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*Review by Detlef Mertins*

# Redefining THE SPACES OF MODERNITY

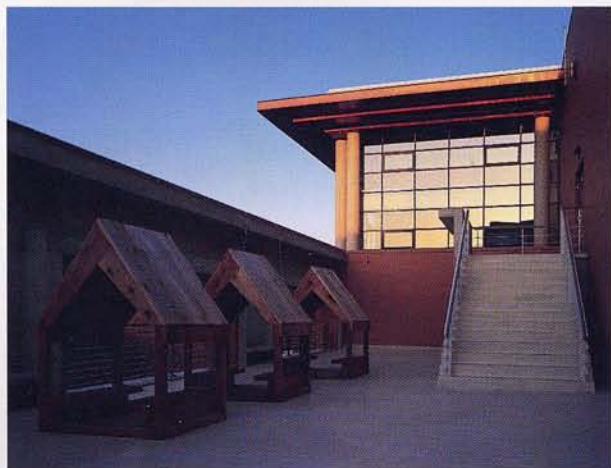
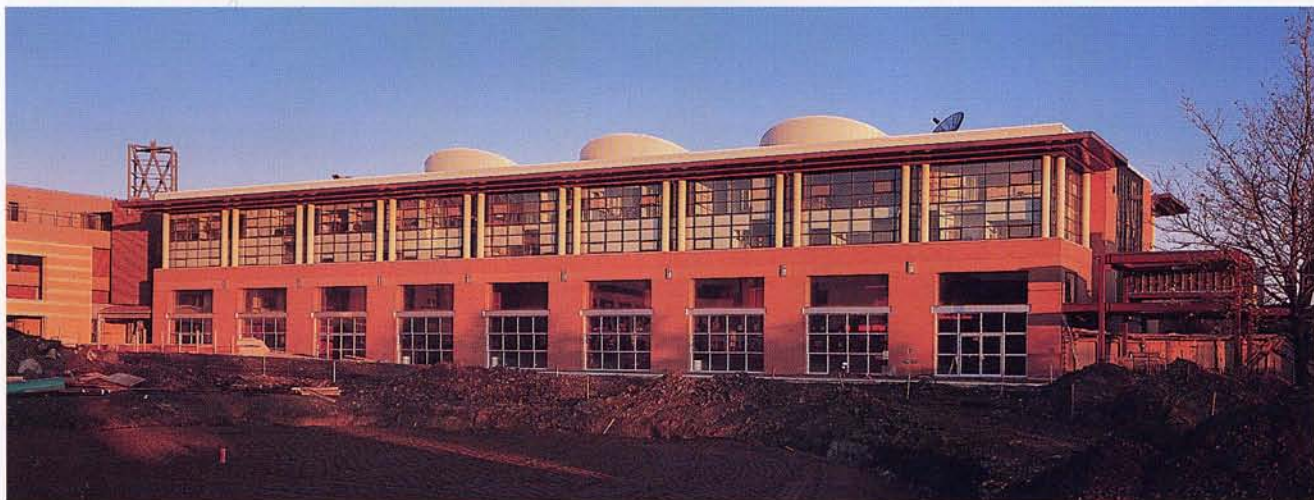
Five years ago, the Toronto Modern exhibition and symposium sought to reckon not only with the heritage of modernism in Toronto, but also with its legacy—its implications for the present. Fueled by debates in Europe, this event gave expression to a growing disenchantment with the historicizing postmodernism of the 1970s and early 1980s, and gave momentum to the renewal and reformulation of modernity that was under way in the schools of architecture and in some local practices. By early last year, “Modernism in the 90s” had become sufficiently mainstream to be the topic of a

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*Detlef Mertins is an architect, critic and professor of architecture at the University of Toronto.*

# YORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT CENTRE

NORTH YORK, ONTARIO



Top: south facade, facing onto the campus's new common. "The building is, in the first instance, a modest rectangular block that is both modern and classicizing..." The colonnade's glazed doors are raised in summer to open up the building to the landscape. Left: inside the colonnade. Above: terrace off the child care centre at second level.

