

# Building a Legacy

By James H. Taylor

**D**uring the years when the Lester B. Pearson Building was being planned, built and brought into service, I was one of the hundreds of employees who were consulted about its design, who were encouraged to make suggestions about what it should contain, and who eventually worked in it. For a time, as Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs between 1985 and 1989, I became something like a general manager—or perhaps “chairman of the tenants’ association”—of the building. Thus, I have a personal view of much that is right, serviceable and even beautiful about the building, as well as a sense of some of its flaws and curiosities.

To begin, let me say something about how the Pearson Building came to be. Let us go back to Ottawa as it was in the years just after the Second World War: a sub-Arctic lumber town only beginning to be transformed into a capital worthy of the country. Sussex Drive was intended to link Parliament to Rideau Hall, following the line of the Ottawa River. Along its north side, there had long existed a row of heritage buildings. The south side of the street was a totally different matter. It still showed signs of its industrial origins. By the early 1950s, Sussex Drive was rebuilt and many older



James H. (Si) Taylor, former Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, says the Pearson Building was “no ordinary departmental office block.”

houses and industrial structures were cleared to create a strip of parkland along its south side, which was ready to receive a new generation of buildings of a character appropriate to a ceremonial avenue.

By the early 1960s, when planning for the Pearson Building began, the Department of External Affairs had grown far beyond its modest origins above a barbershop on Bank Street. One of the most important practical reasons for planning the building was simply so that the department could be housed under one roof, with all the advantages of a single address.

The building would cover about seven acres and provide over a million square feet of floor space. It was to be adequate to support departmental growth from about 2,000 people, the 1960 figure, to about 3,200 people 20 years on. The budget was \$25 million; the actual cost, exclusive of architects’

