

York University's 25th Anniversary: President Arthurs looks to the future of York; development of campus the major priority

F Excilibur's Elliott Shiff concludes his series on York's past, present and future. In this installment, President Harry Arthurs discusses his blueprint for the university.

In his book *Those Ten Years* York's first President, Murray Ross, characterized the university as "a volatile community which sees in society a fundamental hypocrisy in its failure to live up to the standards it professes, an hypocrisy to which they believe the older generation has become inured." It was with this in mind that Ross planned for York in its first decade.

25 years later York's sixth President, Harry Arthurs, is still saying, "We have a lot to do." Arthurs came to York along with Osgoode Hall which moved up to Downsview campus in 1968. He is confident yet cautiously optimistic about York's future.

The university system as a whole was undergoing a dramatic change during York's formative years. In 1950 only 69,000 attended University in Canada. By 1970 the number of university students increased almost 300% to 237,000. During this radical growth the university campus also became a focal point for protest.

One of Murray Ross' foremost concerns was to remove the paternal attitude of the university. The 1960s saw students become involved in university life on levels previously governed primarily by administration and faculty. Ross considered it of the utmost priority that students be provided with the freedom to regulate their own lives and organizations. In his book, Ross states, "York began as the desire for participatory democracy was first emerging in Canada and we were fortunately without the legal, constitutional, and mechanical rigidities which slowed change in older institutions." As a result, students at York were integrated into many decision making processes as they were being created such as permanent student membership on faculty councils, the senate, and appointment of two students to the BOG. By 1970 students sat on over 60 committees in the university and were represented on the search committee for the successor to Ross.

Arthurs feels that the degree of student participation at York is more deeply rooted than in most universities and he says he is "very proud of this fact." He adds, "In principle I'm also pleased with the faculty at York, however my difficulty is that I don't think our decision making process, for a variety of reasons, works well at all."

Citing a financially strapped central bureaucracy Arthurs says that financial belt-tightening over the past 13 years has made it "very difficult for the university to do a lot of jobs it's supposed to do." The advancement of a university also requires the generation and assimilation of information and at this point in York's history, according to Arthurs, "We haven't found a way for people to organize themselves and subsequently present that information."

Although the financial problems can be largely attributed to shortsighted government policy, the problem of organization within the university can be traced back to the early days of York when Ross was working with a small staff. Ross originally hired many young and talented founding deans and faculty who gave a great deal of effort but did not concentrate on coordinating their projects with each other. This made for a diverse intellectual community, but at the same time there was a lack of cohesion resulting in a weak central administration. When financial troubles beset the university in the early '70s the administration was sent scrambling for solutions and could not find a central ground to discuss these problems.

The problem of decentralization at York is evident right across the board. On all levels of the university's system, politically constituted bodies have a difficulty in addressing effectively large issues. In the case of student government, 46% of the students are not represented by the Council of York Student Federation, which is supposed to be the central voice for student concerns at York. This lack of representation within the university means that the York student body, the third largest in Canada, does not contribute effectively to greater student concerns outside of York.

"You can't talk about York as an entity" Arthurs says, "It is a fountain of entities." On the bright side,

York is a dynamic and broadly based institution, but the dramatic increase in population demands a greater centralization. Because of this problem Arthurs says it is very hard to take stock of the university's collective ambition; to take into account all of the affected interests at York and plan to advance them. Arthurs sees this as one of the main problems that has to be addressed.

Bureaucracy and impersonality are two of the most feared elements of any large institution. In the case of York, Ross sought to reduce these as much as possible. This was fairly easy in the first few years of the university. In fact, many of those who were with York right from the beginning tell stories of highly understaffed areas being run by one or two people. Due to York's recent growth spurts many areas are still understaffed. Arthurs indicates the need for an effective central bureaucracy which can handle all of the processing necessary for a large institution.

York, like any other commuter university, has to make a special effort to keep students and faculty on campus beyond strictly academic pursuits. One of the university's biggest priorities is a direct result of the massive influx of students: a severe shortage of physical facilities and a terrific sacrifice of campus amenities which would make the York campus a more comfortable and agreeable place to spend time. The York University Development Corporation has been formed to respond to these needs. In addition to building up the university physically Arthurs hopes the YUDC will make York a more physically attractive place to be.