**Architect:** A.J. Diamond, Donald Schmitt and Company

**Design team:** A.J. Diamond (principal), Philip Beesley (project architect), George Friedman, Michael Leckman, Marie Black, Dalibor Cizek, Stuart Feldman, Anne Marie Fleming, John Iwanski, Jarle Lovelin, Tracey Winton

**Project Management:** UMA Spantec Ltd.

**Structural:** Read Jones Christoffersen

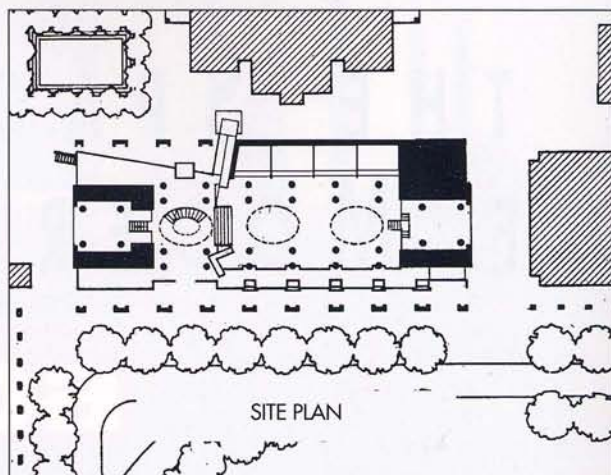
**Mechanical:** Merber Corporation

**Electrical:** Carinci Burt Rogers Engineering

**Furnishings:** A.J. Diamond, Donald Schmitt and Company; Core Design Services Inc.

**Computer imaging:** Baynger Northey Assoc.

**Photos:** Steven Evans



forum in this magazine.

The "new modernism" of recent years has been generated through selective appropriations and transformations of previous modernisms in 20th-century architecture. In Toronto, a selection from amongst the most intelligent of the current projects (consider, for instance, the new OAA Headquarters by Ruth Cawker, Woodsworth College by KPMB, houses by Donald McKay, Steven Fong and Natale Scott Browne, housing by John van Nostrand, and pavilions by Shim & Sutcliffe and Brown & Storey) demonstrates that this renewal has been heterogeneous and experimental. While these terms could also be used to describe the competing avant-gardes in Europe after World War I, the new modernism is no longer burdened either by the desire for millennial *Aufhebung*—the definitive overcoming of 19th-century cultural and political contradictions that Marshall Berman described so well in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*—or by the striving for hegemony implicit in utopian reconstructions as well as in the totalizing notion of "style," be it "national" or "International."

To do justice to the recent modern turn, then, critical interpretations should be cautious of reductive generalizations (of both the "old" modernism and the "new") that compromise the specificity of individual works, while nevertheless searching for idealizations and abstractions capable of clarifying the terms of current architectural discourse. In this short text I will attempt to theorize about an aspect of the new modernism by considering one recently completed project, the Student Centre at York University by A.J. Diamond, Donald Schmitt and Company. My concern will be to relate this project to the modernist theme of architecture as a self-referential construct, tectonic and formal.

Although it is customary to begin descriptions of buildings by referring to their physical location and context, what interests me about the Student Centre has nothing to do with this kind of context or the minor inflections of the design that respond to its site conditions. Instead, I will focus on how the building establishes its own world. Of course, this focus has the added benefit of allowing me to avoid what could only be a tiresome discussion of the utterly banal expansion of the York University campus within which the Student Centre finds itself.

Suffice it to say that the Student Centre dispatches its responsibility within a new grouping of buildings straightforwardly and with grace by making a relatively neutral edge that works at the scale of the unwieldy open space to which it forms one side. The building is, in the first instance, a modest rectangular block that is both modern and classicizing, an ambiguous hybridization of formal paradigms. A seemingly solid base of masonry piers anchors the building to the ground and

provides a generous and well-proportioned arcade. The garage doors that protect the arcade from inclement weather open up entirely during the summer. This base supports a superstructure of delicate columns set in front of extensive glazing at the upper levels of the building. Together with a projecting slab-cum-cornice, the arrangement of elements and their relative proportions gives the building a dynamic but gentle vertical lift. This ambiguous facade also contains several overt tropes from the history of architectural modernism: the colonnade of paired columns evokes both Claude Perrault's polemically modernist facade for the Louvre of 1667-74 and Le Corbusier's "five points for a new architecture" as articulated in 1927. Then again, Viollet-le-Duc's rationalist use of metal lintels in masonry construction is revisited in the base.

