

# 2.0 CENTRETOWN TODAY

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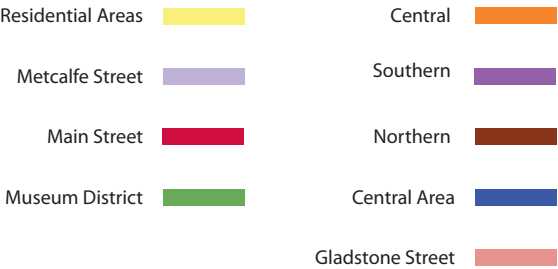
# 2.0 Centretown Today

Centretown can be characterized as a diverse, urban community providing a broad range of services to local and regional users. The assets of Centretown, such as the shops on Bank Street, the cafes and restaurants on Elgin Street and Somerset Street, the gay village on Somerset at Bank and the cultural attraction at the Museum of Nature are enjoyed not only by local residents, but by the City of Ottawa as a whole.

As presented to the right, Centretown is a complex urban neighbourhood comprised of a diversity of uses and places, each supporting a different character. The area supporting the greatest degree of diversity - both in terms of use and built form - is the central portion of Centretown between Kent Street and Elgin Street (the Core Study Area).

The following section provides a comprehensive review of the current conditions present within the Centretown from both a physical and policy perspective. Gaining an understanding of these urban conditions - and the impact they have had on the neighbourhood - is the starting point for preparing responsive recommendations for how the community should evolve in the future.

Illustrated to the right and listed below are the many different types of places and generalized character areas that comprise Centretown.





## 2.1 Policy Framework

It is essential that any proposal put forward is able to operate effectively within Ottawa’s existing planning framework, namely supporting the policies of the City’s Official Plan and the controls of the Zoning By-law.

### 2.1.1 The City of Ottawa Official Plan

The Official Plan for Ottawa provides a vision of the future growth of the city and a policy framework to guide its physical development. The policy framework for managing growth reinforces the qualities of the city that are most valued by residents, providing a strong focus on creating distinctly livable communities. The Official Plan is not a tool to limit growth, but rather to anticipate change, manage it and maintain options. (Section 1.1)

Through the policies presented in the Official Plan, the City of Ottawa will plan its future by pursuing strategic directions in four key areas:

- i. Managing Growth
- ii. Providing Infrastructure
- iii. Maintaining Environmental Integrity
- iv. Creating Livable Communities.

Proposals presented in this CDP support each of these four areas through the protection and expansion of housing choices for downtown living, creation of an intensified mixed-use residential and commercial destination, offering new and improved green spaces, providing stronger and safer pedestrian networks, and setting standards for the highest quality public realm and built form possible.

Although supporting all the Official Plan’s strategic directions are of value, contributing to the goal of Creating Livable Communities is perhaps most relevant for the community of Centretown. This objective includes delivering the City’s intensification objectives in a manner that is sensitive to established communities by requiring compatibility of form and function. Other policies presented in this section relevant to the future of Centretown include:

- demanding a better standard of urban design and architecture
- improving the supply of affordable housing (see sidebar)

- ensuring schools and community facilities meet local needs
- ensuring that sufficient land for parks is available and that existing green spaces are linked to the wider Greenspace Network
- conserving cultural heritage resources for the benefit of the community and posterity
- using Community Design Plans to translate the principles and policies of the Official Plan to the community scale and to be locally relevant

Schedule B of the Official Plan identifies that Centretown supports two urban policy areas, a General Urban Area and Traditional Mainstreet (along Bank Street, Elgin Street, Somerset Street, Bronson Avenue and Gladstone Avenue west of Bank Street). Within the lands designated General Urban Area, opportunities for intensification exist and will be supported. However, because such a large proportion of the city is designated General Urban Area, the scale of intensification will vary, depending upon factors such as the existing built context and proximity to major roads and transit. The Official Plan identifies that the quality of the proposed built form is a significant cornerstone of any future intensification in the General Urban Area.

### 2.1.2 The Centretown Secondary Plan

The existing Centretown Secondary Plan, dating from 1976, has carried forward two primary goals from the original Centretown Neighbourhood Development Plan (1974):

- to maintain and enhance the residential character of Centretown while allowing for a moderate increase in population; and
- to accommodate persons of all age groups, income levels, cultural backgrounds, lifestyles and household sizes wishing to live in Centretown with good quality, affordable housing.

Within the Centretown Secondary Plan, these overarching goals are further supported by a series of important objectives around improving social amenities, enhancing the image of Centretown, providing housing choice and affordability, directing land uses, protecting heritage assets, mitigating traffic impacts and providing and enhancing parks and green spaces.