As far as faculty are concerned, Arthurs cites the recent opening of the Faculty Lounge as a step in the right direction. "I think it's a pretty sad commentary on the university that there hasn't been a place where people can meet, let alone students but even faculty meeting their own colleagues," Arthurs says, adding, "That you can spend 10, 20 or 30 years at this campus and know nobody further away than the next office or the people you see in your departmental meetings means there is not much opportunity for social contact here at York." Arthurs also expresses a hope that faculties will begin to generate more events on campus that will attract people to stay.

For the most part, students at York also lack a central place to congregate. Although the college system serves most resident students, these students represent only a small percentage of the undergraduate population. A Student Centre is essential for a campus this size, but once again shortage of funds has kept plans on the shelf. Last year a referendum was held but students



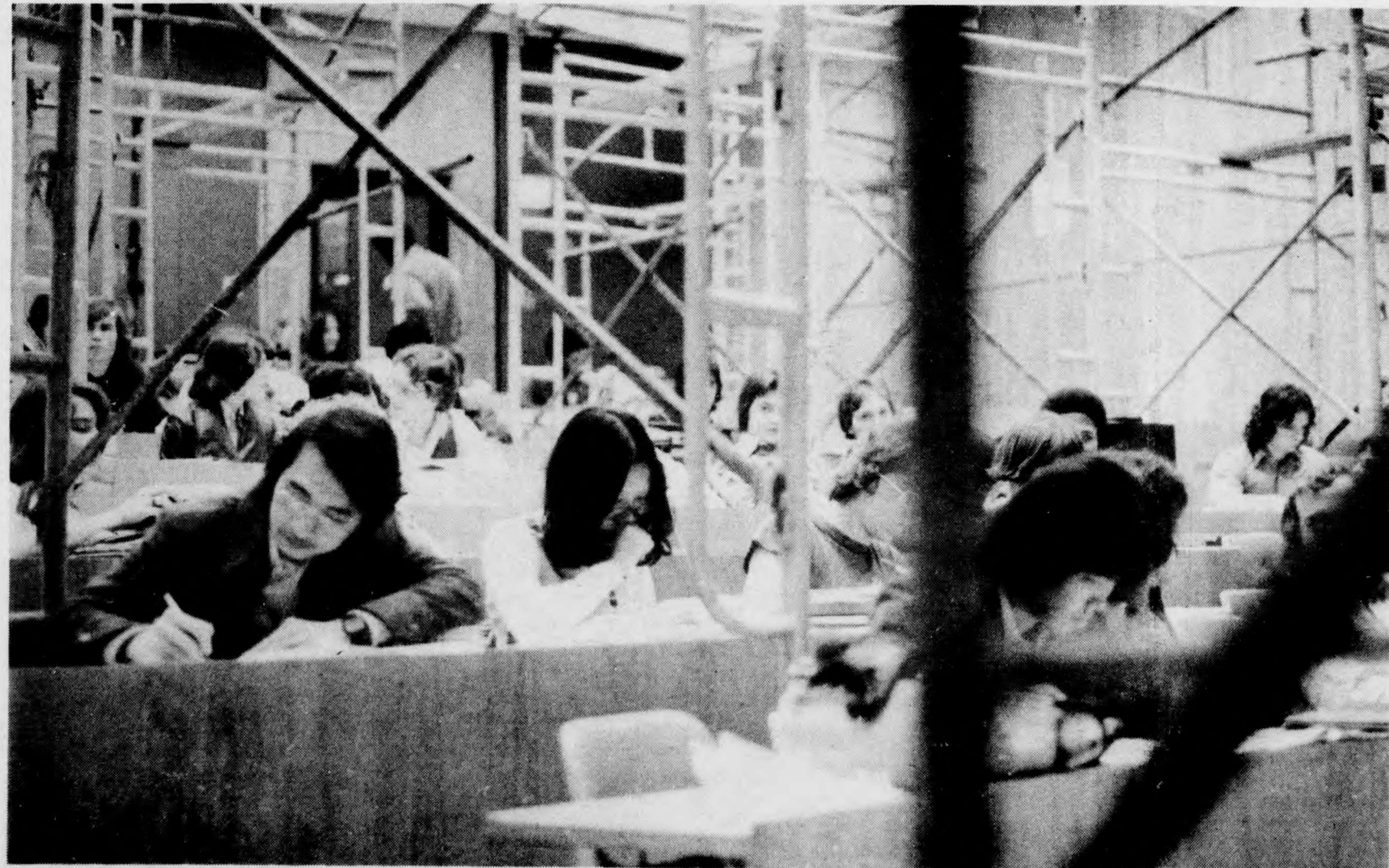
SINK OR SWIM: The one thing York doesn't have a shortage of is parking spaces, or so this tender moment at Stong Pond would have us believe.

