

WINGS OVER DON MILLS

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF ARCHITECTS HEADQUARTERS

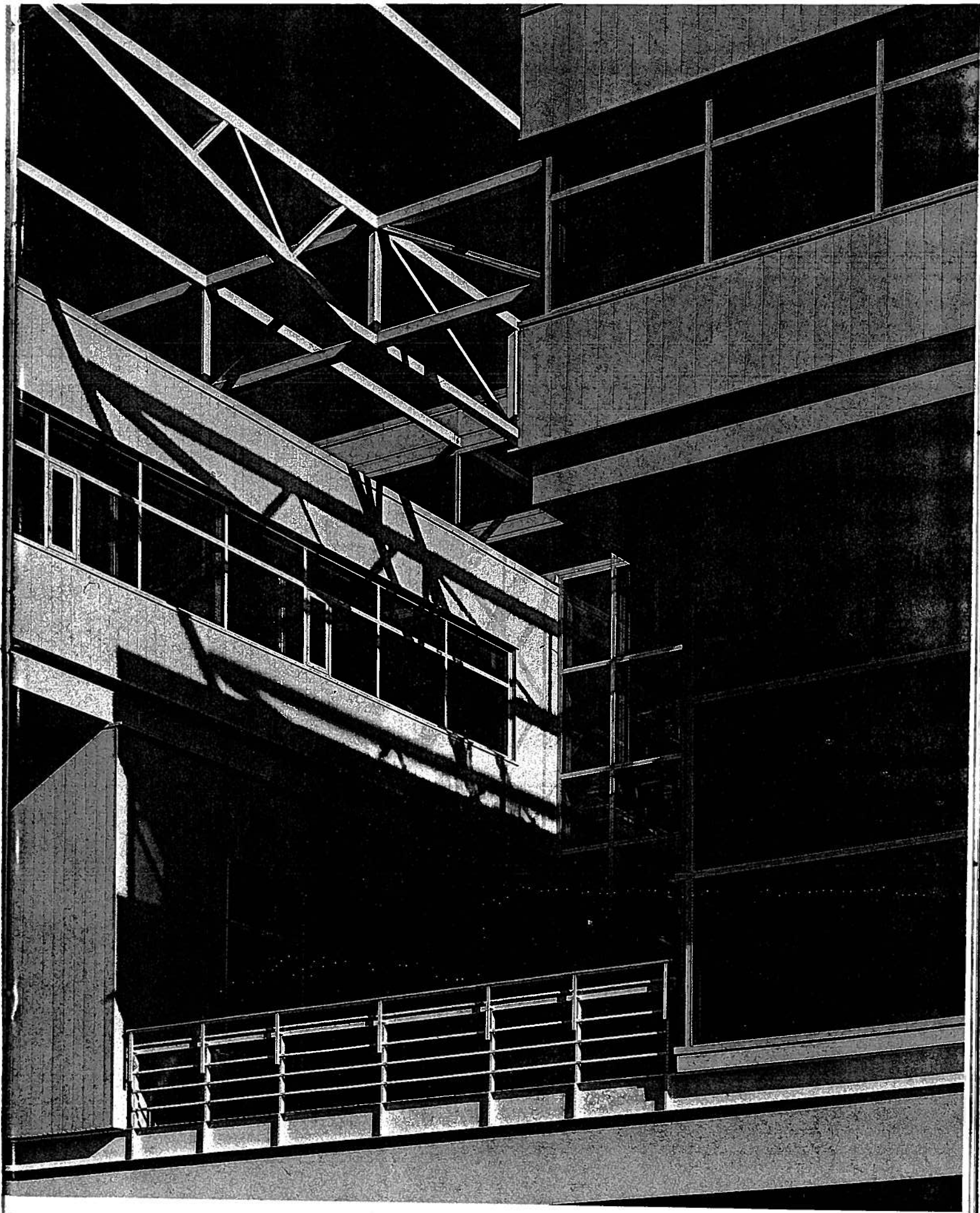
This summer the OAA moved into their new headquarters building in Don Mills. Ruth Cawker Architect won the commission in November 1989 through a design competition that was open to architects in the province and drew 65 entries. The jury comprised architects Patricia Patkau, Victor Marius Prus and Gustavo da Roza, as well as then-OAA executive director Brian Parks and architecture critic Christopher Hume. James A. Murray was the professional advisor.