#### Affordable Housing

A commitment to provide housing to a variety of people with a range of incomes levels is critical for growing cities . Providing affordable and appropriate housing for all residents is a fundamental building block of a healthy, livable communities.

The City of Ottawa recognizes the importance of providing housing for a range of users, and has embedded this aspiration into their formal planning policies. The City of Ottawa’s Official Plan states that *“the need to accommodate social diversity is a cornerstone of a livable community. Diversity in the housing supply is achieved through a mix of multiple and single-detached housing, provision of ownership and rental housing, housing affo dable to low- and moderate-income groups...”* (Section 2.5.2).

A target has been set by the City for 25 per cent of new rental and market housing units developed each year to be affordable (to the 40th income percentile and below). This target has been made statutory through its inclusion in the policies of the Official Plan (Section 2.5.2 Affordable Housing). To meet this affordable housing target, the City is willing to work with development partners to determine the best means by which they can contribute to achieving these targets. Targets can be met on site as well as through ‘alternative means’ such as:

- density bonusing
- meeting the requirement on alternative sites
- a contribution of land to the City

In support of providing a diversity of housing and achieving the Official Plan’s affordable housing target, the City has implemented a “Housing First” initiative. Under this initiative, when City-owned properties are sold the policy requires that 25 per cent of any housing developed on those lands be affordable. This initiative strives to ensure that surplus City land or proceeds from the sale of land are made available to achieve a minimum of 200 of the annual target of 500 units a year target through Action Ottawa.

The Centretown Community Design Plan fully supports the intent of the Official Plan to provide a diversity of housing types and tenures across the city. Where appropriate, it is recommended that future development partners work within the parameters established by the new Official Plan.

Section 3.4.1 of the Plan identifies a series of policies relating specifically to the future population and the “neighbourhood concept” for Centretown. This section promotes the retainment of Centretown’s existing character, while also recognizing that population growth and neighbourhood evolution is inevitable. Citing a potential population increase of 50% (representing approximately 10,000 new residents, equating to approximately 6,250 new dwellings), this section recognizes that such an increase will “benefit the retail commercial enterprises within Centretown and the adjacent Central Area. An increase in population in Centretown will also benefit the City-wide distribution of population and result in a more efficient use of existing public services and facilities.”

Section 3.4.2 presents a series of land use policies to help guide the future growth of the community. Highlighting the mixed-use nature of Centretown, the Secondary Plan Land Use Schedule is presented below and is comprised of 16 designations across six general land use classifications.

The majority of Centretown is designated as a residential area, comprised of a mix of low, medium and high profile buildings, supplemented by a Heritage designation. ‘High Profile’ designation can accommodate buildings ten storeys or more in height (as defined in Official Plan Amendment 76). These areas are clustered in the extreme northern portion of Centretown, north of Somerset. ‘Medium Profile’ can accommodate buildings from five to nine storeys. These areas are generally clustered in the central portion of the community between Elgin Street and Kent Street, south of Somerset. This designation also includes Bronson Avenue. ‘Low Profile’ accommodates structures up to four storeys in height. This designation is represented by the traditional lower rise areas that bookend Centretown to the east and the west. This designation is intended to preserve the existing housing stock and character of these neighbourhood areas. The Secondary Plan restricts commercial uses to those locations typically outside of Residential Areas.

Commercial designations in Centretown are focussed along two main streets - Elgin and Bank - as well as along the Queensway/Catherine Street and sections of Somerset Street. These areas are important as they act as both the local commercial centres as well as well-recognized commercial zones that serve the wider region. Commercial uses are generally limited to these districts, with the exception of a small Residential Office designation at Argyle and Metcalfe, five Heritage Commercial Areas and a Local Commercial Area that allow for retail and compatible commercial uses. The remainder of Centretown includes Major Open Space designations along the Rideau Canal, areas dedicated to Parking Areas and Institutional Use Areas (public and heritage), including parks, schools and community facilities.

Additional policies which are presented in the Secondary Plan and fully supported by this CDP study include:

- maintaining Elgin and Bank Streets as important mainstreets and commercial destinations for the area
- decreasing traffic in neighbourhood areas
- protection of designated heritage buildings from demolition
- conversion of one way arterial streets into two way, with a priority on Metcalfe and O’Connor Streets
- streetscape improvements, including the evolution of Metcalfe Street into a Civic Boulevard
- expansion of the cycle network
- ensuring that all new development will enhance the physical environment of Centretown
- the provision of additional community amenities, including a third community centre, to serve the existing and future population.