voted against the proposed centre, largely because of the fifty dollar increase in tuition that was required. One of Murray Ross' prime objectives was to alter the university curriculum to provide "more flexibility, more choice, more relevance, and less reliance on examinations." The original basis of the York curriculum was a programme of general study in the first two years. In 1969 the college tutorial was introduced in response to the request for an unstructured course in which only a pass or fail mark was issued.

Arthurs is also extremely concerned with the role of the university in deciding its objectives. "Is it the job of the universities to give the students what they want or is it the job of the university to do what it thinks is the right thing? If it takes a longer view then it says that people ought to be here for the richest education that we can conceivably offer. And that's our objective."

This long range outlook allows for not getting caught up in the economic situation of the time which might dictate a stronger emphasis on occupational or professional training. "Today it's computers and business, tomorrow it's fine arts and the day after it's humanities, and I don't think the university should be entirely responsive to what are pretty ephemeral demands. You have to take a view which encompasses all of these things and tries to set them within the general value of a first rate education that is broadly based."

Another major concern for Arthurs is that York be academically first rate. "A lot of the things we do are first rate but we have to pull up our socks in other areas," Arthurs says. Although York is the second most underfunded university in the province, Arthurs thinks the university can expand its resource base and "make more careful decisions on allocating what we've got."



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One of these innovations is a new strategy to try and attract "a really solid cadre of excellent students while at the same time maintaining an equitable policy." Arthurs says this is made possible by reaching out to a wide variety of students, requiring them to give information about themselves. "It takes into consideration such things as maybe you have a 64.3 average but on the other hand you've written a book, or perhaps you've only been speaking English for two years or whatever, but that leads to another area of my concern—that the university should respect social justice." However there are limitations, one of them being that York is at a point where it cannot physically accommodate anymore students. "We've got no place to stow them," Arthurs says, adding, "The next available classroom is my office, and that's where I draw the line."

