

B.A.C.: respect for the present

Peter J. Smith, chairman of the department of geography, takes a look at the arguments made in favour of building the BAC building in the Arts Court. The following are excerpts from the brief he presented to the Campus Development Committee when they held hearings on the building site in December.

Concern about the Arts Quad can be summed up in one sentence — it is inconsistent and absurd to develop an intensive-use area in a high density part of the campus while reducing the size of that open area. The absurdity is heightened when it is realized that the proposed BAC Building will inject an extra 1600 people (1500 students, 100 staff) into the reduced Arts Court. The reduction would be approximately one-quarter, from about 4 acres to about 3 acres.

The intended use of the Arts Court, according to the Long Range Landscape Development Plan, Stage 2, is for rallies, exhibits, concerts, dances, skating, snow sculpture and the like. The Court must also accommodate an intricate pattern of pedestrian paths for through traffic, one of the two north-south pedestrian spine routes and various service vehicle routes. It will be the most immediate open space for a large part of the resident population of HUB, as well as serving the large transient population associated with the surrounding academic buildings. The landscape planner also observes that "it will in fact be the only major space, apart from the Central Quad, on the campus." (Letter of May 29, 1972, in BAC Phase I Report). This is so obviously true.

How, then, can we seriously think of sacrificing an inch of it? The landscape planner goes on to comment that the Court contains "some of the finest existing trees on campus," and that these will enhance its quality in its refurbished form. But he makes no reference to the many trees which were sacrificed for Rutherford II, or to the damage which HUB has brought to the 112 Street elms, or to the further trees which will be lost and damaged if the BAC Building is constructed. How many of the "finest existing trees on campus" will actually survive?

What, then, are the arguments for placing yet another building in this admittedly vital open space? These can be culled from several sources — the BAC Phase I Report; the CDC Minutes of June 6, 1972; and Progress Report 8: Long Range Development Plan (Working Document, September 1972). Since there is substantial overlap among these documents, I am amalgamating them into a single summary.

(i) There appears to be a notion that there is something inadequate about the size, shape and completeness of the Arts Court if it is allowed to survive with no further encroachment. Thus, the long range planners: "The building would complete Arts Court as a quadrangle."

And the prime consultant: "...it is very important to develop a building form that [will] ... create improved definition to the open landscape space by closing off the north side of the Arts Court more effectively and narrowing

visually the interconnection to the north-west between the existing Tory Building and Arts I."

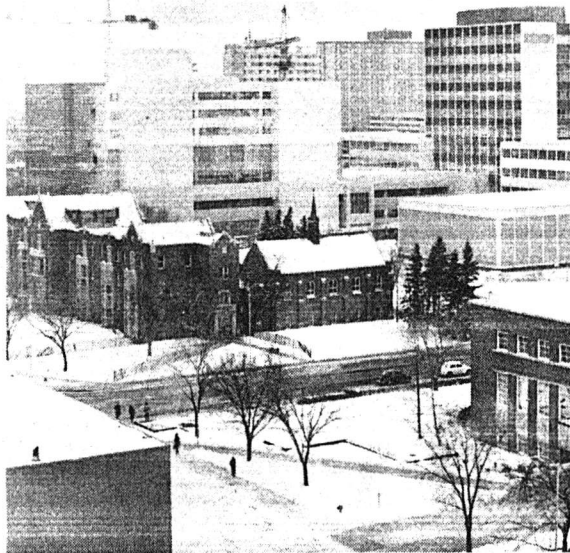
And the Campus Development Office (May 31, 1972, in BAC Phase I Report): "The Arts Court will be better defined and of a manageable size for the development of the open space."

What unmitigated nonsense this all is. Are we seriously expected to believe that the second most important open space on the campus will be improved in appearance and effectiveness if its size is reduced by almost a quarter?

