

The Temple of Science

Meet Our Neighbours: A building with its roots in the Great Depression, 100 Sussex Drive, across from DFAIT, stands as a lasting testament to the importance of science and technology in the national interest. By Leslie Meerburg



photos: Harry Turner/NRC

The public areas at 100 Sussex Drive feature rich details such as marble steps, elaborate paintings and various carvings.

Did you know?

Given its similarity to Buckingham Palace, 100 Sussex Drive has often been called a Palace scale model.

Above the main entrance, under the name National Research Laboratories, is a Biblical quotation chosen by former prime minister Mackenzie King: "Great is truth and mighty above all things: / It endureth, and is always strong: / It liveth and conquereth for evermore / The more thou searchest, the more thou shalt marvel."

The NRC chose this spot because it is next to the hydroelectric generating station on the Rideau River, which provided most of its electricity until the 1970s.

When beholding the 16 Doric columns soaring nearly 20 metres into the air on the building high above the shores of the Ottawa River, one could be forgiven for imagining 100 Sussex Drive to be anything but what it is: a working laboratory replete with world-class scientists, cutting-edge facilities and game-changing research.

Opened in 1932 as the first permanent home of the National Research Council of Canada (NRC), the building is testament to Canada's natural bounty. The outside walls are of Wallace sandstone from Nova Scotia, resting atop a base of Scotstown granite from Quebec. The interior halls are finished in Tyndall limestone from Manitoba, the cut surfaces of the stone revealing a number of fossil specimens.

Upon entering the building through a richly detailed doorway, a visitor sees eight broad marble steps leading to the main rotunda. A glance up at the ceiling shows a painting of the night sky as seen each March 22 at 9 p.m. Throughout the lobby are carvings: mathematical symbols, Ohm's law, a telegraph key, alchemy symbols, sunrises, seashells and maple leaves. The rotunda leads to a 300-seat auditorium, its walls Italian marble, with rounded corners and fluted columns. Elsewhere, the building features a sizable library, as well as countless laboratories where more than half a dozen Nobel laureates have worked. The Nobel Committee called the building the world centre of research in the field of molecular spectroscopy, and a British Nobel laureate called it a mecca of science—making it an apt complement to DFAIT's Lester B. Pearson Building opposite, which honours another Canadian Nobel Prize winner.

The building was the NRC headquarters until the 1960s, when the headquarters moved to the agency's extensive Montreal Road campus in Gloucester. Today 100 Sussex Drive, called the NRC Sussex Laboratories, houses more than 300 of the Council's 4,000-strong workforce. Research performed here ranges from developing treatments for neurodegenerative diseases (like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's) and immunotherapies against infectious diseases (like meningitis) to using ultrafast lasers and light to push the boundaries of knowledge through molecular science.

With facilities in every province, NRC's scientists and engineers help find solutions to life's common risks and hazards, solutions like clean drinking water and air, safe transportation, and the prevention of deadly diseases. With its partners, today's NRC also works to develop alternative energy sources; advanced, light-weight materials; and better medical technologies. It is a multidisciplinary research and development organization working to keep Canadian science and technology light years ahead of the competition.

Leslie Meerburg is a media relations advisor with the NRC. She first visited 100 Sussex Drive as an Ottawa high school student researching a class physics project. That project marked the end of her physics career, but sparked the beginning of one in science communication.