

ROYAL BANK PLAZA, TORONTO

Architects: The Webb Zerafa Menkès Housden Partnership

The now completed Royal Bank Plaza complex symbolizes the latest in what has become known as the Toronto banking fraternities' "race for the sky". Ironically enough, this race began not in Toronto but in Montreal, where in the summer of 1963 the 42-storey Royal Bank of Canada building, part of I.M. Pei's Place Ville Marie complex, competed with Peter Dickinson's 43-storey Canadian Bank of Commerce building. At that time, Toronto's mayor, smarting because his city's existing monolith, the 34-storey Canadian Bank of Commerce building (for 30 years the tallest building in the Commonwealth) had been outdone, demanded not a 45-foot limitation but skyscrapers taller than 45 storeys.

During late 1967, the Toronto race began with Mies' 56-storey Toronto-Dominion Centre, followed by Pei's 57-storey Commerce Court. In 1975, Edward Durell Stone's curiously undistinguished Bank of Montreal building became the third contender, and there now remained only two of the larger banking houses to add to the changing skyline. In 1971, the Royal Bank assembled land at the corner of Bay Street and Front Street and construction of the Royal Bank Plaza began in May, 1973.

The project received an Award of Excellence in our 1972 *Canadian Architect Yearbook* Awards program. James A. Murray, chairman of the jury and editor of this magazine, commented that if you build a tall building, inevitably somebody will build one taller. "Excellence in design concept is vulnerable to such megalomaniac competition. So wisely, it seems, the Royal Bank is reflecting its corporate image — hedonism instead of height — an appealing prospect for downtown Toronto. In addition to its aesthetic jewel-like statement, the Bank's plaza shape and siting respond to major pedestrian circulation desires and to the geometries of street intersections. The diagonal is effectively exploited on foot and overhead."

Ray Affleck saw the building as a welcome alternative to the surrounding plaza-and-tower projects. "The pedestrian circulation in relation to built form is excellent, as is the notion of the great glazed

central hall. The materials, however, strike me as a bit on the opulent side for today's world."

Our third juror, Raymond Moriyama, commented: "It is about time a bank on its glory train of "taller is better" realized the perception of the public. It is pleasant to see the emphasis given to pedestrians with diagonal movement throughout the building. Hopefully, the owners will not lock the doors at 5 p.m."

The plaza breaks the established bank structures' pattern in at least three directions. First, the total 67-storeys were designed as two triangular towers, each 41- and 26-storeys respectively. Second, the open plaza associated with other bank buildings, spaces now synonymous with bleak, unused spaces and windswept pedestrians, was rejected and replaced by a semi-public space within the Royal Bank Plaza. Third, the project is the first large Canadian bank structure to be designed by Canadian architects* This significant move by a Canadian banking corporation has been received with a bland coolness by the local architectural fraternity. Of the other three banks, only the Commerce Court acknowledged the use of a "prestige" name. Our critic, writing on Commerce Court, was

* We have not included Arthur Erickson's Bank of Canada building.

stirred to bemoan that fact that Canadian architects are "reduced to colonial status, functionaries to carry out orders in the field." Even as recently as the OAA annual meeting, local architects were calling for ways and means to increase the architect's "visibility factor", yet the Royal Bank's decision to select a local architect* for their building was alas, received with cynicism by many local architects.

The two triangular towers are linked by a glass-enclosed banking hall, 130-feet high, known as the "urban room." The diagonal slice formed by the facing towers evolved because of the pedestrian flow from Union Station on the south side and up Bay Street into the financial area. Pedestrians can follow the diagonal at grade through semi-public space,

* Even after the approval of Webb Zerafa Menkes Housden, the Royal Bank was wooed by several developers offering designs by U.S. "name" architects.

Toronto's banks in the downtown area: 1 the Royal Bank Plaza under construction. 2 the old Bank of Commerce building, long the tallest building in the Commonwealth. 3 I.M. Pei's Commerce Court. 4 Mies van der Rohe's two Toronto-Dominion towers. 5 Edward Durell Stone's Bank of Montreal building. 6 Royal York Hotel, connected by link to Royal Bank Plaza.

