



Crang and Boake, Architects

THE RIDEAU AREA PROJECT:

Another Point of View

by Lise-Anne Couture

...our generation is both witness and victim of a cultural tragedy to which there is no precedent in history. The radical commercialization of urban land becomes now even a menace to the architectural profession. The architects as servile executors of grand speculation and the large building monopolies have lost their traditional credibility as creators of a better tomorrow. Building once a promise, constitutes now a threat for the collectivity.

Leon Krier

In the past several decades the cities of North America have undergone incredible growth and change. Unfortunately, due to many of the attitudes unique to this century, the very aspects of a city that renders it urban are being threatened by overly ambitious commercial interests. In the past few years while there has been on the one hand a strong movement to recognize the value of the traditional urban setting, much of the damage instigated by the philosophies of the Fifties and Sixties have continued. As a result, new commercial development, being undertaken under the guise of urban renewal, is now threatening to make our downtown regions, the traditional cores of our cities, a thing of the past.

A typical city's downtown region was originally characterized by a multiplicity of users and activities. With the advent of the suburbs many of the residents moved from the core to the periphery. This changed the nature of the downtown region to some extent — the residential density decreased while the automobile population increased. However it still remained the commercial, cultural and institutional center of the city and continued to serve a wide cross-section of the population. Until the fairly recent development of a new typology, the suburban shopping centre, the downtown core provided a rich and vibrant environment, rendering the experience of frequenting it pleasurable if not exciting. The shopping centre has done much to change this in recent years. It has

caused the city to dissolve into a series of commercial nodes which compete with the downtown core. The shopping centre has strived to fulfill a multiplicity of need in terms of goods and services and even entertainment; as a result, both the suburban dwellers and the city have suffered. A majority of the population foresook the diversity that a rich and vibrant city centre can provide for the limited selection of mediocre shops and merchandise that were conveniently accessible. As the shopping centre increased in popularity, signs of vitality began to dwindle with the city... the siege having been successful, the shopping centre now attempted to invade the city core itself.

The Rideau Area Project

Hardly anyone today is concerned about town planning as a work of art; instead (it is seen) only as a technical problem.

Camillo Sitte

In Ottawa, the recent development and construction of the Rideau Area Project is unfortunately an example of a downtown core under attack. Placed in the once active center of the city, it is now a new development that is nothing more than a huge suburban shopping centre, with a hotel and convention centre attached for assured commercial success. Situated along Rideau Street, potentially the most vital street in the area, this new complex is surrounded by parkland, an active market area with many interesting urban characteristics, a variety of typical low scale buildings and is in proximity to many of our present and future national monuments. As the urban aspects of the area have changed so too has the nature of the activity. No longer is this a place for leisurely strolls, observing people and being observed, window shopping, and discovering intriguing shops and intimate places. The transformation of the city as a result of the intervention of this commercial complex with its over-emphasized traffic considerations, evoke concern for true "urban" space which has all too often been replaced by organization based on purely functional and quantitative principles.



Above: Glass enclosed walkways lining both sides of the Rideau Street bus mall. Right: Escalators in one of the 'court' spaces.



The rejection of streets and squares as defined planning elements was linked with the destruction of the fabric of the city... The spirit of the 'city for the car' drove out the principle of the humane city environment susceptible to logical and sensual perception.

Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani

The few token gestures afforded the real needs of the people are superficial and secondary. A recent Rideau Area Project newsletter stresses the improvement of vehicular and pedestrian traffic as a major goal. In order to achieve this, radical steps have been taken to transform a portion of Rideau Street, just blocks away from the Parliament Buildings, into a bus transit mall. At great expense, a maze of one-way streets and a collection of confusing intersections were created in order to accommodate increased traffic along previously less travelled routes. It would seem logical for all of this to occur if at least the pedestrian situation benefited dramatically. This however is hardly the case.

What began as an attempt to serve the pedestrian has resulted in an expensive and grandiose failure. Perhaps believing that exposure to the elements is the worst possible problem faced by the pedestrian, the architects have provided glass enclosed walkways along either side of the bus mall. These take up almost the whole width of the sidewalk and are supported by large steel "greenhouse" type structures. Needless to say, these appear somewhat inappropriate superimposed on the existing facades. Although the provision of shelter at bus stops seems thoughtful and sensible, the presence of these together with the glass and steel structures, which are continuous for several blocks, seems excessive if not a little extreme. It might be noted that the sidewalk enclosures might well be necessary in order to protect the pedestrian from the fumes of the buses which are constantly travelling the length of the mall. Perhaps it would have been easier (and less expensive) to have removed the cause in the first place.