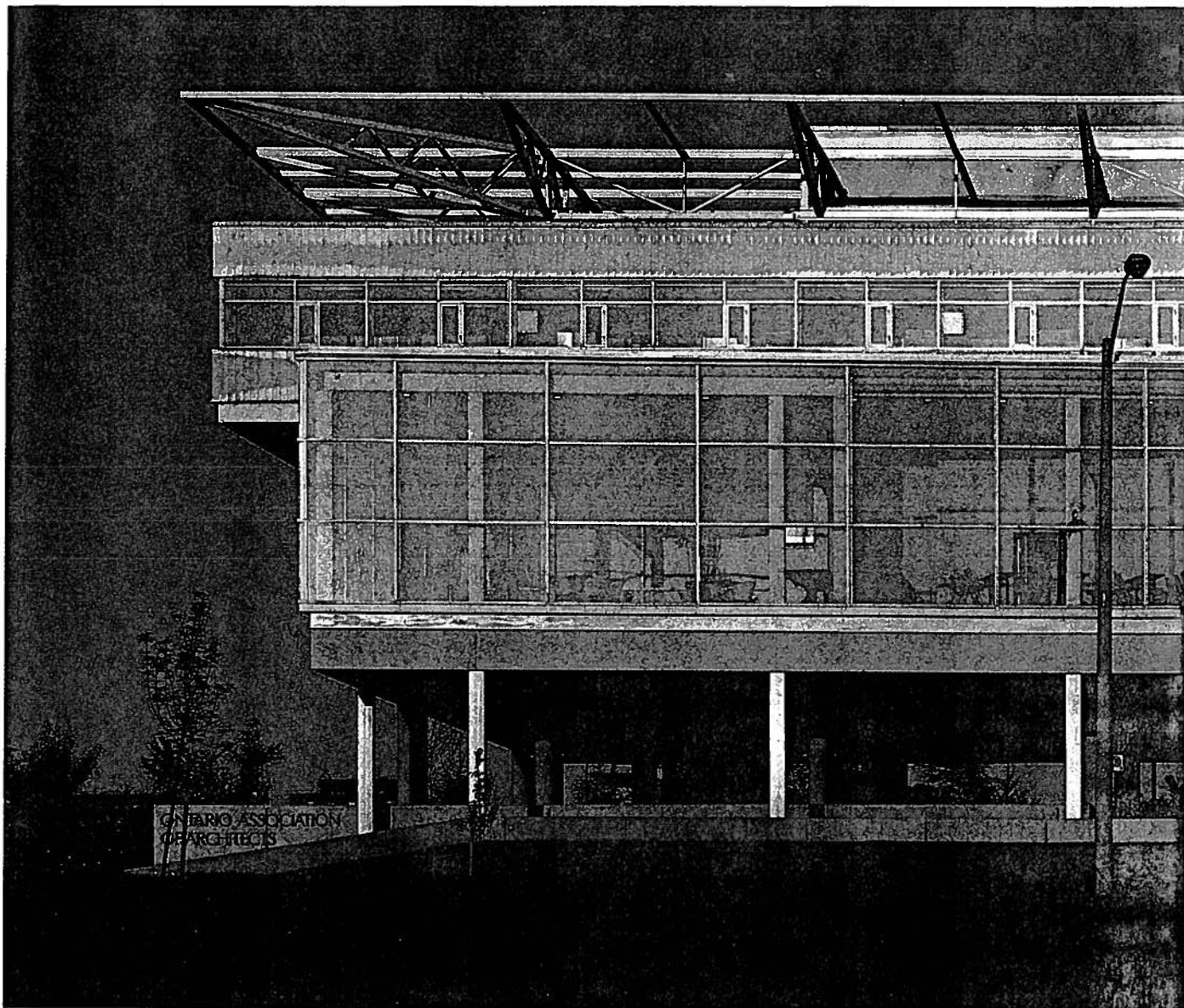
There may be no greater challenge for architects than to design a building for their peers, a building not only to be used and paid for by them, but also to be their showpiece. This one has certainly had its fair share of troubles to the point where Irving Rayman, chairman of the OAA's building committee, resigned "in disgust" before completion. The hard construction costs have risen from the initial competition budget of \$3.2 million to \$4.6 million (about

\$225 a square foot), and there are substantial soft costs on top of this. The hard costs were paid out of reserves in the OAA indemnity plan, and the land was donated by Crang + Boake Architects.

