

# Quality gov't office space is imperative

## *sitelines*

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**G**OVERNMENTS need space for administrative services and personnel, and in a city the size of Winnipeg, it's a significant amount of space.

As governments search for ways to minimize costs, the expense of operating this space is open to scrutiny, and attempts are constantly being made to either reduce these costs or keep them in check.

Several decades ago, both the federal and provincial governments built their own buildings to house most of their administrative employees.

In the long run, this may be the most economical way to operate, but it requires initial (and more visible) spending — as opposed to rental costs, which can be treated as an ongoing operational "line item." Because renting space can provide flexibility, and because renting reduces obligations for large initial capital outlays, governments have tended to house more and more of their employees in leased space.

As leases expire (usually after either five or 10 years), governments start looking for the lowest-cost space the market can provide. This has sometimes led to such extremes as accommodating staff in large abandoned steel warehouse buildings in Winnipeg's industrial parks. This is perhaps not the best place to house administrative staff, and it can take a while before people remember that a city's centre is likely a better place for such work.

As this realization takes hold, "downtown first" is re-instituted as priority policy for leasing office space. The pendulum swings, and we are currently in an era in which downtown offices are again being sought for provincial and federal administration.

As building owners and developers compete to attract government tenants in our downtown, they must of course provide the required space at a cost lower than that of all competitors. As the musical chairs of moving departments to new cheaper-for-the-next-five-years locations takes place, the quality of selected space and of buildings can decline. This can result in lower-quality work environments — and when buildings are stripped to their bare minimum, the public environment suffers as well.

A recent example of this decline can be seen in the development of the new headquarters for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada on Hargrave Street.

The building presents an unwelcoming façade.

Materials and details are of poor quality, and the overall impression created by the building is that our government has no aspirations, either to present itself to the public, to tell the recipients of its services that they are important, or to tell its employees that they are valued.

Three solutions to this situation would lead to higher quality architecture and to a stronger image for government services:

The first of these would be to revert to the policy of constructing buildings for government use, a solution that would probably be cheapest in the long run.

The second would be to enter into long-term lease/buy-back contracts with strict performance, location and architectural standards.

And the third would be to insist on a higher level of architectural and technical performance within the current short-term leasing environment. Though this requires serious commitment, forethought and management from government tenants, it has been used successfully for some projects.

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The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada on Hargrave Street is an example of unappealing architecture in government offices.