

LESTER B. PEARSON BUILDING

A MONUMENT TO CANADIAN DIPLOMACY



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Situated on Sussex Drive, along the ceremonial route that connects Parliament Hill to Rideau Hall, is the Lester B. Pearson Building. Unapologetically a creature of the 1970s, this sprawling complex of concrete towers draws heavily on the Late Modern and Brutalist forms of architecture, and remains – more than 50 years after its opening – the beating heart of Canada’s diplomatic corps.

The project to build the complex ties back to the era of public service expansion that dominated Ottawa in the 1950s and 1960s, and which came to define Canada as an internationally engaged country. Construction started in 1970 and was completed three years later. Design of the building was led by the Toronto firm of Webb Zerafa Menkès (known today as WZMH) – the same team that would go on to design the CN Tower.

The company’s brief in Ottawa was rather different in character but no less demanding. Its goal was to consolidate the offices of the Department of External Affairs, then in the midst of an expanding postwar mandate, into a single modern facility that projected a dignity and international stature appropriate for Canada’s diplomats and foreign visitors and dignitaries.

The architects responded with a large, multi-tiered, irregularly shaped complex comprising four office towers ranging from four to ten storeys in height. The towers were arranged around a shared central core and raised atop a monolithic podium connected to exterior terraces. The combination of the Late Modern and Brutalist architectural styles – with large-scale precast concrete panels, deeply recessed bands of windows, and flat rooflines – combined to give the complex a strong sense of horizontality, solidity, and permanence.

Inside, the building’s ceremonial ambitions were even more apparent: a grand double-height lobby finished to a high standard, cast bronze entrance doors, a dedicated auditorium and conference room, and, on its upper floors, a full suite of ministerial accommodation and formal protocol rooms designed specifically for hosting visiting foreign officials.



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‘Fort Pearson’ – a symbol of Canada’s influence on the world stage

The building was officially opened on August 1, 1973 by Queen Elizabeth II. In her inaugural remarks, the Queen praised the building as a symbol that reflected Canada’s expanding influence on the global stage, and expressed joy at the fact that the inauguration was being held on the event of Ottawa’s hosting her first Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

It was a fitting choice to name the building after Lester B. Pearson. Pearson, who served as Prime Minister between 1963 and 1968, was a skilled diplomat who helped shape the post-World War Two order. During his career, he played a role in shaping the creation of both the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Famously, he is credited with defusing the Suez Crisis in 1956 when he proposed the creation and deployment of an impartial United Nations peace and police force. His role in brokering the conflict earned Pearson the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957. He remains today the only individual Canadian citizen to be awarded the prize for their diplomatic actions. It should come as no surprise to learn that the building that bears his name today has also earned the nickname “Fort Pearson” among those who work there.

Over the next five decades, the story of the building remained largely unchanged. It served, and continues to today, as the epicentre of Canadian foreign policy, home to more than 3,000 employees.

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In these regards, solidity must be considered a good thing. In others, it is less prized. The Lester B. Pearson Building saw no major rehabilitations throughout its first 50 years of service, even as its systems and structure steadily aged.

That changed with the launch of a sweeping, multi-phase rehabilitation project. Announced by Public Services and Procurement Canada in 2017 and started in 2019, the 10-year, \$750-million project calls for a complete refit of the four towers with a sharp focus on employee wellness, universal accessibility and environmental sustainability. The plan calls for the project to be delivered in four phases, with each tower modernized separately in an effort to minimize disruptions to operations.

The refit of Tower D was completed in the summer of 2021, work on Tower B completed in 2024. Major construction on Tower C started in 2024, with completion expected in 2027, while the timeline for the final phase of the work – on Tower A – is being re-evaluated.

The project has also prompted reflection on the building's setting, since it stands on Indigenous land. Public Services and Procurement Canada has indicated it is exploring opportunities to incorporate permanent land acknowledgments and Indigenous art into both the interior and exterior design as the rehabilitation proceeds.

The building's role as a living showcase of Canadian identity has evolved in other, smaller ways over the years. At the complex's opening in 1973, two large and stylized landscape murals, titled Canada East and Canada West and created by Quebec modernist master Alfred Pellon, were brought to the lobby from Canada's first diplomatic mission in Brazil. The murals were seen as early examples of Canadian cultural diplomacy.

There they resided until 2011 when then Prime Minister Stephen Harper ordered his newly appointed Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird to replace the paintings with a large photo portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. This move was timed to coincide with a royal visit by Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge. It was met with backlash from some who characterized it as an imperialist gesture that ignored Quebec culture and modern Canadian identity.

In 2015, newly elected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared the murals be returned to the lobby of the building, and there it remained until 2020, when the structure was cleared out to make way for renovations. It will be returned to the building upon completion of the work. The integration of these and other works of art was specified as part of the building's designated heritage value in 2013.

Today, even as construction crews continue their work tower by tower, the Lester B. Pearson Building endures as one of the most architecturally distinctive and historically significant buildings along Ottawa's ceremonial route.