

fees, landscaping and furniture, was \$27.2 million. Construction began in May 1970; the first moves of staff came three years later. The building was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on August 1, 1973.

The Pearson Building was indeed no ordinary departmental office block, nor was it intended to be. Zoning restrictions along Sussex Drive—in particular a height restriction of 46 metres, or 150 feet—ruled out building a single tower. The architect envisaged four low towers, rising from a common lobby acting as a plaza or square and furnished with the indoor equivalent of park benches so that people could sit and watch the world go by.

The design of the building is a clear illustration that form follows function. The hierarchical dispositions of Tower A, backed by support services housed in towers B and C, are almost an exact reproduction of the department's structure and internal lines of communication as they were conceived at the time. It was almost as if the organizational chart had been built up into the air and the skin of a building fitted down over it.

How, then, has the Pearson Building worked out in practice? It was well designed and well built. Thankfully, it has been well maintained. The building has become familiar as the heart of the Sussex Drive streetscape.

In one important respect, however, through no fault of those who planned and built it, the building has not been entirely satisfactory over much

of its lifetime. In 1982, the Trudeau government decided to amalgamate the international trade and foreign relations functions into a single department, succeeding in creating a kind of permanent seismic disturbance in government organization. While the building had provided for one minister, the various versions and amendments of integration over nearly 30 years have usually envisaged three, and sometimes even five. A close examination reveals some evidence of overcrowding, of suites of offices shoehorned into spaces never planned to accommodate them.

The Pearson Building served the original departmental concept for which it was designed for only nine years of its existence, and has served a quite different concept for three times as long, doing so quite successfully—surely a tribute to both the building and the people who have worked in it. The continuing extraordinary utility for the government and the taxpayer of its special facilities, its excellent state of maintenance and its contribution to its surroundings continue to justify to outside observers the judgment that this is the “best government building in Canada.” And while it may seem strange to call a structure only 35 years old a heritage building, the Lester B. Pearson Building, in its relatively short life, has indeed become part of the heritage of the capital—and of the nation.

James H. (Si) Taylor, a heritage activist, was a member of the foreign service from 1953 to 1993. This article is adapted from an address he gave to Heritage Ottawa last January in the Cadieux Auditorium of the Pearson Building. See it at Our World Online.

Inside stories

When the Pearson Building was designed, provision was made for an operations centre on the 8th floor of Tower A. The need for such a facility had arisen with the October Crisis of 1970. In the early days of the crisis, External Affairs coordinated an ad-hoc, inter-departmental team that worked together on a 24-hour basis.

The clean horizontal roofline of Tower A is broken by a length of black pipe, says Si Taylor, “as if someone had installed a wood stove in the Minister’s office below.” The chimney was connected to a furnace in which classified waste was burned in the middle of the night. It remains visible today but is no longer used.

Work in progress: Photos taken between 1970 and 1973 show 125 Sussex Drive as parkland and the Lester B. Pearson Building as it rises to completion. Thanks to the reference staff of DFAIT’s Jules Léger Library for these images and other assistance.