At its most elemental, the building can be understood as a simple rectilinear prism, with a dominant central hall that is bracketed at both ends by blocky masses containing special purpose rooms. On its sides, the "Great Hall" is flanked by narrow zones of building whose facades carry the image of the modern palazzo described above. On the primary public side this narrow strip contains the arcade, the principal entrance

and a host of minor entrances that lead directly into a thin zone of seating. Food concessions and service rooms occupy the equivalent strip on the back side.

The central hall is in itself further subdivided into a major central bay, with three elliptical skylit shafts of space that rise through the four levels of

the building, and two minor structural bays, which elaborate the spatial layering of the building from outside to inside. Along the main public edge, then, these layers include an arcade, a zone for sitting that can be entered directly from the arcade at several points and that is raised above it by five steps, and a zone of equal dimension, a few steps higher on the main floor level of the Great Hall, providing places to sit that are neither fully part of the hall nor immediately adjacent to the outside.

While the spine of the Great Hall organizes the light shafts, stairs and important ancillary public spaces—such as the pub, the child care centre and a lounge—its symmetry is offset by numerous conditions, especially the asymmetries of the concession side in contrast to the sitting side of the central hall, the competing geometries of the two ramps, and the dynamic helical stair rising through one of the elliptical openings. The axiality of the Great Hall is further qualified by its lack of visual termination at either end. On the west end, the axis looks out a big window and then folds down into the pub, which is a double-height space in the lower level where the axis is turned back into the centre of the plan towards the dance floor located directly below the Great Hall. Similarly, on the east side of the main

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level, the axis passes up a set of stairs that divides, to arrive off-axis at the corners of a mezzanine lounge, where once again a large window allows it to extend beyond.

At the same time, the elliptical openings in the floors above provide dramatically shifting diagonal views through the height of the building. Unlike cupolas and rotundas that stabilize and fix space, these layered openings combine spatial demarcation and spatial extension. In their elliptical shape and in their serial repetition, they eschew any simple sense of centralization. Even the design of the concrete structure operates against stasis. Rather than reinforcing the openings, the columns around them have been joined by diagonal beams to form clusters between the openings—cruciform figures that compete visually with them and that deflect the eye away from the long axis while marking it. In the words of the architects, “resolving the polarities of classic containment and the redefined space of modern architecture is consistent with program needs. The resolution has been accomplished by using structure to calibrate the spaces, without diminishing the continuity of space.”

These various formal, tectonic and material manipulations have produced an interior equivalent to the classical/modern duality identified in the discussion of the astylar exterior. By playing with symmetry and asymmetry, and by limiting and simultaneously extending space through the layering of structures and volumes in both plan and section, the architecture of the Student Centre creates a seemingly simple, clear and hierarchical order that dissolves into a complex and ambiguous spatial field within which we are able to move at will or drift aimlessly. This is an architecture not of points or fixed positions, but of lines—a multiplicity of lines, lines of vision and movement passing from one zone to another, from one plateau to the next, lines without end. Even the most point-like elements turn out to be points of transition—stairs, entrances and thresholds.

On the top floors of the Student Centre, the labyrinthine quality implied in the lower levels is made explicit in a dense configuration of enclosed offices, meeting rooms, lounges and clubs. A system of layered rooms, rather than spaces, now occupies the perimeter zones, creating a network of sub-centres, public and private routes, receiving rooms and service spaces. As on the lower level, the long axis of the central hall serves as a line of reference within an otherwise multi-centred and fine-grained field.