### 2.1.3 The City of Ottawa Zoning Bylaw

The main tool used to translate Official Plan and Secondary Plan land use policies into consistent decisions and ‘on the ground’ actions is the Zoning By-law. While an Official Plan sets out the municipality’s general policies for future land use, zoning by-laws put the plans into effect and provide for its day-to-day administration. The Zoning By-law sets out controls for the permitted uses and type of development by setting specific requirements that developments must follow. These standards include how land may be used, the types of buildings that are permitted and how they may be used, building heights, parking requirements, setbacks from the street, lot sizes and so forth.

In 2008, City Council approved the new Comprehensive Zoning By-law 2008-250, which harmonized the existing 36 zoning by-laws from the former municipalities into one by-law. The new By-law supports and implements many of the policies of the City’s 2003 Official Plan, which focuses growth within the urban part of the City; promotes increased transit ridership; emphasizes good urban design; and will achieve compact mixed-use communities over the next two decades.

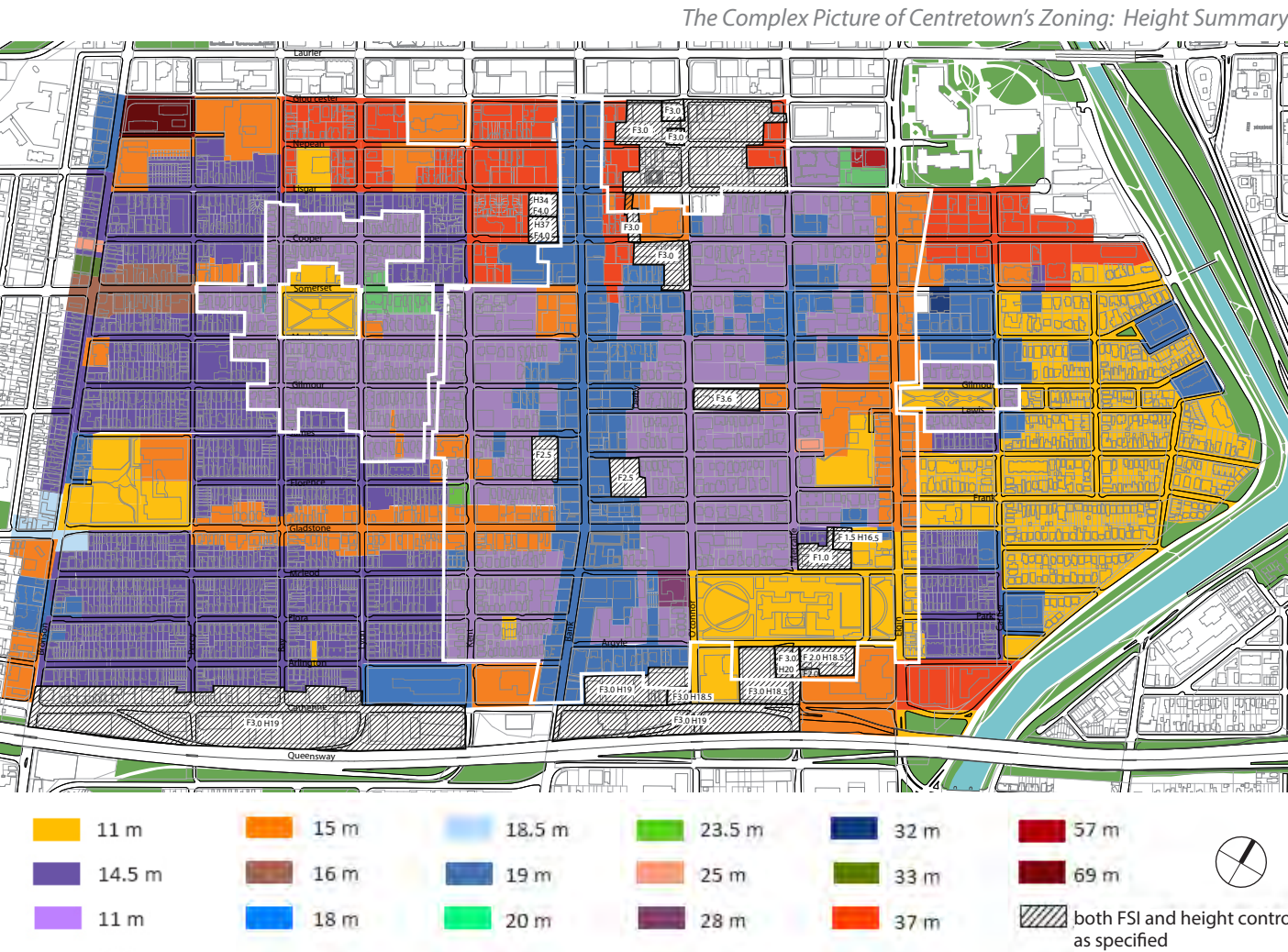
Today, Centretown supports four primary zoning classifications, including:

- Residential
- Mixed Use / Commercial
- Open Space & Leisure
- Institutional

Over the years, through a process of regular revision and amendment, the zoning for Centretown has become increasingly complicated. As identified in the 2006 evaluation of the Centretown Plan (“How’s the Neighbourhood?”), one of the major issues facing Centretown today *“has not been one blow but instead many individual attacks - the scourge of spot rezoning and variances.”* Today, Centretown is subject to more than 20 sub-zones, each supporting its own zoning controls.

A further level of complexity is the more than twenty areas supporting a ‘split zoning’ classification. Split zoning have both height controls and a floor space index [FSI]). Density controls are used to limit the gross floor area that may be built on the site. In addition to the general confusion in interpreting these two controls, applying these practices has sometimes resulted a conflict between height permission and the density allowance. For example, a site with a 3.6 FSI permission supports a height limit of only 11 to 14.5 metres. Typically, a 3.6 FSI building demands an 18 to 21m tall building to accommodate the permitted gross floor area. The City of Ottawa is moving away from FSI controls, and instead is relying more on built form controls such as height and setback requirements.

A final layer of complexity is added by Section 60 of the Zoning Bylaw, the Heritage Overlay (indicated in white), which indicates that despite the existing underlying zoning, the zoning requirements of the Overlay prevails within designated areas. In these locations, a new set of zoning standards is introduced, generally restricting height to no more than 14.5 meters.



Centretown’s zoning has not been updated comprehensively in decades. The complexity of its zoning, as presented above, and the frequency that it is revised is an indication that Centretown would benefit from a zoning review. This process could be used to establish more appropriate and clear standards to direct future change in a coordinated manner.

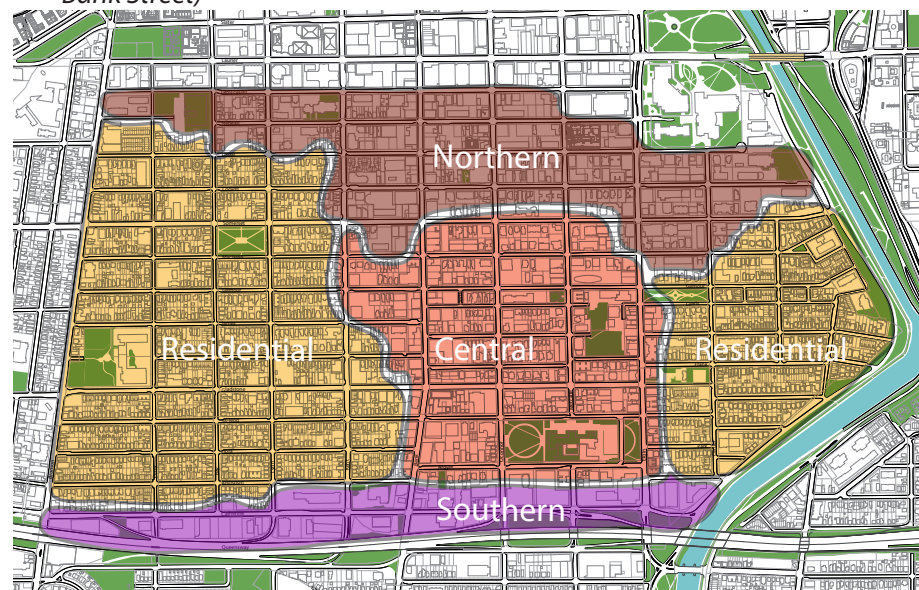


## 2.2 Understanding Centretown: Character Areas

The broad mix of uses which have found a home in Centretown as the area has grown and changed has resulted in a neighbourhood rich in character and diversity. Today, Centretown continues to evolve, due in large part to the recent influx of new condominium developments clustered in the northern portion of the community as well as infill and conversion developments in the more southern portions.

