunction of those two touchstones, culture and heritage, that soon coined the catch-phrase ‘a living memorial to Confederation’.”

However, when a national arts centre is situated in a regional market and, in this case, Canada’s smallest province, certain challenges become evident. In 1964, when Lester Pearson was Prime Minister, the Government of Canada along with all 10 provinces made the commitment to build this living memorial to the Fathers of Confederation. The formula at the time had the Federal Government paying 50 per cent of the costs and the provinces agreeing to cover the other 50 per cent, contributing their share based on population. Now, nearly 50 years later, only some provinces continue to contribute to the ongoing operation of this national memorial.

In 2012, a total of \$977,500 was contributed by the provinces: PEI provided \$760,000; Ontario \$200,000; the rest came from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and the Yukon Territory. At present, the remaining provinces and territories (including Newfoundland and Labrador) do not contribute anything to Confederation Centre. The Government of Canada continues to contribute, through the Department of Canadian Heritage, to the national monument’s operating expenses each year with at least \$3 million to support various activities at the Centre.

Occupying an entire block, the Confederation Centre of the Arts faces Queen’s Square in Charlottetown’s business district. Built in 1963-1964, the Centre is a large, multi-purpose cultural complex executed in the modern Brutalist style. Its four constituent pavilions are distinct yet form a coherent whole and contain a theatre, art gallery and public library clustered in a U-shape around the “Memorial Hall.” It sits adjacent to Province House, the legislature building for Prince Edward Island. The official recognition refers to the building on its legal lot.

Heritage Value

The Confederation Centre of the Arts was designated a national historic site of Canada in 2002 because:

- as one of a number of cultural complexes built in the 1960s and 1970s in Canada, and as a memorial to the Fathers of Confederation, it is an outstanding example of a national institution dedicated to the performing arts;
- when it was built in 1964, it was highly innovative in its stage design and acoustics, and featured state-of-the-art lighting and construction techniques; and
- it is a distinguished example of Brutalist architecture in Canada, which, for its era, is well integrated with the city.

The Confederation Centre of the Arts was built with the intent to inspire Canadians, through heritage and the arts, to celebrate the origins and development of Canada as a nation. The centre was constructed between 1963 and 1965 in the modern Brutalist style to the designs of architect Dimitri Dimakopoulos, theatre designer George Izenour, and sculptor Gérard Tremblay. David L. Klepper and Russell Johnson de Bolt of Berenak and Newman Inc. were the acoustic consultants, while William M. C. Lam designed the lighting.

Character-Defining Elements

The key elements that contribute to the heritage character of this site include:

- the prominent location adjacent to Province House in the downtown core;
- the setting facing a square within the business district;
- the reinforced concrete frame and the exterior faced with solid, continuous walls of smooth-faced sandstone;
- the low geometric massing of the whole, and the one-storey central Memorial block with a glass roof consisting of a series of skylights, each a pyramidal diamond shape;
- the three surrounding pavilions arranged in a U-shaped cluster, each with a distinct geometric profile, the visually separate, yet functionally interconnected units of three and four storeys that comprise the whole;
- the interconnecting levels including a basement, a mezzanine, and balconies;
- interior pedestrian concourse and exterior plazas, terrasses and steps;
- the terrace with its sympathetic landscape design, flags and sculptures;
- the limited number and size, and strategic placement of the windows which provide indirect light;
- the original interiors and finishes;
- the functional design of the interior, including the theatre space with its adjustable spatial configuration and adjustable first six rows of seats and the orchestra pit that raise and lower;
- the theatre interior's cloud-shaped 'baldacchino' sculptures;
- the two-level pedestrian circulation, and interior concourse.

The massive complex in the heart of Charlottetown might seem a tiny bit intimidating on first glance – imposing architecture, a full city block, four large sandstone cubes. But once you’ve stepped onto the property of Confederation Centre of the Arts, you soon sense the people-friendly atmosphere that permeates this cultural centre that is officially Canada’s memorial to the founding fathers. Visitors enjoy ice cream and a live brass quintet, families crowd into the amphitheatre for a rousing (and free) noontime show by a corps of young “triple threats,” and culture buffs study public works of art.

Venture inside and the fun continues. Newly opened in 2015 is “The Story of Confederation,” a startlingly realistic replica (also free) of the original Confederation Chamber, where the 1864 Charlottetown Conference discussions led to the creation of a country. The original chamber in Province House next door is currently closed for conservation work, but the first-rate film and interpretation provide a full and entertaining explanation of nation building Canadian style. For more on Confederation, visitors take in a vignette or walking tour with the Confederation Players, easily recognized by their warm wool suits and charming gowns – really the only folks around town wearing top hats and carrying fluttering fans.

Stepping across the pavilion and into Confederation Centre Art Gallery, you find yourself in a completely new setting, surrounded by contemporary art exhibits and historical artifacts. The exhibits extend from the four upstairs galleries into the lower concourse of the complex, and the classic Brutalist-style architecture of the 1964 building protects the treasure trove of culture within, but a pleasant surprise in the partly underground hallways is the beautiful light-filled, marble-clad space called Memorial Hall, where the founding of Canada is officially commemorated.

It’s not possible to leave Confederation Centre without taking in some live theatre. The Charlottetown Festival is noted for its first-class Canadian musicals, most famously for Guinness-record setting *Anne of Green Gables – The Musical*. With tickets in hand, fully inspired by visual art and historical anecdotes, it seems a perfect moment to settle at a table in Mavor’s courtyard – the finest outdoor dining in the city - with dinner and a drink before the show.

Message from your Convener

The Confederation Centre is a must see for every Islander and visitor alike. We can see some of the best Canadian theatre productions, view the best of Canadian art, learn important Canadian stories of history, read a good book or borrow one from the library found there or just take a stroll along the historic block and enjoy the scenery. There is also a first class restaurant in the centre which caters to theatre patrons and locals. As well, there is a gift shop which has some interesting and different items to browse and purchase.

Tickets to the theatre are purchased at the box office or online. There are some special seat prices for all performances on main stage and locals can watch for offers of discount tickets for the premiere performances of most productions at the first of the season. Pick up a brochure at the ticket office or go online and plan your night out to see a performance to be remembered.

Here are a few questions to test your knowledge on the history of Confederation Centre of the Arts.

1. When did the Confederation Centre open?
2. Why was the centre built in the first place?
3. Who was instrumental in having the memorial built in P.E.I.?
4. Who paid for the building of the Confederation Centre?
5. What two special people were at the opening of the Centre?
6. Name two special architectural features of the building.
7. What is the name of the longest running theatre production at the centre?
8. About how many original productions have been showcased at the centre over the last 50 years?
9. How many performances have members of your group attended in the last ten years?
10. Name some of your favorite theatre productions and tell about some of the memorable scenes.

The information for this kit has been taken from the following online sites.

<http://www.confederationcentre.com/en/our-history.php>

<http://www.atlanticbusinessmagazine.net/article/confederation-centre-should-be-nationally-celebrated/>

<http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=7735>