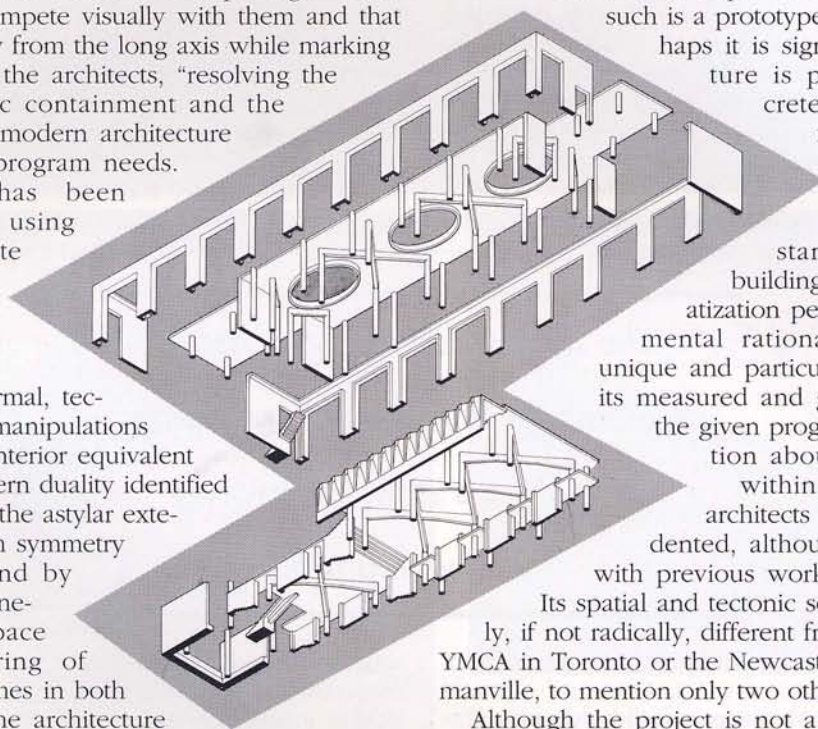
The “world” of the Student Centre is, then, neither homogeneous, nor governed by a single order. Every

term that comes to mind to characterize one’s first impressions of the building—clarity, simplicity, robustness and stability—is immediately followed by its opposite—ambiguity, complexity, delicateness, and instability. The building is centred and decentred, fixed and fluid, restrained and rich all at the same time, and all achieved with the most stringent economy of means.

So what kind of modernism does this reading of the York Student Centre reveal? It is perhaps easier to say first what kind it is not. To begin with, this building does not participate in the discourse on standardization and mass production that dominated mainstream modernism during the 20s and the 50s. It uses contemporary means of construction economically and effectively, but

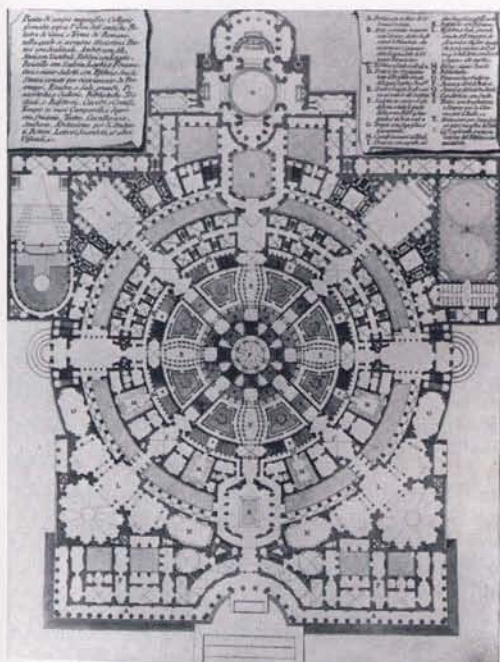
there is no implication that the building as such is a prototype to be replicated. Perhaps it is significant that the structure is poured-in-place concrete, in contrast to steel frame, which appeals more to architects who continue to pursue aspects of standardization. This building is not about systematization per se, nor about instrumental rationality. Rather it is a unique and particular work, not only in its measured and generous response to the given program, but as a proposition about architecture. Even within the *oeuvre* of these architects the project is unprecedented, although some continuities with previous work could be discerned.