Today, the central portion of Centretown between Elgin and Kent has become the most varied - both in form and function. For more detailed analysis, this area can be divided into three general character bands, book ended by the more uniform traditional neighbourhood areas to the east and west. Character areas in the central portion of Centretown include:

- *The Northern Character Area:* Larger, taller building form, including residential, commercial and retail that provide transition to the traditional Downtown area / Central Area.
- *The Central Character Area:* Mixed use, mixed building typology.
- *The Southern Character Area:* Linear, low-rise employment zone with some residential
- *The Residential Character Areas:* Low-rise residential with mixed use secondary main streets (Somerset Street and Gladstone Avenue west of Bank Street)



Central Area (The Core)	Blue	Central Character Area	Orange
Northern Character Area	Red	Southern Character Area	Purple
		Residential Character Area	Yellow

Character Areas



## 2.2.1 The Northern Character Area

The northern portion of Centretown – generally defined as the zone north of Cooper/MacLaren Streets - tends to support larger buildings that are broader and taller than those buildings in areas to the south. This unique building typology is the consequence of a significant program of redevelopment over a thirty year period between the 1950s and early 1980s. During this period, the single detached homes that dominated the area were replaced with a mix of purpose-built office developments, commercial conversions, mid-to-high rise apartment buildings and surface parking lots. Scattered amongst these large apartment and office structures, is a small amount of the original low-rise urban fabric.

The form of buildings present in this northern portion of Centretown, combined with the function of these buildings and mix of uses they contain, has made this area act as a ‘transition zone’ between the high-rise, high-density, employment focused Central Area (north of Gloucester) and the less dense, smaller scale, lower rise, more residential areas south of MacLaren Street.

Like the rest of Centretown, this area supports a mix of fast moving one-way arterial roads and more quiet local streets. The arterials that run north-south divide the neighbourhood and deliver fast-moving traffic from the highway system to the downtown core. The function of the arterials as high volume highway off-ramps negatively impacts the quality of development, streetscape condition and mix of uses possible along these busy neighbourhood streets. Only Elgin Street and Bank Street – the area’s commercial ‘Mainstreets’ – function as typical mainstreets with slower two-way traffic, active uses at grade and pleasant pedestrian environments.

Although the east-west streets generally provide a more pleasant setting for pedestrians and development opportunities, there are some locations in the extreme northern portion of the area – situated between Gloucester Street and Lisgar Street - where backs of building are exposed to the street and street frontage conditions deteriorate. This is due to the shallowness of the blocks and the large format building typologies that overpower shallower parcels.

The combination of these factors have created development challenges that are unique to this part of Centretown. The mid-rise and high-rise buildings that line these east-west streets creates a canyon effect for pedestrians that often results in shadowing and windy conditions at street level. As buildings tend to be oriented on the east-west streets, it is frequently the ends of the building that abut the main north-south arterial streets, which creates a weak frontage on these important streets.

Stagnant for many years in the 1980s and 1990s, the area is currently undergoing a renaissance due to the trend for downtown living. Many new developments have been built on large surface parking areas and many more redevelopment opportunities remain.

Across this densely populated northern zone, there are no publicly-owned park or open spaces to meet local recreational needs.

