

The philosophical principle of architect

as master craftsman

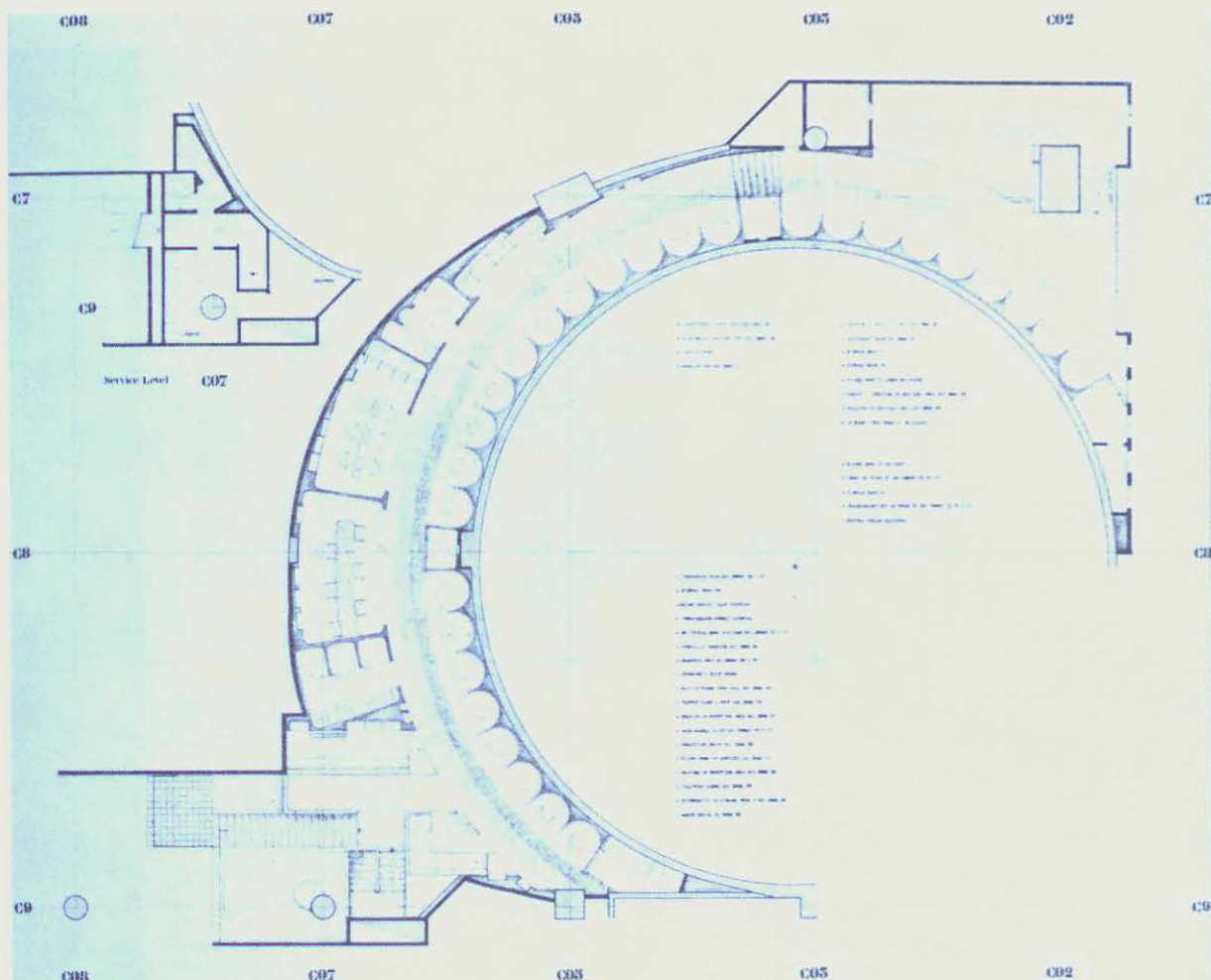
lives on in Toronto...

PROFILE OF A PRACTICE

by Marianne McKenna

Marianne McKenna is an architect working in the Toronto office of Barton Myers.

Layout: Helen Makin



HERE IS A PRACTICE which circumvents the standard problems and frustrations of practicing the profession today. Francesco and Aldo Piccaluga have crafted their two-man Toronto office in response to their personal philosophical principles about architecture and the design process. Their practice ranges from architecture to industrial design (you can buy their lines of furniture and light fixtures) to interiors. All of their work is produced from the very complete, and highly articulate drawings which are the design and production drawings rolled into one.