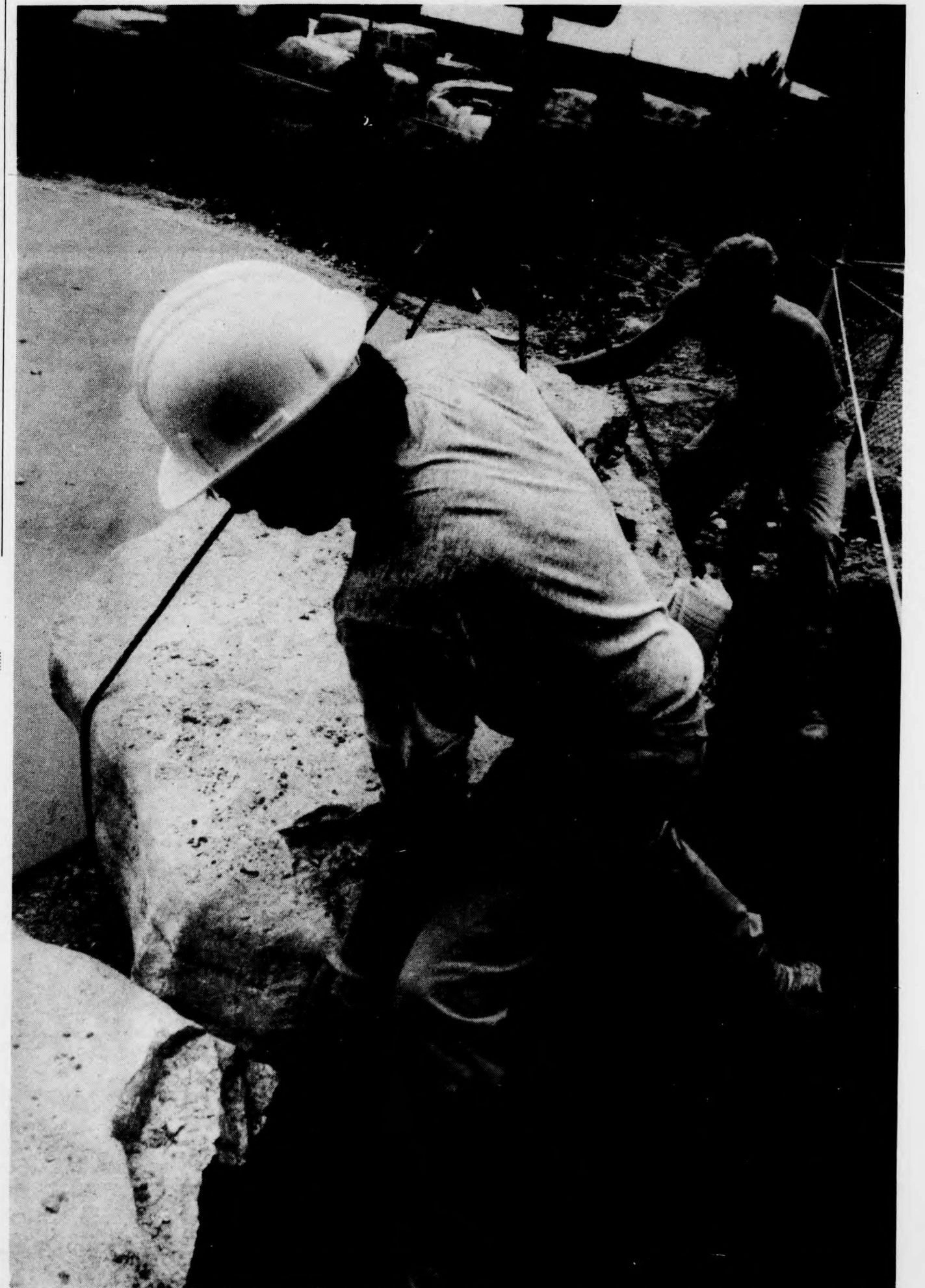
York was built during a period of social consciousness and awareness and accordingly Murray Ross was greatly interested in changing the posture of the university as a whole "so that it can identify, and take of a position on, the major social issues of the day and to change dramatically and completely the whole organization and ethos of the university so that it is a 'free and open society'."

With the recent reawakening of social activism on campus, specifically with regard to the situation in South Africa, Arthurs is very cautious about the university's role. "I've traced it as far as I can at the moment and as far as social awareness is concerned I don't think that we are implicated in South Africa, and I am happy not to be and I would certainly instruct anyone in the university not to become involved."

Concerning the university taking a position on social issues, Arthurs distinguishes between two things. "What the university does acting as a corporate body I think it

has to stand morally for. If it invests in this, that or the other it is going to be open for criticism. If it adopts certain admission policies its got to accept the moral consequences of its own decisions as a corporate entity." However, Arthurs separates this from the behaviour of individuals within a community with "prides itself as one of diversity and freedom." Arthurs adds, "I would hate to get in a position of being asked to clamp down say on a professor who had a particular political position, or for that matter a member of the Board of Governors who didn't represent university policy but represented their personal views. I think that a university that does not represent personal freedom and personal autonomy is not much of a university and can never be much of a university. And so if there is a desire to create a collective decision which infringes on intellectual freedom and personal autonomy then I would be very concerned. It's contrary to the principle of the university."

York University has gone through some very turbulent times in its first 25 years. There was the social upheaval of the 1960s followed by the crisis of the early '70s when there weren't enough students, and later the enrollment explosion of the late '70s and early '80s. "We have to take stock of what it's all meant and where we wish to go next," Arthurs says, "and in the process we must not let ourselves be pushed. We must go where we think we ought to go." Like York's founding father and first President Murray Ross, Harry Arthurs has a list of distinct priorities for the university, the most pressing being the development of the campus and the community physically. But "the bottom line," Arthurs says, "is that York is a democratic institution respectful of the diversity of its makeup. That's damn difficult to try and set to reality. But it is a conviction I have and I think most people here do."



HARD AT WORK: At left, the air becomes increasingly dense with menacing scaffolding rods, as students rush to finish exam before they are completely engulfed. Right, heavy rock gets big lift as site is prepared for the Lumbers Building.

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