Its spatial and tectonic sensibility is significantly, if not radically, different from that of the Central YMCA in Toronto or the Newcastle Town Hall in Bowmanville, to mention only two other recent works. Although the project is not a prototype, it may be understood as an exemplar in the same way that most of the “great” works of modern architecture were not reproducible but crystallized “new” architectonic paradigms. Think of Wright’s Unity Church in Oak Park, Mies van der Rohe’s Concrete House, Gropius and Meyer’s Bauhaus in Dessau, Terragni’s Casa del Fascio in Como, or Le Corbusier’s Pavillon Suisse in Paris, to mention only a few examples (all in concrete). Like these more august and celebrated works, the Student Centre creates an autonomous world, separate and independent from anything in its immediate context. The formal coherence of the architecture and its role as a social condenser/dispenser suggest that the building be understood as a fragment of utopia having both social and architectural implications. More hypothesis or alternative than solution, more circumscribed and local than totalizing and universal, it is nevertheless the product of a projection, the bringing forth of a positive and constructive vision by an active and productive subject. In the tradition of Enlightenment modernity, as described by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the project “no longer borrows the criteria by which it ori-



ents itself in history from models supplied by another epoch," even those of 20th-century modernism. Rather, it forges "its normativity out of itself," but recognizes that this self only exists in a network of social and cultural mediations.

While the modernist Walter Gropius could propose that buildings simply "body themselves forth" as the inevitable, direct and unmediated expression of material and psychological needs, the architects of the Student Centre explicitly acknowledge that they are working with and on received formal paradigms and codes. The new modernism of the Student Centre has been created with a postmodern understanding of the unavoidability of referential and representational devices. It has not arisen automatically, nor as an absolutely new invention, nor as the necessary expression of progressive his-



G.B. Piranesi, "Plan for a Vast and Magnificent College" (1750).

tory. Rather, these architects have worked deliberately to hybridize two culturally given codes: that of historical modernism (elemental abstraction, integral materiality, spatial continuity, self-referential construction) and that of classicism (figural and bounded spatiality, hierarchy, harmony of parts and whole). Despite the architects' intention to "resolve" these two paradigms, the resulting project actually represents the duality of formed and unformed, stability and instability, not as a dialectic that can be "synthesized," nor by privileging one or the other of these opposing terms, but as the sustained opposition of distinct categories. In the context of the current division between these paradigms in architectural discourse—which may be taken to parallel the division in critical theory between the modernism of Enlightenment rationality (Habermas), and that of Nietzsche's accomplished nihilism (poststructuralism)—the project represents the *desire* for resolution.

In contrast to the architectural ideology of Gropius—to cite only one mainstream modernist,—and in agree-

ment with postmodern theory, invention and freedom operate here *through*, and not in opposition to, the given ideas, formal paradigms and material means of architecture, and are represented as such. This project reminds us that architecture, like language, does not exist in absolute terms, but only as social practice, as something maintained and transformed by use, which in architecture means by the activity of making projects.

The extent and deliberateness of the formal manipulations described above returns architecture to the condition represented by G.B. Piranesi's *Plan for a Vast and Magnificent College* (1750). Recognizing that the end of the classical order of things was at hand, Piranesi spun the principles of classical order into an endless labyrinth of rooms, passages and stairs. His placement of a stair at the very heart of the plan—in the position



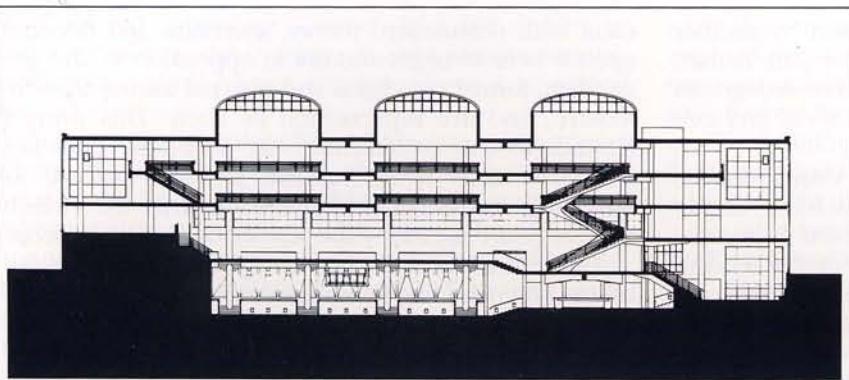
G.B. Piranesi, plate from "The Prisons" (1760).