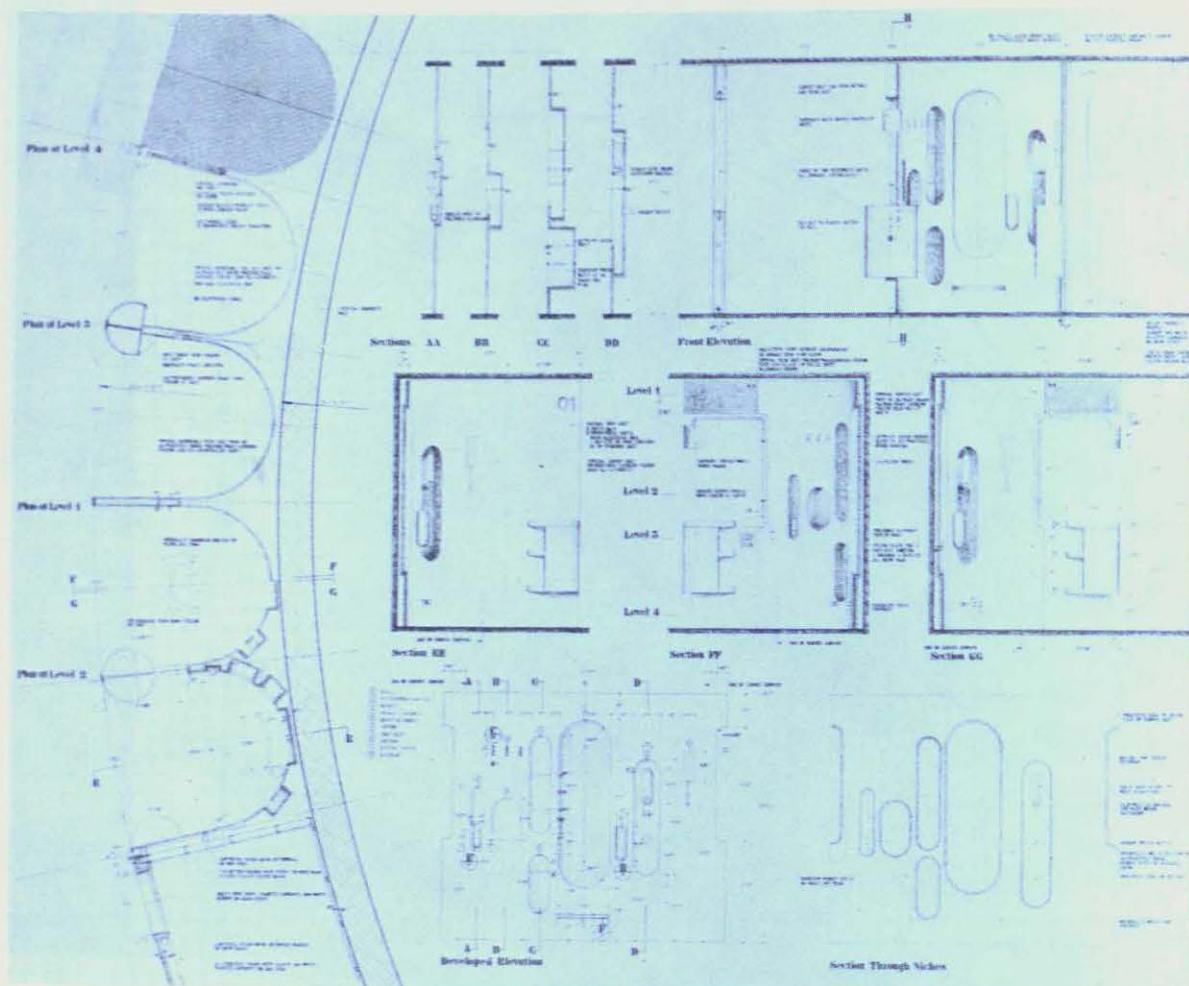
Their well-tempered office is an introduction to the Piccalugas; discreet, thoughtfully conceived, with simple solutions to all angles of outfitting an office - from a system for hanging sets of drawings on wooden dowels to hydraulic lifts on the drafting tables. A complete differentiated working environment in white and shades of grey in about eight hundred square feet; drafting room, conference room with rear-screen projection, and a photography studio/workroom. Here they do everything themselves from

rough sketches through the photography of the finished product.