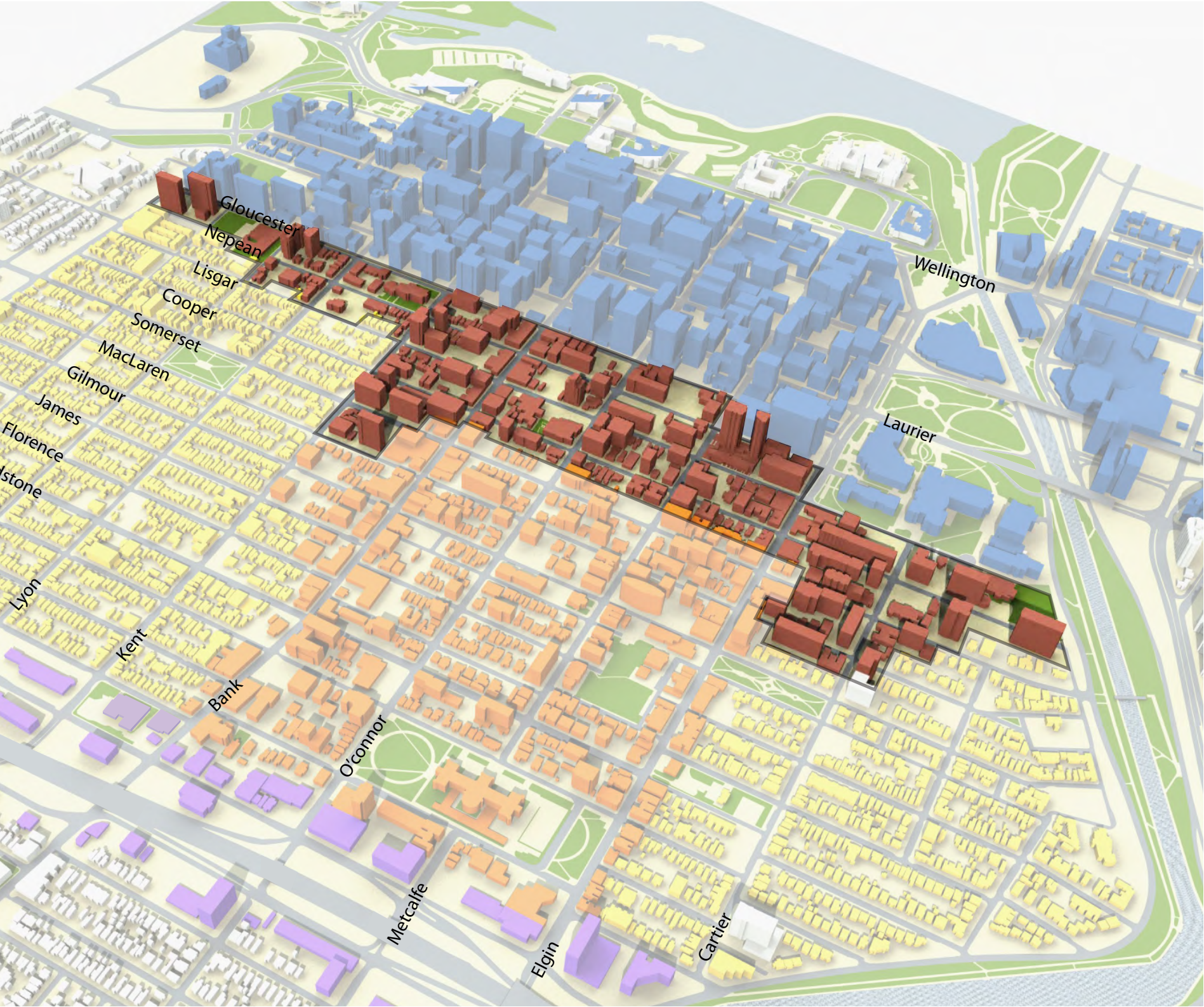
### The Northern Character Area Today

1. *Land Use*
  - Mix of uses including residential, commercial, institutional and leisure.
  - Supports two important commercial corridors along Bank and Elgin Streets, with a smaller third commercial cluster along portions of Somerset Street.
  - Area is dominated by purpose built residential apartment buildings. Large areas of surface parking are also present, some of which have been approved for, or are undergoing redevelopment.
  - Development parcel sizes vary, but are considerably larger than in other parts of Centretown.
  - Development parcels are typically narrow (shallow depths), creating challenging development conditions.

2. *Built Form*
  - Building typologies vary from townhouses, to low-rise offices to high-rise residential buildings and offices.
  - Although a variety of building heights are present, tall buildings dominate.
  - Taller buildings are typically ‘slab style’ built in the 1960s and 1970s. Slab style building create a strong street wall condition, resulting in shadow and wind impact.
  - In more recent years, some taller, slimmer condominium developments have also been introduced.
3. *Heritage*
  - Some historic buildings from Group 1 and Group 2 are present in this area, but not in large concentrations.
  - A small portion of this area is designated as a Heritage Conservation District.
4. *Public Realm*
  - Streetscape treatment is generally poor quality.
  - In several locations, private parking lots are encroaching on the public right-of-way.
  - Except for Bank Street and parts of Elgin Street, other north-south streets are not pedestrian friendly.
  - Area does not support any publicly accessible City-owned park spaces.
5. *Future Developments*
  - A number of surface parking lots remain, which will likely be used for future redevelopment.
  - Many of these surface parking are substantial enough to support larger scale developments.
  - Several applications for intensification have already been approved. Refer to section 2.9 below.



Northern Character Area



Existing Conditions in the Northern Character Area





## 2.2.2 The Central Character Area

The central area of Centretown is generally defined as the area south of Cooper/Maclaren Streets to Argyle/Arlington Streets. The scale of the structures, the quality of the buildings and the completeness of the streetscape makes walking in this part of Centretown one of the best pedestrian experiences of the downtown. At the southern tip of the neighbourhood, the community has benefited from the recent restoration and refurbishment of the 100 year old Museum of Nature. New park space is also planned adjacent to the museum.

Unlike the area to the north, which is characterized by larger buildings frequently above 10 storeys, this area is generally characterized by a mix of smaller-scale low and mid-rise buildings organized in a finer-grained development pattern.

Within the internal part of the district, buildings are more intimate in scale and support a tighter urban pattern. Several streets in this area provide a strong heritage identity and a large portion of the area has been designated as a Heritage Conservation District. In more recent years, many of the heritage homes have been converted into multi-unit apartments and commercial businesses (offices, restaurants, health care services, etc).