Whatever caused the problems (the OAA hope to prepare a formal report for their members by December) it's clear that one of the building's most striking design elements has been compromised. The uplifted winged roof or "fifth elevation," is left as a bare frame, lacking the tilted louvres that were to be fitted.

The Don Mills site is just south of Highway 401 the main east-west highway across the north of Toronto. The building's 1,900-m² floor area has arrivals and parking on the lowest level, reception, conference rooms, an exhibition gallery and restaurant on the second level, and offices for the OAA executive, admissions, and indemnity plan on the third level.—B.L.





THE ARCHITECT'S VIEW

Ruth Cawker

Since the building was opened in April 1992, I have received at least one phone call or message a week from people who have visited it and want to tell me their impressions of their visit. Common to all these accounts is the observation that the building surprised the visitor, and prime among the reasons is what many have called its "lightness." Not so much the light that comes in the windows, it would seem, but the lightness of the experience of the building.

I have been thus prompted to reflect on this idea of lightness, and I suspect it derives from at least three quite disparate sources. First, only because it is the most immediate for me, the motif of sliding planes, a compositional preoccupation that dates from a 1986 visit to Holland. Planes and lines of material that do not meet, but pass beyond each other's jurisdiction, providing a sense of relative light-weightedness, the cardinal freedom De Stijl conferred on the Modern movement.

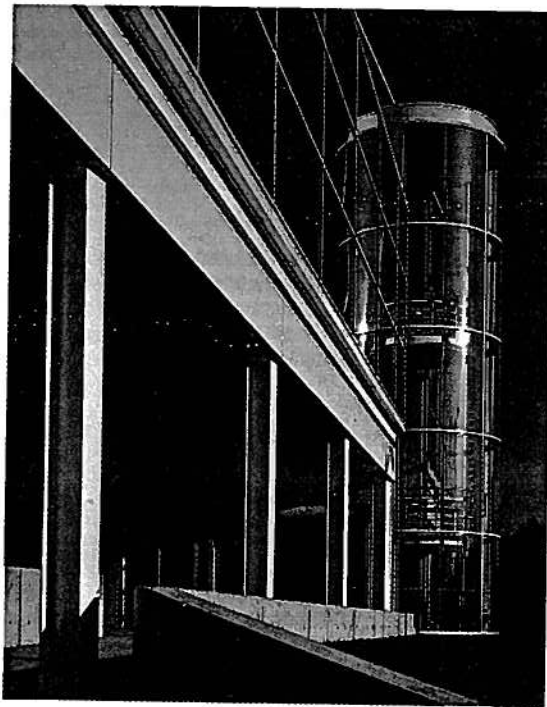
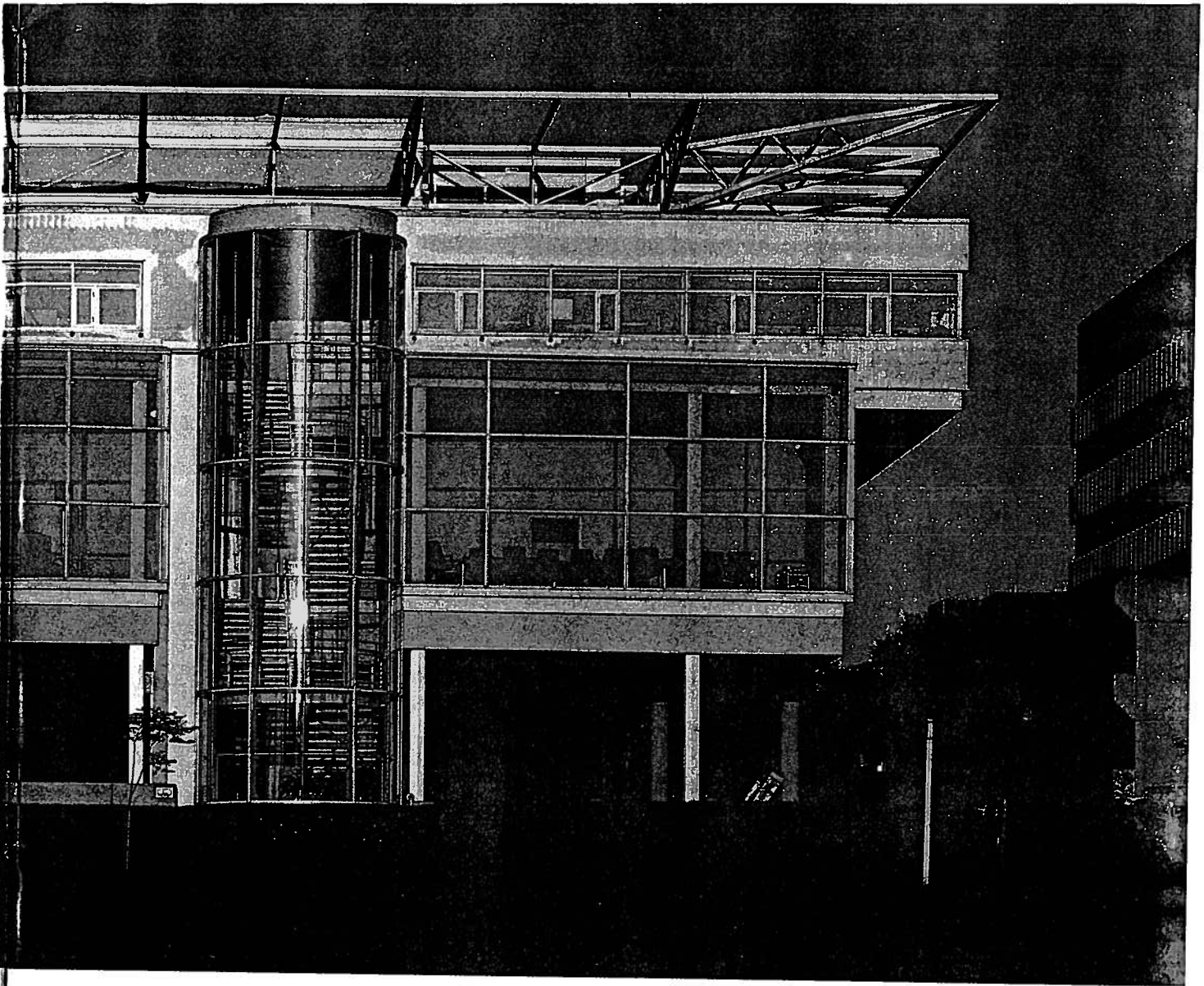
Second, the spidery sense of tectonics that Michael McColl brought back with him from England when he joined my