The Piccalugas have found out through experience that they cannot have draughtsmen working for them. "Our method of work doesn't allow people designing for us," says Aldo Piccaluga, "we don't want anyone solving the design problems the way he already knows how."

The brothers were born in Genoa. Francesco is self-educated. He began working summers in an architect's office when he was sixteen, and has been studying architecture ever since. "I might still go to school, though," he says with a slight smile. "I want to see what a student who knows nothing about architecture is exposed to; what is the methodology of the professors; what do they give to the students. I want to see where the new generation of architects is coming from." Aldo went to the School of Rome (he was a contemporary of Manfredo Tafuri's), and received a background in architecture which was heavy in science and engineering.

"I sometimes wonder if the fact that Francesco has not been exposed to a



DeBardinis Estate Center
Architect: DeBardinis
Engineer: DeBardinis
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formal school has something to do with his lack of inhibition toward the design process, if it has allowed his creativity to develop without dogmas or rules, while I am more restricted by my engineering background," says Aldo. "In fact, the continuous sharing of experience has educated both of us, our roles are so tightly knit," explains Francesco. "There is a simultaneous input from both sides, an interaction. We don't even talk when we are working."

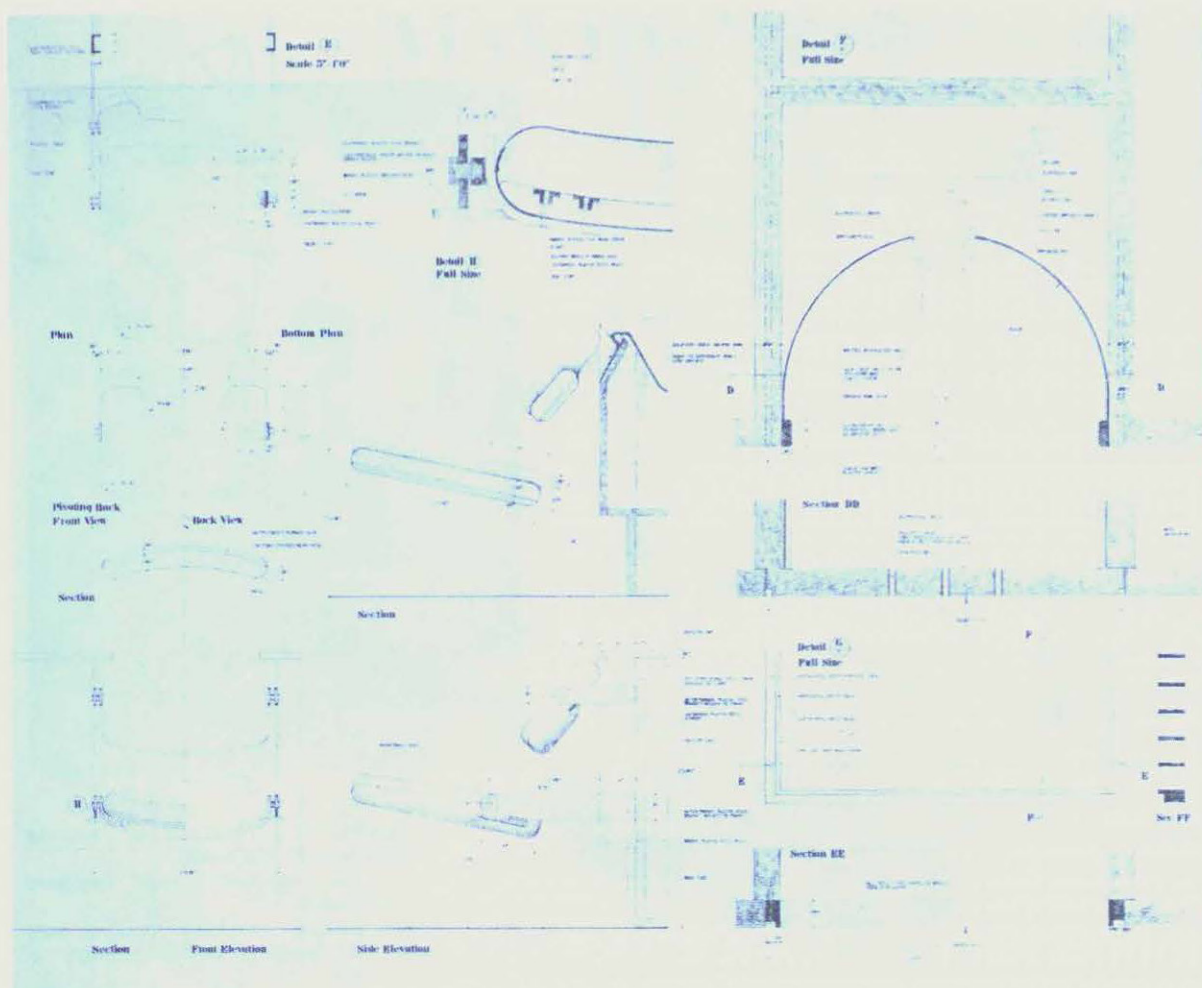
Their methodology revolves around the working drawings. "Concepts are easy. From intuition about the problem and from experience, we develop a language; a system which conditions the development of the design," says Francesco. "But the design only matures during the working drawings; the period of time you spend on the board trying to solve the problems. This is where the ideas start to grow. That is why our drawings are so rich in detail born from thinking on the drafting table."

