

Unlocking the vault: Glenbow Museum's bold new chapter

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The new, futuristic-looking Glenbow Museum at the JR Shaw Centre for Arts & Culture in Calgary is scheduled to reopen in 2026.

Once called “a vault” for its imposing design and limited accessibility, Calgary’s Glenbow Museum is on the cusp of a dramatic transformation. With thick concrete walls, minimal windows and a

barely noticeable entrance, the museum's brutalist architecture stood in stark contrast to the vibrant stories housed within.

Now, a \$205-million renovation aims to bring those stories – and the building itself – into the light.

The imposing eight-storey structure, which has been closed since 2021 and opened in 1976, wasn't initially built as a tourist destination – but as a workplace for conservationists and a controlled environment to store the museum's collection, says Glenbow president and CEO Nicholas Bell.

Nevertheless, the museum is a cultural institution. Over the years, it has welcomed thousands of visitors and been listed as the city's best art gallery by [Best of Calgary](#) more than once.

"Over the decades, the staff did an extraordinary job of building a community through accessible programming, and the museum has had a lot of recognition nationwide," says Mr. Bell. "But it was really fighting against its physical footprint."

A brutalist relic

Architecture trends in the 1970s didn't help Glenbow's vibes. "Glenbow was built in a quasi-Canadian brutalist style, which was meant to be kind of monolithic," says Robert Claiborne, creative director and partner at DIALOG, the lead architect and designer behind the transformation. "People weren't comfortable going inside because they didn't really feel welcome there."

The structure of the former Glenbow was robust, constructed with unusually thick concrete walls, floors and columns to support the weight of the museum's collection, says Mr. Bell. Visitors could only access three of the eight floors, with the remaining levels reserved for storage and conservation work.

Mr. Claiborne's plans included demolishing the interior while retaining the structure's skeleton. He's a staunch believer in restoring and reimagining old buildings, rather than tearing down and building anew. The team, including development manager Colliers, construction services company EllisDon and RJC Engineers, were on board.



Glenbow's design plans include a stunning, can't-be-missed entrance (pictured), a skylight that filters light throughout the museum, double-height ceilings, glass panels and more.

DIALOG/SUPPLIED

Light at the museum

When reimagining Glenbow, Mr. Claiborne says bringing in natural light was his first order of business. However, he acknowledges that adding light into an art gallery needs to be tightly controlled to protect the work from damage.

The sturdiness of Glenbow meant the building could take a lot of demolition, so DIALOG took it down to its bones. The architecture and design firm made use of all eight storeys, allowing visitors to see the conservation work and storage facilities on the higher levels.

The design plans include a skylight that filters light throughout the museum, double-height ceilings, glass panels and walls along the staircase so patrons can see behind the scenes, and a stunning, can't-be-missed entrance, welcome after years without an official front door.

DIALOG's design will also include architectural details that capture and control light inside and out. The museum's Salon gallery combines architecture and nature to take advantage of the best light. In 2026, the space will open with an exhibition that features Canadian journalist, media personality and fashion icon, Jeanne Beker. It's being co-curated by Ms. Beker herself and designer Paul Hardy.

"We were going to bring light in many ways, but it needed to be done very thoughtfully. North light is what you want because it isn't direct sunlight," says Mr. Claiborne. "In the Salon gallery, we pushed out a wall and created what we call the 'pillow window,' which brings in perfect north light."

Light will also be found on the new fifth-floor rooftop terrace, designed by American artist Maya Lin, which will feature gardens, city views and a 13,000-square-foot public space.



The newly renovated ground floor of the Gardiner Museum in Toronto will include a fully equipped makerspace (pictured), a community learning centre and an Indigenous gallery space.

RENDERING BY MONTGOMERY SISAM ARCHITECTS/COURTESY OF GARDINER MUSEUM

Imbuing museums with life

Mr. Bell expects the reopened Glenbow to become a major downtown Calgary attraction, drawing in both locals and tourists.

Through multimillion-dollar investments from all levels of government and a public fundraising campaign, Glenbow is set to reopen in 2026 at its new home, to be named the JR Shaw Centre for Arts and Culture. Thanks to a generous \$25-million endowment from Canada's Shaw family, admission to the museum will be permanently free for all patrons, making the space more accessible and inclusive.

Glenbow is just one of several museums and cultural arts centres in Canada to receive government funding for a renovation. Fredericton's new [Performing Arts Centre](#) will replace the city's former Playhouse Theatre and is scheduled to open in 2026, while Saint John's [New Brunswick Museum](#) and Toronto's [Gardiner Museum](#) have announced multi-million-dollar redesign plans. Many of these structures are 40 to 60 years old and nearing their natural ends.

Gabrielle Peacock, executive director and CEO of the Gardiner Museum, is looking forward to welcoming patrons back to the renovated first floor in fall 2025. "A fully-equipped makerspace, community learning centre and a new gallery of Indigenous ceramics will engage both our local community and visitors to Toronto," she says. "The full-scale transformation of the ground floor will bring our physical space in line with our mission of building community with clay, while emphasizing what connects us as humans."

When it comes to Glenbow, Mr. Claiborne's ultimate goal is designing an inviting space that fosters a community connected by art and culture. "There is something about when you imbue a building with joy that the community loves," he says. "I hope when it's built, Glenbow just becomes one of the most comfortable, inviting places in the city."