The district also supports several important institutional uses, including national museums, embassies, government services and two schools. The high level of conversion as well as the role of Bank and Elgin Streets as commercial corridors has transitioned this area from an area dominated by large single detached homes to a highly mixed-use apartment neighbourhood.

Although this part of the Centretown is very close to open spaces along the Rideau Canal (largely NCC controlled), it would benefit from stronger connections to these important community assets. Bank and Elgin Streets are still the best pedestrian corridors in the area; however their character changes as they transition to the south.

This district is facing redevelopment pressures, with new developments proposed or under construction along its major corridors (namely Bank Street).

### The Central Character Area Today

#### 1. Land Use

- Mix of uses present, although the area supports a strong residential base. Other uses include commercial (retail), institutional and leisure (parks, open spaces).
- Supports two important commercial corridors along Bank and Elgin Streets. Retail uses are mostly concentrated along these two corridors with some additional commercial uses along Somerset Street.
- In some locations, the large single detached homes have been converted into commercial uses, such as professional offices, restaurants or retail stores.
- Area supports an outstanding institutional node, anchored by the Museum of Nature.

#### 2. Built Form

- There is a variety of heights in this area, but there is a large concentration of low-rise to mid-rise buildings especially in the form of single detached houses and low-rise heritage apartment buildings.
- Some larger scale buildings were introduced in the 60's and 70's, however the overall character of this area is defined by low to mid density developments.
- Development parcels sized vary. The periphery of the area supports larger parcel sizes (especially along Bank Street), but the internal portions of the zone have much smaller parcels.

#### 3. Heritage

- There are many heritage buildings in pockets, which add to the heritage value of this area.
- The majority of the area is protected by a Heritage Conservation District designation.
- Although much of this area is designated as a Heritage Conservation District, the heritage value of some areas is questionable. There are however, several pockets of outstanding heritage quality that merit full protection.

#### 4. Public Realm

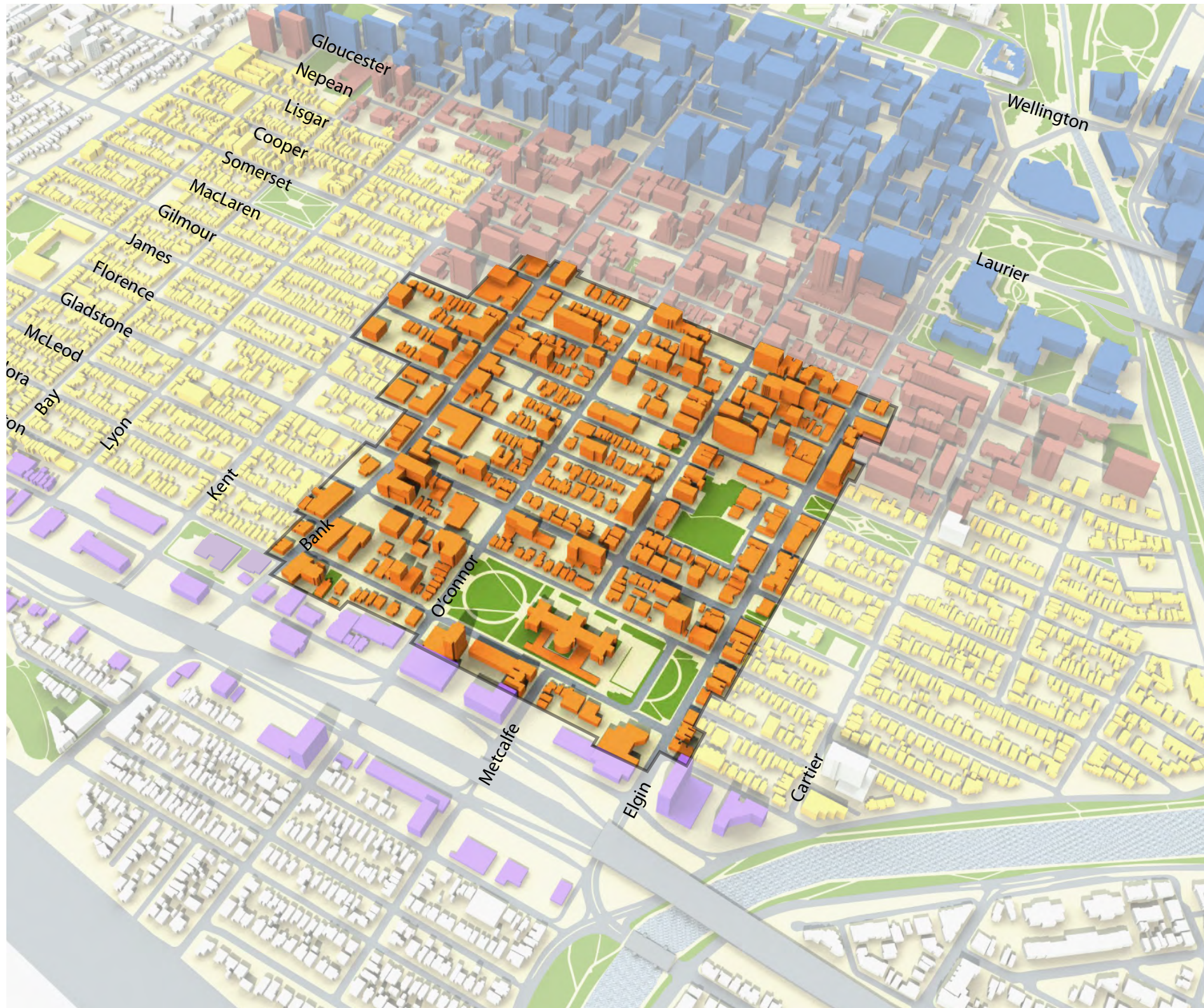
- Although formal park spaces are present in this area, the wider area remains under-serviced.
- Quality of the streetscape along the residential streets is quite good. This needs to be protected.
- In some locations, private parking lots are encroaching on the public right-of-way.
- The character of Bank and Elgin Streets transition as they move southwards from Gilmour Street.
- Character of O'Connor Street as a north-south arterial road is generally poor.