The Piccalugas draw every detail. "Unless you draw it, you don't know," says Aldo. "When you draw all the paving, you see the texture, the

patterning, the relationships with the other materials, the scale; this is the test of the suitability of the material. The working drawings are not just to tell the contractor what to do; they are the cultural content of the design."

A set of drawings is carefully roughed out. Each sheet describes a layer of information about the design. Details are not isolated but included as the drawing progresses; elevations, plans, and sections visually keyed to re-enforce each other. Each fastening detail is described, exact points of attachment of panels are indicated. Almost no shop drawings are required. Steel fabricators trace over their drawings. Mechanical and electrical consultants work over mylars. The extra drawing work pays off. Not one additional clarification drawing was required during the construction of DeBardinis, and 'The Upper Cut' in Toronto and the Wolf Advertising Agency in Buffalo were built without supervision.

For the contractor the pricing is easier; no contingencies are added in for the unknowns or the incompleteness in the drawings. Both



with contractors and with clients, the Piccalugas believe in a kind of natural selection. They don't compete or pursue work, and very rarely go after a client. Clients come to them with unusual problems seeking a solution and this seems to guarantee that their drawings and design intentions are respected.

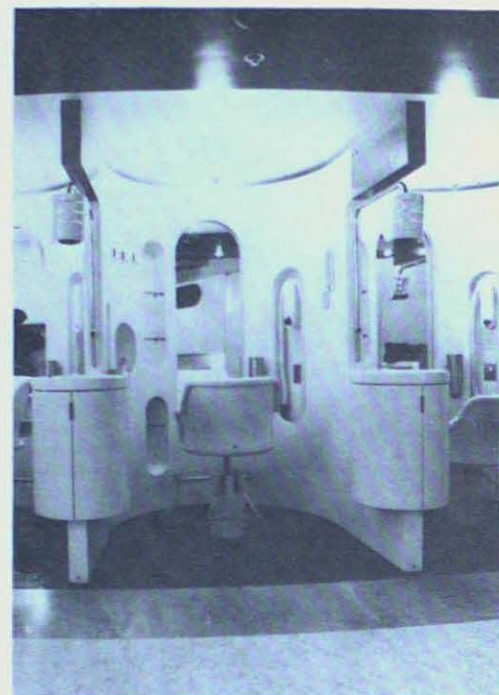
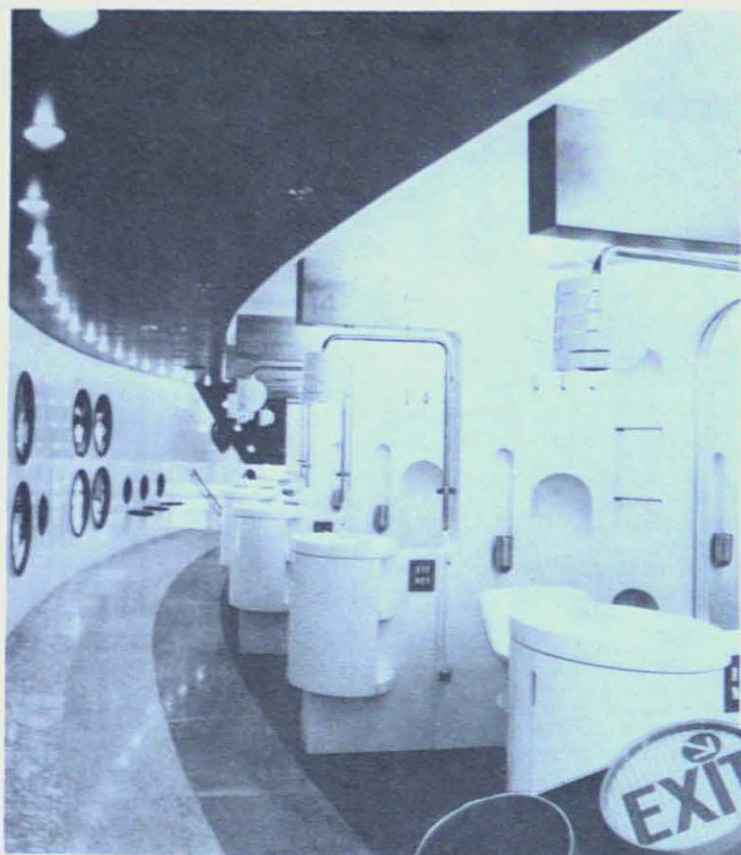
A hair salon was one such unusual problem: DeBardinis was created in a residual crescent-shaped space (not originally destined to be commercial space) which surrounds one of the parking ramps in the Eaton Centre in Toronto. The problem becomes part of the solution in much of the Piccalugas' work. The unique shape of the space is exploited in the salon and becomes part of the design 'language'. The internal arrangement of the parts - from twenty-eight work stations, strung out along the inside circumference, right through to the washrooms, seem a irrefutable fit.