that should have been reserved for the most important room—gave expression to the decentring and destabilizing of architecture in its passage to modernity. It is significant that this project has not yet arrived at the "negative utopia" of the more well-known *Prisons* (1760), which the historian Manfredo Tafuri has identified as the historical origin of the avant-garde. While the *College* placed the meaning of architectural composition into question, Piranesi still exalted the capacity of the imagination to create models that would give form to new values in the future. The

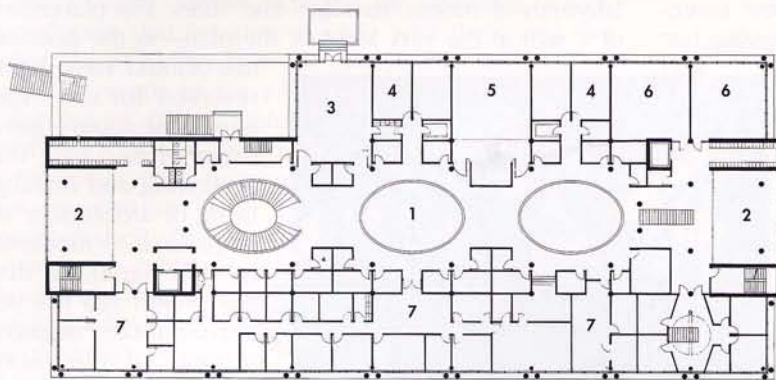
themes of imagination, the sublime and decentredness enter into the project, not yet as absolutes as they would in the avant-garde, but mediated by the idea of invention. The activity of invention renders the role of utopia concrete as the creation of alternatives that depart from historical conditions, in order to project into the future the bursting forth of contradictions in the present. Like Piranesi's *College*, the York University Student Centre reiterates the modern role of architecture to formulate hypotheses in the context of unstable worldly conditions, rather than to offer solutions—hypotheses that, in Tafuri's terms, "no one will ever claim should be completely realized." ♦

#### WORKS REFERENCED

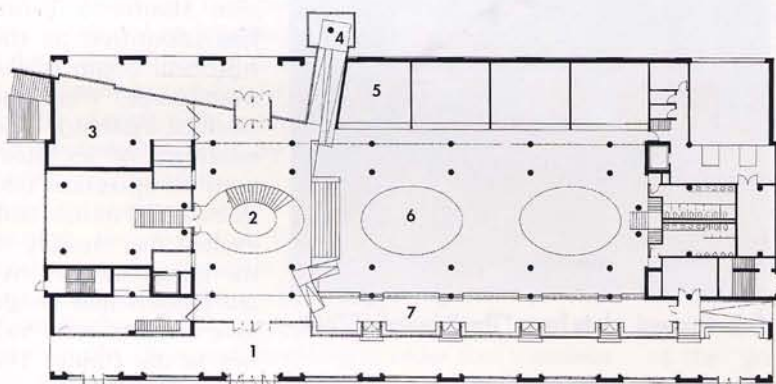
- Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (MIT, 1987).  
 Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (Simon & Schuster, 1982).  
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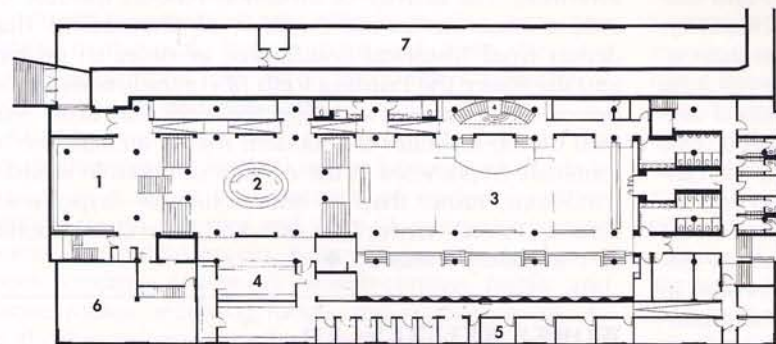
E-W SECTION