practice in 1988; a pure thrill in the suspension of those components that must be carried, but not expressed as a burden, the way one transports a precious but fragile gift.

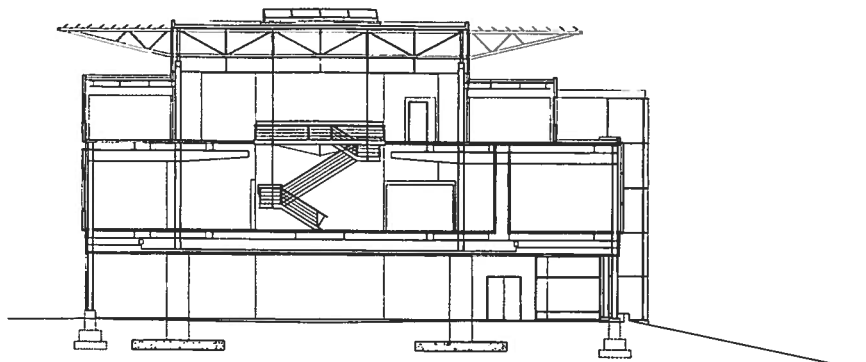
And third, the skeleton of the building, pared to the bone by Peter Sheffield, and left to breathe in the uncompromising southeastern light.

The front of the building angles tangentially to Moatfield Drive in order to broadly face Don Mills Road. Arriving at the plateau of the site, visitors ascend to enter, and while climbing alternately experience views back towards the long green ribbon of the Don Valley park land and forward toward the folded space of the reception canopy, beyond that to the double-height gallery, and beyond that through the clerestory to the pure landscape of the sky.