The Piccalugas' work is identifiable by this kind of programmatic invention, the creative solutions to technical problems, the impeccable detailing and the elegant use of materials. (They were the architects for the restaurants

in the CN Tower.)

"We avoid solutions which have a short life;" says Aldo, "buildings have a relatively short life already." They use plaster. "One of the materials that deteriorates most quickly, and that has a temporary aspect, is drywall. There is also a tactile problem with drywall," explains Francesco. "It is one thing to put your hand on a plaster wall, and another to put your hand on drywall." The Piccalugas can tell a plaster wall from twenty feet.

"We do not use a material which pretends to be something which it is not. All the synthetic materials are eliminated and you are left with brick, plaster, marble, the various rocks and stones, tiles - glazed and unglazed, wood, glass, and steel. If we use plastic laminates, they look like plastic laminates." Each material is employed for its particular richness. "Marble," says Francesco, "has certain qualities that other materials don't have. You can have inlays, inserts, patterning, create designs on the floor. This is something lost in the profession - the use of the floor to define spaces, direct circulation and



Concentric gradations of marble leading around the salon.

Work stations are custom designed pre-fab units.

Every detail carefully thought out, from hair washing basins through to exit lights.

reflect what is happening in the ceiling. These details are not superficial. They are the details that define the whole program."

What about the cost? "You don't have to use the marble wall-to-wall," says Aldo. "We use the materials for their special characteristics in proportions that reflect the budget. You can use marble and wood, marble and carpet."

In DeBardinis, one ascends a flight of mottled white marble stairs up to the salon level. Three concentric gradations of grey marble define the major circulation route, directing movement around the perimeter of the circle, past the string of pre-fabricated, moulded polyurethane work stations. Each station is equipped with mirrors, footrest, recessed magazine rack, blowers, hot comb, central vacuum, and intercom - all wired up and ready to go. The work station areas off the main circulation are tiled.

For every project the Piccalugas go into special production - the built-in seating, the hot lamps, the lights, the equipment, and the furniture are all custom-designed. The product is part

of the language of the design and only through design does it meet their requirements. "It is a fallacy to think that a standard product is cheaper," says Aldo. "The difference is that you specify a standard product, and a custom product needs to be designed. And it has to work, and that implies a risk. You have to know what you are doing."

While other architects search for new ways to use standard products, or tailor those products to their requirements, the Piccalugas are confident that their designs and creativity are not affected by the availability of materials or products. They have the freedom to design and develop their ideas with the only constraints that they choose to impose.

The Piccalugas are unique in the kind of autonomy that they have achieved. They are craftsmen/architects, and as such appear to have the satisfaction in their work that comes from actually making something. The drawings are the pragmatic means of achieving the built product, but more, they are the culturally rich expressions of architecture as an imperial science. □