



"HUB: A Critique"

Looking down that long, long mall

A review by Richard Desjardins

From the time of its conception, the Housing Union Building (HUB) has been a subject of controversy. Hailed as everything from an innovative experiment to an architectural nightmare, HUB is a structure that defies an indifferent reaction.

The most recent in-depth look at HUB is entitled "HUB: A Critique" prepared by Janet Zobel, a student in the Faculty of Environment Design at the University of Alberta as part of her Masters Thesis. Ms. Zobel's main concern in preparing her report on HUB was the relationship between function and expression in design and to determine what the architect had done to balance these two aspects.

HUB was initially envisioned as a response to the tendency of students to seek off-campus

apartments as this trend seemed disruptive to the cohesiveness of the university. As well, a feeling that the community at large felt alienated from university promoted the discussion that HUB should provide a non-threatening common meeting ground for students and non-students. After much debate, the Students' Union decided to construct an apartment-type structure incorporating a shopping mall idea to help lower rents and provide an amenity for both the project and the campus.

Completed in 1972, for \$5,600,000, HUB was immediately recognized as a radical departure from other structures attempting to combine residential, commercial and recreational facilities. Often described as a "skyscraper on its side," HUB is unique because it has a street running the full length of its underside, with a shopping concourse one and a half stories above ground, incorporating three stories of apartments covered by a plexiglass roof.

In her critique, Ms. Zobel outlines many of the problems unique to HUB because of its daring design. Because the mall is built up off ground level the interior is considered to be only three stores high, thereby eliminating the installation of elevators. This cost saving device has resulted in 58 stairwells, some as high as seven flights which present a major problem for residents and maintenance staff. Much of the building is finished with exposed concrete which presents a dust cleaning and stain removal problem. The plexiglass roof leaks during rainstorms and if the canvas is not drawn during the summer, the air temperature can rise to between 35 and 37.5°C. Another problem presented by leaving the canvas open in the summer, according to Ms. Zobel, is that the concrete floor heats up to 60°C and this causes condensation in the mechanical soffit resulting in leakage and soaked drywall on the ceiling over 112th Street.

Zobel's critique involved interviewing maintenance staff who felt the large expanse of glass presented many cleaning problems. She estimates that if each person were to dispose of their own garbage properly, half of the daily maintenance battle on the mall level could be won.

During her interviews with tenants, Ms. Zobel found that the major complaint was the noise level caused by mall traffic bouncing off hard glass and concrete surfaces. Tenants also felt that space in the two storey high living rooms in the four-man suites was wasted and that provisions should have been made for each cleaning of the windows facing into the mall area.

As well as dealing with HUB's shortcomings, Zobel's critique also examines HUB's virtues. Considering that the intention of HUB was to reduce the boundary of city life and university life, Zobel considers the HUB experiment quite successful. After conducting a building patron profile, Zobel states that 63% of HUB users did not live or work in the building, 16% of the users were not involved with the University in any

apartments as well as eliminating a view of colorful shutters from the mall level. Zobel's remarks that shop owners were not aware of noise level to the extent the tenants were and merchants tended to perceive more noise as meaning more customers. The casual users of the building did not perceive noise as a problem, most likely as Zobel points out, because they do not have to stay in the noise they create.

Zobel's lavishly illustrated critique includes some interesting comparisons between HUB and classical architecture. In one example, she compares HUB as a gigantic lantern at night and she feels the mall was reminiscent of a ship complete with ramps, railings and exposed duct work. Zobel's critique goes as far as to include illustrations of the interiors of several buildings comparing them to HUB to further her argument.

Gateway contacted Rick Wilkin, architect of HUB for a reaction to Zobel's critique. Mr. Wilkin was unaware that a critique on HUB had been prepared. When asked if he had designed HUB with a ship motif, Mr. Wilkin replied "I don't know how she (Zobel) got that idea". Mr. Wilkin, who also designed the

capacity, and 15% of the users were either tenants or people employed on the mall. Zobel cited noise as the biggest inconvenience resulting from the multi-use nature of HUB, however she found that different users perceived the problem differently. As one student put it, "there is a constant din from the mall. My ears are always ringing". In order to reduce this noise level, residents must close their shutters limiting a portion of natural light into their

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