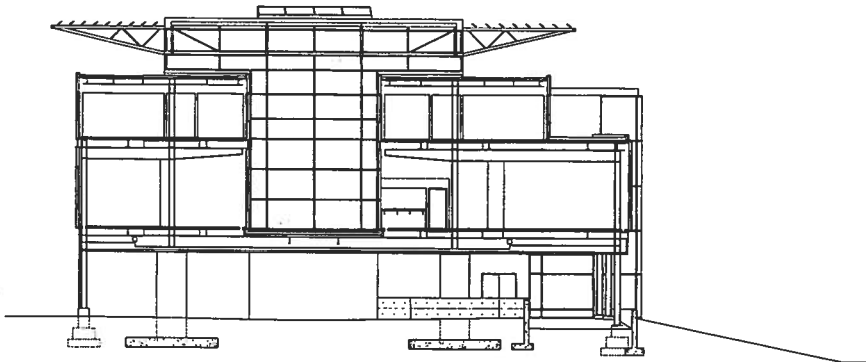
The arrival is an unwinding coil that, as in Palladian architecture, establishes a higher plane for the contact for which the building has been conceived; a contact that always refers us back to the outside from which we arrived, so that the landscape is the one sure reference for whatever abstraction the building creates. The strangeness of the building—what visitors have called its surprising character—is its transparency, the simplicity of this uncoiling path and the tall simple freedom of space at its centre. ♦



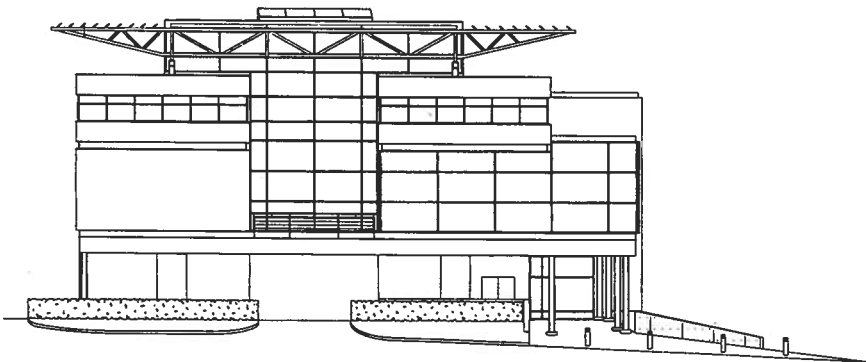
Top: east elevation, broadside to Don Mills Road. Far left: approach from Moatfield Drive. Left: entry path alongside parking to the glazed stair tower. The arrival is "an unwinding coil" that sets up the building's continuing contact back to the landscape outside.



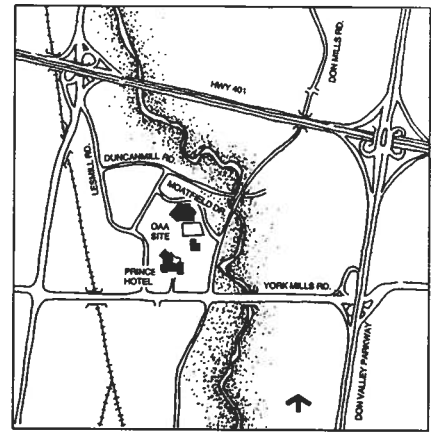
EAST-WEST SECTION



SECTION THROUGH TERRACE



SOUTH ELEVATION



LOCATION PLAN

Architect: Ruth Cawker Architect

Design team: Ruth Cawker,
Michael McColl.

Project team: Goran Milosevic,
Willa Wong, Cheryl Kowaluk,
Jonathon Crinion.

Contract administration:
Bernard Gillespie

Structural: Peter Sheffield & Assoc.

Mechanical: The Mitchell Partnership

Electrical: Carinci Burt
Rogers Engineering

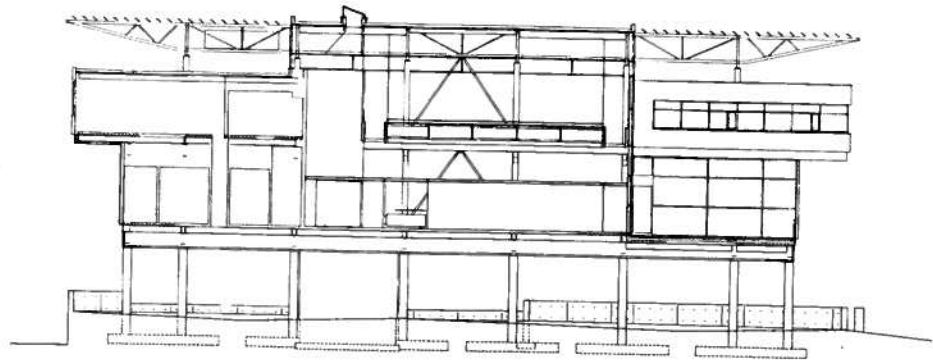
Building Envelope:
J.C. Perrault & Sons

Quantity Surveyor: Helyar & Assoc.