Even a town alive with building activity will die if in the course of this building the challenge to accept a more wide-ranging commitment, to recognize a broader definition of 'needs', is ignored.

Josef Paul Kleihues

The implementation of these sidewalk structures seems to indicate a deep misunderstanding or lack of acknowledgement of the true nature of the 'street'. As a place for display, exchange, exposure

and observation, the street remains one of the last vestiges of the public realm. The planners of the Rideau Area Project however have perceived the street as fulfilling a much narrower role. The emphasis is placed solely on man's need for mobility — to go from A to B in comfort — and not on the events one might encounter or the sensations one might experience along the way. With their preoccupation for promoting efficient mass transit and 'improving' pedestrian circulation, the planners seem to have lost sight of the many qualitative aspects that are important to the life of a street. From the point of view of the pedestrian much of the feeling of being in the city is removed. Enclosed in a glass cage, the pedestrian environment becomes totally artificial: the sounds of the street are muffled, the views become somewhat obscured. The people in the buses can no longer partake in the street experience either, for they can no longer see the store windows nor the people who parade before them.

...what is needed is a hybrid architecture for the hybrid city, an architecture of rooms as well as space, of facades as well as frames, an architecture which makes urban space as well as consuming it.

Michael Dennis

There exists, in the area around the Rideau Centre — namely in the market area and along Sussex Drive, a number of pedestrian-scaled pathways and intimate courtyards that could have served as valuable clues for the reconstruction of what is now a development that rivals the megastructures of the Fifties and Sixties. If we are to strive for a coherent urban form with a continuously changing context, it is necessary for a dialectical relationship between the whole and the parts to occur, but, for this to be done successfully, new forms must be derived from the existing structural order.

The Rideau Area Project rejects the inherent structure of the city by choosing to ignore the existing grid as a basis for establishing further development. Instead it has created a new order that detracts from a potentially legible fabric. The solution is not to ignore contemporary urban constraints but to re-adapt and refine the given structure to suit our present needs. This approach would perhaps have provided a more satisfactory result in terms of pedestrian movement, for in lieu of a system that provides a sense of path and place, the Rideau Centre provides a confusing sequence of malls and bridges that remove people from the street and manipulate them through a series of relatively unexciting commercial corridors.



The Rideau Centre

Architecture is becoming ever more tarnished, faded and dim... It is shabby, poor and bare. It no longer expresses anything not even the memory of another age's art. Confined to itself, abandoned by the other arts because human thought abandons it, architecture recruits labourers for want of artists. Every trace of the vitality, originality, life and intelligence is gone.

Victor Hugo

Since the Rideau Centre fails to make a positive statement urbanistically, it seems reasonable to assume that it would at least make a valid architectural statement. The Rideau Centre however fails on this level as well, it is quite evident that the main purpose of its existence is to achieve commercial success. The act of spending money seems to be the only part of the experience of 'being downtown' that the planners acknowledge. The architecture accommodates business not people.

Even to an architect with a so-called trained eye, the plan of the



Above: A mall terminating at Eaton Court. Left: A skylight providing light to one of the lower floors.

building remains confusing. It is difficult to sense where one is in relation to anywhere else. This is due mainly to the irregularity of the plan and the repetition of similar materials and themes. A two-dimensional diagram reveals the rationale behind the plan quite clearly, however. The circulation system consists simply of a series of straight lines connecting the three anchor department stores (the traditional shopping mall solution) with an additional mall parallel to Rideau Street (the only path derived from existing geometry). The organization is based solely on the maximization of rentable space.

This typifies the attitude of the architect towards planning; the 'needs' of the shopper as a human being are of the last importance. The architectural features leave much to be desired, the skylit atrium spaces called 'courts' that occur at the three major intersections within the mall do provide natural light and relief from the relatively low ceiling heights. However, the courts, which all tend to look the same, have resulted in a visually confusing array of stairs, ramps, escalators and elevators. The use of mirror cladding only adds to this cluttered effect, created by too many elements in a relatively small space. The skylight motif is repeated throughout the complex with the seemingly noble intention of providing natural light to the lower floors through cut-outs in those above. Again the results are less than satisfactory; at times, the skylights line up with the cut-outs for a moderately pleasing effect despite the fact the openings are rather small. However, at other times their relative positions make less sense sectionally and, even worse, there are instances where one glances up through the openings above to see that there aren't any skylights at all. The reflected ceiling plan of the lighting fixtures and structure fails to correspond to the plan below, and this becomes somewhat visually disturbing.