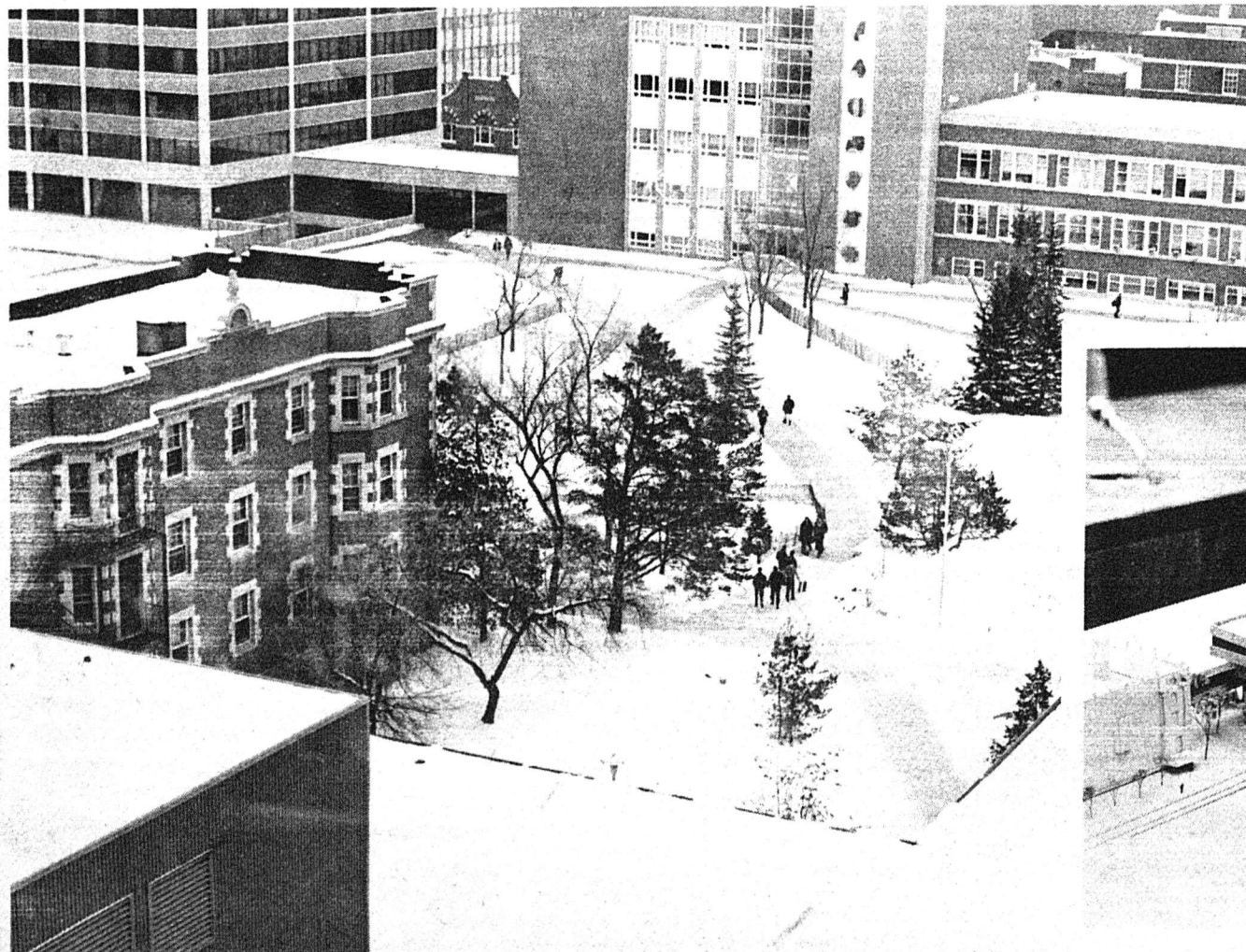
When Mr. Bittorf, prime architectural consultant, was asked if there was something inherently better about a smaller, squarer open space, he could give no effective reply. He confined himself to the comment that the BAC Building would harmonize better with Arts I and Rutherford II.

Is there, then, an unstated dislike for the appearance of the Tory Building? If so, this can be no argument for placing another building in front of it, and rationalizing the decision by saying that it would give better definition to the north side of the Arts Court. This margin of the Arts Court is already clearly defined, by the Tory Building. Another building in front is not going to make this boundary any sharper or more definite.

The reference to the gap in the northwestern corner must also be challenged. Is this objectionable just because it is a gap in an almost continuously built-up perimeter, or because of the area to which it leads? The latter is cluttered and confused, and out of keeping with its surrounds. But this will not be its permanent condition.