Contractor: PCL Constructors
Eastern Inc.

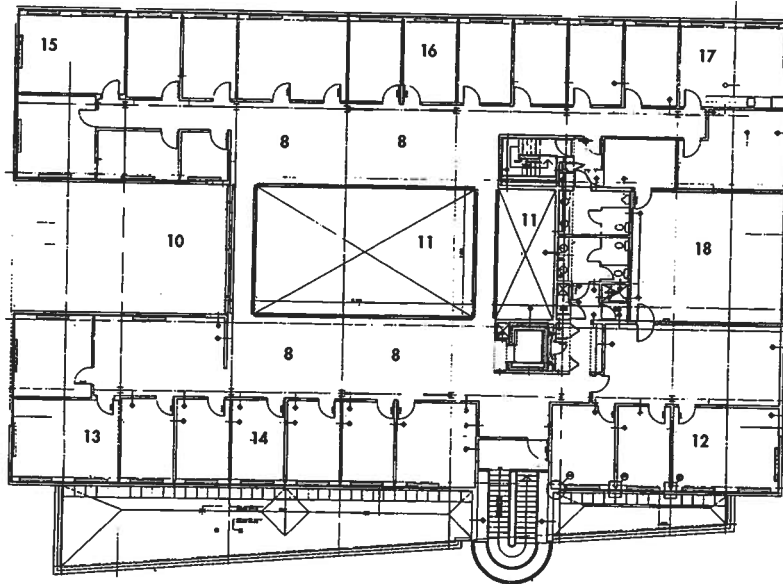
Photos: Steven Evans



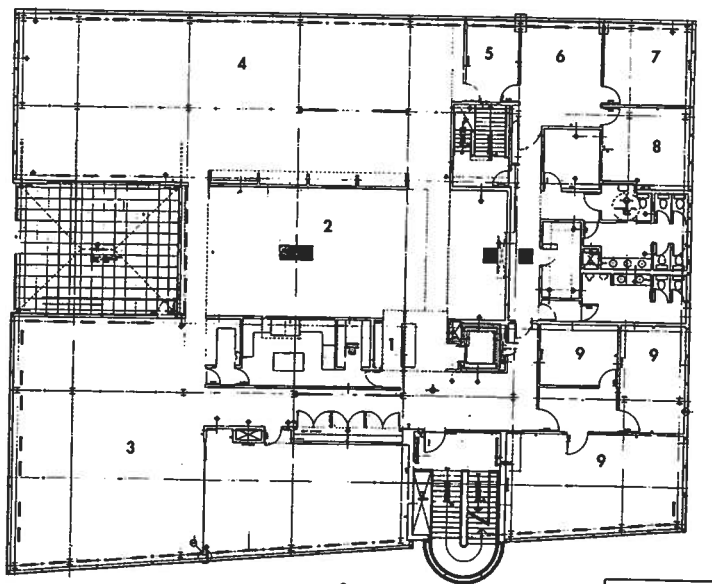


LONGITUDINAL N-S SECTION

- 1 reception
- 2 gallery/waiting
- 3 lounge/dining
- 4 display
- 5 public relations
- 6 secretary
- 7 communications director
- 8 storage
- 9 meeting room
- 10 terrace below
- 11 open to below
- 12 registrar
- 13 executive director
- 14 president
- 15 indemnity plan general manager
- 16 indemnity plan offices
- 17 staff lounge
- 18 mechanical



THIRD FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

Photo far left: view from the southeast. The building reads as a sign for motorists passing on Don Mills Road. It sits between a modern office block and a 19th-century farmhouse which was relocated here five years ago. Photo left: the plateau-like site before construction, consisting of infill on top of silt and sand.





A CRITIC'S VIEW

Marie-Paule Macdonald

The new OAA headquarters is a building deliberately designed with visibility in mind. Clearly defined as a legible constructed object, poised on a knoll with its spiky articulated roof silhouette in full salute, it stands out in high contrast against the sky when seen from Don Mills Road. Viewing out from the interior, the elevated main floor acts as a horizontal chassis for the great panes of glass that face the highway. The large windows frame the landscape outside in a vast panorama.

The specular experience is in fact the building's principal offering to the casual visitor; one cannot experience the building more fully because of its location and imperatives of the OAA's program.

