The Queen Elizabeth Atrium’s cascading staircase provides an active option for vertical circulation through the original Sun Life Building (1929) that now operates as Canada House’s working wing. By stepping out into the atrium’s tight space, it provides multiple platforms that serve as spaces for social interaction delightfully washed by eastern sunlight from a massive skylight.
“We wanted to show Canada, not tell Canada,” is a line Canada’s High Commissioner to the U.K., Gordon Campbell, repeats several times as we tour Canada House, located on the western edge of London’s Trafalgar Square. His point is simple: the renovated and revitalized embassy is intended as a tour de force of contemporary Canadian design reflecting strong Canadian themes all deftly layered into an intricately restored Grade II heritage building. And such is its symbiotic interweaving of historic and Modern, that hard-to-please English Heritage, who monitored the project throughout, blessed the outcome as the best restoration in London at its opening.

Canada House’s almost classically balanced Trafalgar Square façade unites two buildings designed between 1823 and 1827 by British National Gallery architect Sir Robert Smirke. The Union Club component was purchased in 1923 with its conjoined twin, the Royal College of Physicians, added in 1963. Even though it was repaired after almost being sold in 1993, Canada House’s interior by 2012 was drab, rather shopworn and largely used only for occasional events. But with an enthusiastic Campbell installed, a new British-centric Conservative government in place and the adjacent Sun Life Assurance Building (1929) purchased, transformation was on order. Edmonton’s Stantec Architecture was tasked with the task of a complete makeover including consolidating all 240 dispersed staff into the expanded Trafalgar Square location.

Stantec’s mandate included a major infrastructure upgrade as well as inserting modern office spaces into Cockspur, indifferently renovated in the 1980s. Three connections through one-metre-thick walls separating the new building from the heritage wing were required. Natural light was to be teased into the new complex along with improved transparency from the square. An extensive heritage restoration of Canada House was demanded given what Campbell admits were highly destructive earlier interventions. And finally, the new High Commission had to emerge as a seamlessly integrated showcase for Canadian art and materials as well as manufactured and bespoke furniture and lighting design.

The Return of Light

Key to correcting Canada House’s dreary reputation involved first re-opening many lost windows. Not incidentally, the re-opening of numerous and generously-sized neo-classical windows opened views to and from the Square to ensure greater interactive transparency. They become “a really shining beacon of light, especially at night,” says Stantec’s Vancouver-based principal Noel Best. “You can really look right into the building and see it happening.”

Second was the restoration of the building’s many original skylights including two delightful oculi in the Ontario and B.C. rooms. A raft of closely packed and unsightly “dog house” skylights were replaced by flat glazing, now integrated into the large roof deck terrace that overlooks Trafalgar Square and ensures an attractive “fifth” elevation from surrounding buildings. The skylights also bring light into the re-intro
A Return to Grace

Lost or compromised heritage details have been meticulously restored. Insistent outdoor carpeting was stripped, exposing maple flooring that was brought back to its original sheen. Where required, new, carefully matched marble sourced from Canada was used, and Canadian Shield granite was introduced in Cockspur’s public lobby. As Canada is the world’s largest exporter of lumber, Campbell (not incidentally past-Premier of lumber-rich B.C.) wanted wood used at every opportunity, says Stantec’s London-based principal, Aaron Taylor. Thus, domestic red oak flooring, detailed with intricate parquetry inlays and other details were picked out in gold leaf to accent deeply coffered ceilings and panelled walls. Original and still-in-use brass door handles employing a maple leaf motif were recast to create approximately 100 additional ones used elsewhere in the building, adds Cindy Rodych, Stantec’s project leader (now principal of Winnipeg-based Rodych Integrated Design).

A Design Showcase

Canada House’s light-intense functional revitalization and rich heritage restoration stand on their own merits. But crucially, both work well to provide worthy galleries that showcase probably the largest out-of-country Canadian collection of historic and contemporary art, as well as domestically commissioned bespoke and manufactured furniture and lighting. To be inclusive, all of Canada House’s meeting rooms bear the names of Canada’s 10 provinces, three territories and three oceans. Major event rooms take their monikers from four prominent Prime Ministers: Macdonald; Laurier; Borden and Mackenzie King. The task was to populate each with art and furnishings that spoke to and came from their identified region.

In addition to their artistic merit, the selected artwork was carefully assessed and digitally mocked-up to ensure they responded well within each room’s physical characteristics. “We [were] very careful about where we have introduced art into the spaces, incorporating works even into the design of the frames and the design of the moldings around the walls,” explains Taylor. Of 281 pieces, 91 were newly approached for submissions. 29 designs from 16 artists were then converted into hand tufted wool carpets by Toronto’s Creative Matters for丢了. Another favourite Campbell saying is “look down at every turn.” One downward glance is an interesting one. With the return of two floors, acoustics mandated area carpets, but not just any off-the-shelf rugs. Instead, arts communities in each province or territory were approached for submissions. 25 designs from 16 artists where then converted into hand tufted wool carpets by Toronto’s Creative Matters for meetings and function rooms. This included four from Winnipeg-based multi-media artist Denise Prefontaine and two from P.E.L. painter Norma Jean Maclean, including her haunting early spring light on buildings in a coastal landscape for the P.E.L. room.

With the carpets literally as a base, the team worked with the Department’s own design group to identify Canadian furniture manufacturers. Rodych reached out to Stantec’s many provincially-based interior design leaders to identify the best bespoke designers. This region-specific sourcing included tables, chairs, credenzas and lounges, although where boardroom-type chairs were not available, commercial furniture firms from Ontario and Quebec, including Teknion, Nat- kömper, Krug and Kehrman, filled in. Through an intensive iterative process, multiple bespoke objects were commissioned that eloquently reflected the climate, landscape, plants, wildlife and human artifacts characteristic of the named room.

The most spectacular is by Omar Arbel of Bocci. His slim, chromatically entwined metal strands and glass globes (“snowflakes, although more amorphous,” says Rodych) cascade down through the core of the ultra-thin, gravity defying main staircase profile in Canada House’s elegant main entrance. It is evocative in its own right but its “structural quietness ensures it does not detract from the showcase stair,” adds Rodych.

More than a sum of its parts

With typical Canadian modesty, Campbell finishes our tour by saying, “blend don’t brag.” Similarly, Best concludes, “Canada House is not about some sort of radical intervention, it is more about careful, incremental steps. We could call it ‘layering on,’ but basically it was about always being ready to backtrack and reconsider. At the end of the day we made sure we were consistent in how we married the two.”

Notwithstanding its cohesive balance of old and new highlighted by rich heritage with the same wood used for the underside of the sails,” the Canada House is a fitting home-away-from-home for Canadians.