

Canada's Pièces de résistance

In architectural offices all across Canada, talk is of "building in context." As never before, Canadian architects are becoming increasingly sensitive to how their buildings "fit" into neighbourhoods. It's not just using the same brick or matching window and door placements: designing a building in context means considering the scale and measure of surrounding structures, taking into account local building materials, popular architectural forms in the area, and the history of the neighbourhood.

Concern for context has given shape to many innovative building projects across Canada in the past few decades. In so vast a country, choosing just a few representative examples is no mean feat. The buildings selected here are all outstanding in some way — whether for artistic beauty or exceptional technical advances. More importantly, these buildings exhibit thoughtful approaches to their "contexts."

With an international client such as the Sheraton Hotel chain, the designers of the Halifax Sheraton in Nova Scotia could easily have fallen victim to the "luxury hotel syndrome" and produced an anonymous corporate high-rise tower. Instead, local architectural firm Lydon Lynch chose to defer to the waterfront site and to the neighbourhood — past and present — in its design. The neighbours to the south are restored eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wharf buildings that have been renovated into shops,

restaurants and an art college. The arms of the U-shaped hotel extend into the harbour, much as the fingers of the wharves stretch into the water. Unlike the polished tower to the north, the Sheraton takes its cue from the low-rise wharves and rises to a maximum height of seven storeys.

The building materials too were selected with the site's history in mind. The exterior is made of granite aggregate blocks designed in consultation with a local manufacturer. The colour, texture, density and random pattern of the blocks relate to the cut stone of the wharf and to previous buildings on this site.

A university situated in the heart of a modern urban centre must strike a balance between a cohesive campus on the one hand, and a structure integrated with the city that surrounds it on the other.

Before the construction of a single campus, the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM) was scattered throughout the downtown area. The site of the new university, located in the eastern sector of Montreal's commercial core, covers two city blocks. The site is historic: Montreal's first cathedral and episcopal palace burned down here in 1852. The chapel of Notre-Dame de Lourdes and the steeples and south transept of St. Jacques remained and are now integrated with the new campus and surrounding structures.

Architectural firm Dimitri Dimakopoulos and Partners laboured to ensure that the



surrounding urban context was respected. Building heights were kept down along St. Denis Street in uniformity with other structures, but stepped up along Berri Street where buildings are higher. Both the steeple and south transept of St. Jacques Church are preserved. The silvered Byzantine dome of Notre-Dame Chapel, not part of the campus itself, is integrated into an adjoining complex of terraced parks.

UQAM's construction is of reinforced concrete clad in beige brick. The university's façades are articulated to integrate with the domestic character of its neighbours and broken into bays and balconies to echo the local idiom. To match the commercial street context, the scale along Berri Street is more urban. The stone spire of St. Jacques and the rough bulging ashlar of Notre-Dame provide nostalgic contrast.

Toronto's Eaton Centre: successful shopping complex, tourist attraction and meeting place.

But what happens when there is no existing "context," no immediate neighbourhood for an architect to respond to and respect? As so often is the case, urban growth can consume hitherto untouched farm fields in a matter of months. This was the experience of Jones and Kirkland, a young Toronto architectural firm, which won a national competition five years ago for its design of a civic centre for Mississauga, an expanding city on the outskirts of Toronto. The selected site for the new city hall was a rather desolate field with only a sprawling shopping mall nearby.

The architects delved into the area's history for civic and agrarian traditions on which to base their design. They