Above and below, the familiar architectural jumble of the U of A



Development densities that are
for a population of 10,000

Is it not possible that future building and landscaping in this area will give extra definition to the Arts Court, if it is really necessary? A quite apart from the condition of the greenhouse area, is it desirable to close in the northwestern corner more completely?

One of the most famed of all urban open spaces, Piazza San Marco, has four sharply defined boundaries, but the intensity of this closure is relieved by a large gap in one corner, leading in short distance to open water. Breaks of this kind are important, and particularly so now to the Arts Court. Its eastern boundary has become an unrelieved line of building, which urgently needs counterpoint, an opening to balance the building bulk, a sign that this is not a rigid, unyielding sealed-off space.

In effect, none of the statements about the quality of the Arts Court can be construed as convincing support for the BAC Building. Rather, they are attempts to provide reassurance that the Arts Court will still be an effective space once the building is complete.

The landscape planner certainly attempts more. His letter of May 29 makes no reference to the size of the Arts Court, but says merely that the BAC Building can be integrated with landscaping notions.

(ii) The argument that access to the Tory Building will be improved has been discussed already. It is an obvious side-benefit of the building proposal, but it is not in itself a satisfactory argument for the BAC Building. That is, access can be improved without constructing another building in the Arts Court.

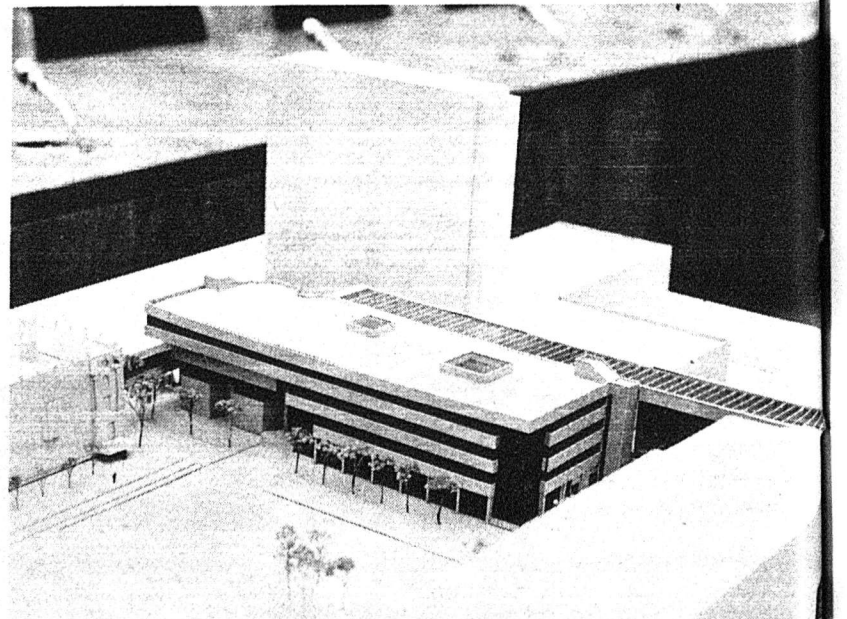
A related argument is that additional lounge space is needed in the Tory Building. Again, however, this cannot be a central argument for the construction of another building. Lounge space can also be created in other ways, particularly bearing in mind the approaching over-supply of classroom space in the Tory basement.

(iii) A third argument, and the first forceful one, is that the proposed site is favored by the Faculty of Business Administration and Commerce, particularly because of its associations with the social science departments (chiefly Economics) and particularly because of its proximity to the proposed computing centre in the greenhouse area.

The latter is not really stressed (it is mentioned in Progress Report 8) since the prospect of a new computing centre must now be very remote. Proximity to the social science departments, though, is an obviously desirable goal, and it would not be served by the alternative site which has been suggested to the east of HUB.

At the same time, the link between BAC and Economics does not define a precise building site, rather it identifies an area within which several alternative sites could be defined.

(iv) The factor which really determines the site and form of the BAC Building is the desire to develop a covered walkway system in the northern part of the campus. This, too, is a desirable goal, but it raises critical questions. Does the need for



Model of the proposed BAC building