THIRD FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



BASEMENT



The student centre is one of several buildings recently constructed as part of a new campus plan for York University north of Toronto. The student centre is linked by an open/closed colonnade to other new buildings around a new green space or "common" at the entry to the campus.

Inside the brick-base colonnade of the student centre are multiple entrances into the building's main floor dining and fast food court area. Below this is a basement dance and pub keller.

There are a variety of dining spaces from large and bright, to small and dark. All these flow from one to another. The structure calibrates the spaces, without diminishing their continuity, thus resolving the polarities of classic containment and modern space.

The second floor is a mezzanine dining area and daycare centre. On the two upper floors are a variety of meeting rooms and office spaces for student societies and clubs.

Three large elliptical lightwells bring daylight down three floors into the central areas of the building. At the western end, the lightwell illuminates a grand helical staircase which is an important visual and social focus.

In 1989 the 8,900 m<sup>2</sup> project received a *Canadian Architect* magazine award of excellence. It was completed in 1990 at a cost of \$17.5 million.

Right: looking east in the great hall from near the main entrance.

- |                        |                     |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| THIRD FLOOR            | 4 pavilion          |
| 1 lightwell            | 5 food concession   |
| 2 lounge               | 6 great hall dining |
| 3 common room          | 7 verandah          |
| 4 conference           |                     |
| 5 council room         | BASEMENT            |
| 6 retail               | 1 upper pub dining  |
| 7 student associations | 2 bar               |
|                        | 3 dance floor       |
| FIRST FLOOR            | 4 kitchen           |
| 1 colonnade            | 5 storage           |
| 2 main stair           | 6 games room        |
| 3 art gallery          | 7 mechanical        |





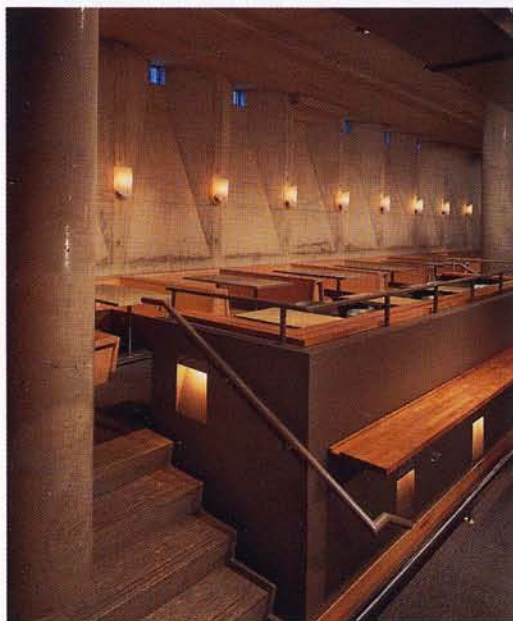




Facing page top: great hall looking west to the helical stair which rises through one of the three elliptical lightwells along the main axis. These lightwells provide shifting diagonal views through the height of the building thus helping to both fix and extend space. Similarly, cruciform beams near these openings mark the axis and yet deflect the eye away.

"By playing with symmetry and asymmetry, and by limiting and simultaneously extending space through the layering of structures and volumes..., the architecture creates a seemingly simple, clear and hierarchical order that dissolves into a complex and ambiguous spatial field..." —Mertins.

Facing page below left: fourth level, long central axis. Facing page below right: the verandah dining zone in the great hall. Left: third level looking to lounge area.



Top: stage and dance floor in the basement pub. Left: staircase behind stage up to the pub mezzanine. Far left: a reticulated south wall marks more intimate raised pub seating. Architectural concrete, adair marble, birch, maple and steel combine into a rich and tactile palette of materials.