The building is conceived to be approached in a car, which glides under it and parks beside the slender piloti. After negotiating the door, the driver ascends an open stair whose curved glass wall presents the first of the series of framed views of the landscape from the interior. The approach sequence is just as successful when one arrives on foot walking up the driveway and underneath the first floor.

The arrangement of simple volumes expresses carefully, intentionally and rationally a transparent principal floor elevated above the green landscape of an established industrial suburb, proto "edge city," or "perimeter centre," as this kind of suburban context is variously labelled.

The gutsy occupation of the site is carried through from

grade to the floors above. The stair tower is confident and convincing. Its curved glass walls are sleek and impressive. Access to the top level from here is controlled by a computer attachment to the door. From reception at main level, a controlled access elevator takes one up to experience the most playful element of the interior, the bridges across the central space. Otherwise the pleasure of a promenade through the entire building, of traversing the airy upper walkways, is reserved for those who have an official responsibility in the serious and essential business to which this institute is dedicated.

The structure of the OAA building is organized around a simple, central space, and white-painted steel structural elements are discreetly present at all the spatial boundaries without appearing overly muscular or intrusive. The most important aspect of the major central space is attended to: the suffusing of pure daylight through the glassed-in slots between the roof and upper walls is true architectural manipulation of space, the building's greatest asset. In following through on the sectional part of a disengaged roof, an agreeable daylight working environment, and consequently a productive one, has been assured. Further, the quality of the space constitutes a positive argument for large areas of glass even in our cold Canadian climate. The lighting inside and out has been thought through, and carefully chosen and positioned light fixtures work with the building.

While the boxy spaces of the main and upper floors are generously proportioned and light-filled, they are Volvo-like in their dependability. The Centre Le Corbusier pavilion in Zurich (1964-66) may have set out an overall pattern for the building, but some force has edited out any trace of the sculptural, sensual quality that is Corbusier's signature. Of course, there may



Facing page: restaurant lounge and terrace. Above left: central gallery space from catwalk on the third floor. "The suffusing of pure daylight through the glass between the roof and upper walls is true architectural manipulation of space." Above right: meeting room with views of the Don Valley ravine.

have been some sense that an emphasis on predictability rather than aplomb is an advantage given the concerns that are dealt with day to day inside the OAA headquarters.

From the outside the building reads as an icy white or overall light grey. It is effectively colourless, somewhat translucent. In the summer the vivid greens of the vegetation in the background compensate, but if the building is in the Corbusian tradition, a passionate commitment to colour would have been appropriate and welcome. The interior's singular devotion to a blue-violet colour against the white in the carpet and two groupings of the magnificent "Grand Confort" chairs, [furniture and carpeting were by Bregman & Hamann Interior Design], is so omnipresent that even the receptionist's outfit and a few potted African violets seem to have followed suit.

The effect of the spartan interior and its plain detailing is to render the unfriendly aspects of the building, some of which are unavoidable under the circumstances, more apparent. So the terrace, which should be sensed as an amenity as well as an architectural feature, is provided with a door that is latched not to open from the terrace. Once past the door, it will shut and leave you out there. Some of the detailing seems incomplete. At one spot where a white painted steel rod wanly penetrates the ceiling, you may well ask what gremlin stole the grommet or sleeve meant to accommodate it, leaving the rod to pass through an approximate circle, saw-cut or poked into the ceiling.

Returning to the exterior, the landscaping is pleasant and perfunctory. In the interests of economy, this might be the opportunity to explore some of the green movement's current alternative solutions to grass that include maintenance-free indigenous ground covers. The OAA intends to plant white

paper birches and lilies of the Don Valley. The orderliness of the architecture might seem less intimidating if seen against a wild, tangled garden.

The original scheme proposed by the youthful team of Ruth Cawker and Michael McColl no doubt won the competition because of its unequivocal response to the program, and because of the way it tuned into its location near typical factory lots in Don Mills, an area that was once light industrial and has been transforming into offices. It adapts to its context by making its own strong, individualist statement, albeit more rigorous and formally daring than the norm.