#### 5. Future Developments

- Due to the less frequent presence of surface parking lots, lower-rise context and tighter parcel configuration, opportunities for development of larger-scale buildings in this area are more limited than in the Northern or Southern Character Areas.
- Most potential redevelopment site are concentrated along Bank Street, although a small number of infill sites are also present within the internal area.
- Some new developments have already started to happen, ranging from mid to high-rise. These have been introduced fronting the arterial north-south streets and not typically along the residential east-west streets.



Central Character Area



Existing Conditions in the Central Character Area





### 2.2.3 Southern Character Area

The Southern Character Area is very different when compared to the other two character areas in the central portion of Centretown. This area acts as a buffer to the busy Highway 417. Partially due to its location adjacent to the 417, the area supports significant parcels of underutilized land – either in the form of surface parking lots or residual open spaces. These green spaces are inaccessible and appear as ‘left over’ spaces in the neighbourhood.

The area is dominated by employment uses, typically comprised of office, light industrial, services or retail. Although building footprints are large, buildings tend to be low-rise and support their own surface parking areas. There are also limited residential uses in this area.

The area is very car dominated and Catherine Street is generally used as a collector road for Highway 417. The level of traffic on this route, the proximity to the highway and the poor streetscape quality make Catherine Street an unfriendly environment for pedestrians.

#### The Southern Character Area Today

##### 1. Land Use

- It is a mix of uses, but employment and retail are dominant.
- Employment uses are well served by direct access to the highway system.
- It is close to institutional nodes including the Museum of Nature and schools.
- Ottawa’s main bus station is located in this area, but its long-term future is uncertain. A rezoning application has recently been approved to accommodate high-rise development should the station move in the future.

##### 2. Built Form

- Most of the buildings are low- to mid-rise. A small number of higher-rise buildings are also present.
- There are many stand-alone buildings with on-site surface parking.
- The building footprints are typically larger than those in the Central Area.
- Building parcel sizes vary but tend to be quite large along the highway corridor and Catherine Street.

##### 3. Heritage

- There are two Group 2 heritage buildings located where Catherine Street intersects with the north/south streets.

##### 4. Public Realm

- It is not a pedestrian-friendly corridor. Quality of the streetscape is poor.
- This area supports no dedicated parks or open spaces. However, it is in close proximity to important public open spaces, including the Museum of Nature green space and the Rideau Canal.
- Open spaces adjacent to the highway are in poor condition and disconnected from the wider green space system.

##### 6. Future Developments

- The large parcels, surface parking lots and proximity to the Queensway, suggest that there is potential for significant future redevelopment in this area.
- The Beaver Barracks CCOC housing project is currently nearing completion. In addition, there is interest in redeveloping the Voyageur Bus Station site.
- An application at 203 Catherine Street for a 23 storey tower was recently approved by Council, with additional development interest on other sites along Catherine Street.



Southern Character Area



Existing Conditions in the Southern Character Area

