

# campus alien

...the dominant theme

of his own

The Urban Design Group is a collection of individuals who present two awards each month to examples, in their opinion, of good and bad design in the urban context. Last month's "Black Ribbon Award" went to the new provincial courthouse on Churchill Square; the "Canadian Champagne Award" was given to Professor Richard Baird for saving two elms from destruction on 83 Avenue. November's awards will be announced December 1.

Nominations for future awards are welcome c/o The Urban Design Group, 11132 83 Avenue.

Someone associated with the campus plan once claimed that it was modelled after Florence or Venice--intimate little Piazzas, medieval-type passageways, "manageable" open spaces, stimulating jumble of shapes, sizes and textures. Those of you who cannot yet see Florence rising on the banks of the Saskatchewan now realize how deep the gulf is between yourselves and the people building our campus.

It is easy to lose one's cool discussing the campus plan. And that gives an important clue to what is wrong. What we see at odds at the U of A is a "system" versus the particularism of its opponents. It is all the logic of an internally consistent model (the plan) versus the volition and "irrationality" of individual human beings (the people). So we see a quick flush of anger when living critics are opposed by an inanimate and approved system. It is a microcosm of the larger struggle that characterizes our society.

The logic of a system is internal. Thus an elegant model can be defended repeatedly and successfully as long as the defenders stay within their own terms of reference. Indeed that is precisely the defensive tactic they take when confronted by critics. But it should be obvious that no system can be all-encompassing. What remains outside the system always stands as an indication of other values and perceptions.

The existing campus plan has characteristics typical of a system - well articulated assumptions. A growing university in the middle of the city indicates to planners that we will have an "urban campus" with certain consequences for form and the use of space. With our sometimes cold winters the plan assumes that all major areas should be connected and there should be no on-campus walk that requires longer than ten minutes. In sum, the plan starts with a general statement that we aim for an enclosed compact urban campus.

But a plan should be capable of taking non-system factors into account. A plan might be very sensitive indeed to "outside" factors yet retain its own integrity. And that is what is relevant to the U of A. Our plan has proceeded on its own logic without serious reference to factors outside the system. That is why one can accuse the plan of insensitivity *without* opposing the plan's concept *per se*. What many people are really saying, and what the Urban Design Group supports, is that the implementation of the plan has been disastrous, not necessarily the concept itself. This obviously need not be a paradox. One need only recall the phrase: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

It is the refusal of the planners to turn their heads far enough to appreciate values other than their own that generates intense anger. It is anger against the presumption of any system to universal validity. The inhumanity of that presumption directly underlies the inhumanity of the present campus.

The plan emphasizes compactness and the relations of interior space. The question of exterior relations is ignored. Thus centuries of architectural experience in the relation of form to nature, space and other forms is largely irrelevant to our campus plan. It has been edited out in the plan's assumptions. Buildings are

designed and situated on the interior space, with no concern given to their relations to each other. Evidence makes that clear. In a city with a developed appreciation of exterior standards of relation, one is therefore shocked, alienated and depressed by what has happened at the U of A. To be outside is to be offered a similar disregard for sentimental historic values (as most systems do). Where a physical environment is part of the campus has survived in affection in tens of thousands of hearts, the plan unceremoniously eliminates it. The new plan, in 1968, proceeds as though the city were starting anew after fifty years. None of its thousands of earlier buildings has any claim to respect. Thus the increasing disaffection of the people of the U of A, disaffection bred of insult.

It is not the intention of this article to characterize the plan as disastrous, but rather to point out its implementation. Humanity went through a similar process in 1968. In some measure, and far too late, humanity has been seen since. The planning issue at U of A.

Walking to the University from downtown in 1970 one could see a large window glowing through a tall, graceful window at the end of 90 Avenue. The Rutherford Library greeting a snow-shrouded city. Inside, one charts the darkening sky through fine large windows, the colours not but deepening into the universe. You can see the windows now from a few feet away and they are nothing. The Rutherford has succumbed to an afterthought, purposely onto it and destroying its unique character. The harmony of the old is replaced with the disfigurement of new. All in the name of functional addition HUB locks Rutherford from its former access to the city. The windows are blinded, the Rutherford is amended, imprisoned and in more.

Approaching campus on the north, the eye was once drawn to overhanging branches up a long sidewalk to the humane and beautiful entrance to the Arts Building. The beautiful street almost seemed to have been drawn for the Arts Building. The community into the humanities of the university. The street, the invitation have been eliminated. Again the wall of HUB forbids and yielded its harvest to the neighbourhood kids, the Windsors now stands.

On April nights past, one could look through the green leaves of an extraordinary archway down between a series of stone walls to the entrance of the Cameron Library. It was a building to be sure located in the heart of the U of A campus. It was even a major mistake. But one clothed in trees and the setting became an odd kind of friend. A psychic escape route from the lower in topography, removed square lines of the remainder of space. A massive concrete wall smashes through the front of it, wall now blots it from consciousness. The nascent friendship between the Cameron has been killed, and the friends themselves.

Having begun, where do we go? Beautiful fields of grain once front of the old residences.



*The plan denies us the seasons. Winter is our most compelling natural fact. The campus plan, rather than coping with winter seeks to reject it. We do not find winter so unpleasant that we care nothing for subtly-drifted fields and trees clothed in snow and hoar-frost. Our shivering does not make us blind to the beauty of old buildings glowing with their orange light through the ice-fogged air. We want no part of any arrangement that trades our comfort for ugliness, our convenience for destruction. If an "urban" campus means isolation from nature in the way we live and build in our environment, we want no urban campus. The U of A has been built for a few weeks of really cold weather, not appreciating that one season increases the value of the next. We need a spring, summer and autumn campus, too.*