As a built solution, the OAA headquarters is a limpid translation of the current Ontarian conception of the association as a disciplinary and regulatory body. (Most of the provincial associations have similar roles so this might be seen as following a Canadian tradition.) While the OAA facilities are adequate for moderately sized gatherings and formally scheduled events, there is no real provision for more casual use of the spaces. Thus the program does not include, for example, an archive or reference library, a lecture hall, or a casual coffee and doughnut area, but rather formal catered dining, a controlled reception and waiting area, and seminar rooms with some adaptability. Another building a few streets away, Carmen Corneil's Ontario Public Service Employees' Union building translates the wishes of another kind of client (one that admittedly represents a much greater number of members) from a program that aims to function in an open and accessible manner into a building that is warm, funky and inviting. In addition to its architectural significance, its program includes a casual lunch room and a charming library and reading room

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Left: inside the stair tower at the reception level on the second floor. Forcing the visitor to enter by stair or elevator "neither gives the visitor much of a lift, nor is it grand or inventive enough to be preamble."

OAA MEMBER'S VIEW

Macy DuBois

I like the bravado of the new OAA headquarters building as seen by passing motorists. I like its almost weightless whiteness when seen in contrast to the adjacent concrete buildings and the recently relocated 19th-century close neighbour. Most published images do not do justice to the OAA building's successful broadside relationship to Don Mills Road. Its roof pergola, although a puzzling element, appears like the crown on the Statue of Liberty to create a positive aura of radiating energy and adds to the noticeability.

But although the new building attempts more, it contains some elements that prevent it from matching the quality of Parkin's 1955 competition-winning version at 50 Park Road (that is, before it was brutalized by the removal of the ramp/exhibition space and the grander entry). That building was high architecture in a modest dress. Its utter simplicity enabled it to weather changing fashion reasonably well, as have other Parkin buildings of that period.

Ruth Cawker has designed a more complex building, which, because she has attempted to preserve as much parking space as possible, has lifted the building essentially free of the ground. She has acknowledged elsewhere that her inspirations were Le Corbusier's *Maison Savoie* at Poissy and Barton Myers' Don Watt building on the Bayview Extension in Toronto. Recognizing an uncomfortable detachment from grade, Myers used a metal mesh screen to give the Watt building more substance and a stronger link to the ground. A similar mesh is seen in Cawker's competition perspective, but has not materialized in the building. Its relationship to the earth

might have been solved by more attention to the landscaping. Except for a few small trees and grass, there is an almost complete absence of plant material—the shopping centre approach to landscape design, and hardly adequate for the OAA.

I have said that the roof pergola is a "puzzling" element. Even if the louvres were in the outriggers (as in the competition-winning design), I wonder what this most prominent of components would accomplish in our climate except to give a certain visual distinctiveness to the building. There is a cost in logic, and therefore in design integrity.

The slight off-squareness of the street facade should have been done with more commitment. It is reflected again in slight off-squareness of the roof light monitors. The idea of an occasional free element is intriguing, but it needed to be done with more verve.

The building's detachment from the ground creates an inferior and unpleasant sense of entry. The visitor is forced to enter by stair or elevator. This neither gives the visitor much of a lift, nor is it grand or inventive enough to be preamble.

Once on the main floor one enters the high exhibition space. Bridges and balustrades on the floor above allow additional views down to the gallery, but they feel detached from the events below because of the height of the room. This height seems unnecessary in the meeting rooms and positively uncomfortable in the dining room where the high glass walls overpower the ceiling plane of acoustic tile.

The modernist whiteness along with the light wood finishes give a sunny, fresh quality. Any review of the famous Weissenhof Siedlung of 1922 in Stuttgart will connect this building to such early Modern buildings with their mainly white external and internal simple planes. It is interesting to see the return to the original *tabula rasa* International Style, along with that style's detail sense, almost as if World War II had not interrupted that evolution. Some of Cawker's details show fresh thinking, such as the round base plate to the steel columns and the perforated metal start to the handrail for the main stairs.

One very important aspect of the Parkin design was the lunchroom. At Park Road it was a place where architects could meet and discuss issues during the informality of lunch, although even in that convenient downtown location it was not used enough. I was distressed when it was eliminated, and pleased that it has now been revived in the new building. However, the new lounge is uncomfortably exposed and with just too little of design interest, the suburban scene visible outside dominating the few elements within.

Once determined to move and use the Don Mills site, a location which endorsed car-city, the OAA should have developed a building which shows how to handle low density, the arrival by car, parking, entry, internal space and response to energy and environment concerns. Although the winning design is an attempt by a sincere and committed architect as the controlled design attests, the solution falls short of being exemplary. ♦

Macy DuBois, OAA is a principal in The DuBois Plumb Partnership Architects of Toronto.