Further criticism of the architecture is based on some fundamental architectural notions, such as the acknowledgement of formal principles. Because of their nature, we would expect that at the end of axes, we would find some form of termination that would justify the gymnastics that occur in plan. Such notions however are addressed by only the most meagre attempts. In one instance, as we proceed down the mall toward a court space, we find ourselves on axis with a wall that is all but blank, save for a firehose cabinet and a door to a broom-closet. In an attempt to camouflage this obvious mistake, three lampposts have been placed side by side in front of the wall. This type of poor consideration or lack of resolution to the endpoints of the various malls is repeated throughout



Above: Long rows of benches down the centre of a mall offer little enticement to sit down. Right: Service-like entrance on Daly Street.



the center. In another similar instance, we find that as we descend an escalator towards one of the main exits, we are on axis with the fire stairs. The entrances themselves are anything but grand; at times, they are best characterized by low doors, low ceilings and low levels of light.

Perhaps the architects hope that the shoppers will remain oblivious to all this, but they will surely notice the lack of consideration afforded them in terms of space provided for the purpose of relaxation. The few seating areas that do exist consist mostly of rows of benches aligned down the centre of the malls, often without the benefit of natural light or an appealing view. Even less accommodation is to be found on the upper floors, where the space left over by the floor cut-outs is insufficient to provide both for circulation and seating. The court areas offer little opportunity to relax. There is virtually no additional seating nor anything of visual interest save the exposed elevator that disappears into a fountain and the overused skylight motif.

...the endless reports and regulations on isolated technical problems — real orgies of quantitative thinking — have been accompanied by a generalized decay of our environment.

Leon Krier

Except for a roof garden which consists of bits of greenery planted between the mechanical rooms and vents, there is little attempt to provide any outdoor space. At ground level we find an expansive lawn upon which sits a tiny heritage building, the scale of which is only emphasized by the unarticulated, fortress-like facade behind it. Also, along this east elevation are two entrances to the shopping mall. One terminates Besserer Street in a so called court, although this narrow space wedged between a parking structure and a long unrelieved wall is hardly enticing. The other entrance must be approached via a long ramp ascending towards what appears to be a service entrance. Along the south side of the building the entrance is located on the MacKenzie Bridge and again the building appears monolithic, and uninviting. On the canal side and on Rideau St. however the articulated facades are overwhelming. The choice of concrete, steel and tinted glass as materials, and the scale of the elements serve only to emphasize the presence of this building as a foreign body. The overscaled walkways that link the second level of the Rideau Centre to the Bay department stores across Rideau Street lack elegance and obstruct the view. To further damage the nature of Rideau Street, the concentration of activity on the inside of the centre has caused the commercial space at ground level to

turn its back on the street. The new scheme has imposed service doors on the street where there were once "active" entries into stores. It becomes quite apparent that a change in priorities has occurred when the architects and planners begin to treat a major downtown street as a service alley.

Conclusion

Progress owes itself to the discontented.

Aldous Huxley

The intent of this article is not solely to criticize the various aspects of the Rideau Area Project, but rather, through this, to illustrate an important issue at this point in time. That is, in order for us to provide a most appropriate and humane environment through our architecture, there must be an on-going critical dialogue occurring within the profession. With this it is hoped that many of the flaws and failures, such as those of the Rideau Area Project, can be prevented from ever happening in the first place, or at least through criticism after the fact, be prevented from ever happening again. A more open critical forum would help improve the standard of quality in architectural and urban design, as well as demand greater conviction from all with respect to critical issues. This article also tries to illustrate that architects are often placed in difficult situations that are beyond their control. These are the result of developers, entrepreneurs and politicians who make decisions in their own interest often at the expense of the average citizen. What is being asked for is that a more socially responsible attitude and approach be taken and reflected in both functional and aesthetic terms. The architect must re-examine and re-adjust his priorities, and in the end take on a more important role in the shaping of our cities. The re-development of the Rideau Area held great potential... had the initial decisions been more sensitive to the existing context, the nature of a city centre and the real "needs" of people, it could have resulted in a much more positive architectural and urbanistic statement.

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Note

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