



Julian Jacobs Architect Emery Yard

Type: Reinventing a Prototype/Public Works Building

Project: Emery Yard, North York

Structural Engineers: Anrep

Mechanical and Electrical Engineers: Mancini Saldan

Soil Consultants: J.T. Donald

Environmental Systems: H.C.I. Consultants

Size: 20,000 square feet

Budget: \$2 million

Completion: Spring 1992

Most people can imagine high design for trendy restaurants or for the offices of the corporate elite. But an award-winning maintenance building dispels the myth that advanced architecture looks best on executives. Not so at Emery Yard, a parks and maintenance building designed to be both functional and beautiful, where staff morale has soared and, compared with other maintenance buildings, absenteeism is down.

The City of North York has been building parks and maintenance buildings for decades – facilities to store trucks, assemble park furniture and administer city clean-up crews. But, like most municipalities, North York has built cookie-cutter structures for its blue collar workers, bereft of texture or material interest and lacking a natural relationship to the outdoors. “Staff would say to me, ‘Why do you stereotype us as blue collar workers who don’t deserve any views onto the landscape?’” says Derek Nicholson, design and construction project manager for North York’s Parks Department. “You stereotype us and, because we are welders, expect us to weld all day in a windowless room.”

Emery Yard, a new parks and maintenance building by Julian Jacobs Architect, not only has received the prestigious 1994 Governor General’s Award for Architecture, but the facility has also transformed the lives of the people who work there. It is the only public works building of any type in Canada to win the biennial award. And it was constructed for no more money than the banal maintenance buildings from the past.

The Parks Department had outgrown another nearby facility – Allness Yard – and workers had started to complain about headaches caused by poorly ventilated paint areas and the fact that staff had to use flashlights to weld properly in the building’s

windowless workshop. Absenteeism was a problem and morale at the cramped facility was shaky.

But Nicholson wanted, first and foremost, a building that could function effectively for a somewhat beleaguered crew of workers. The program for Emery Yard, which employs up to 75 personnel, required an efficient use of space for building and repair workshops, manageable truck paths and adequate ventilation for toxic fumes; the entire program was accommodated within the \$85 per square foot budget typically allocated to other maintenance yards. “I’m not interested in building something that wins awards if it doesn’t function,” says Nicholson.

The overall budget of \$2 million included a proportion for the expense of preparing a difficult site – a toxic garbage dump – for construction. Methane gas and carbon monoxide were some of the 25 toxins spewing from the garbage dump. A grid of steel piles was driven down 50 feet to reach solid ground and a slab was suspended over grade beams to provide adequate load-bearing capacity. A horizontal grid of pipes was laid below the slab and perforated to allow the toxins to float into the pipes before reaching several venting locations. The venting is ongoing, and electronic sensors which can detect toxic levels were installed in the ceilings throughout Emery and hooked up to a monitoring facility in North York.

Next, Julian Jacobs took the typical floor plan that had been handed to him and reinvented it. He shifted the entrance of the building from the front facing the major road and placed it on the side, allowing for a centralized plan with a meeting room/cafeteria at the heart of the building. Wanting to elevate the basic industrial type into an organic shape, Jacobs used the front facade – freed from its original duty – to create an undulating brick wall, textured to look like snake skin, with a large eye-shaped aperture cut into it.

Sensuous, curved forms have been juxtaposed with tough industrial materials throughout the building’s design. Wanting to break up the monotony of a series of garage doors on the long elevation, Jacobs used undulating forms near the side entrance, cladding them in stained birch ply and vertical wooden fins; tough steel mesh fins provide visual interest as well as serving as safety bollards for outgoing trucks.

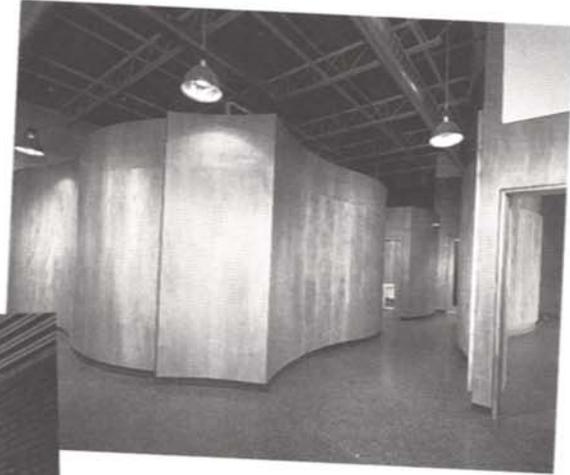
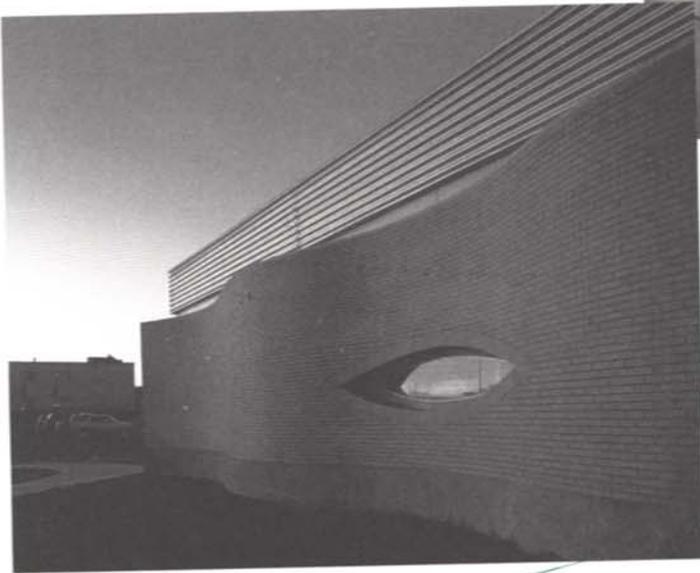
Jacobs replaced the conventional long, dark corridors of other maintenance buildings with a meandering path that leads, ultimately, to the centre or hearth of the building. “I personally have a phobia about corridors,” says Jacobs. “They’re sterile and

they're inhuman." An undulating wooden wall gives way to an office and the meeting room/cafeteria. A green terrazzo floor creates the sense of "walking through a meadow from which rise the wooden walls, or a forest," says Jacobs. The lunchroom sits at the heart of the facility and, detailed in warmly stained plywood and white drywall, doubles as a training area.

Flashlights are no longer required. The workshops at Emery are flooded with natural light. The building provides an enormous garage space with a vaulted roof; frameless glass was specified, providing grace and levity to an otherwise workaday space.

Besides providing employees with a healthier workplace environment of which they can feel proud, Emery Yard has embraced

workers as productive and sensitive individuals. And they have responded in kind: "The workers just love the building," says Nicholson. "In fact, they're quite territorial. You could eat off the floors at Emery. That's certainly not the case at Allness." ■



Undulating, organic shapes used for the facade of the building are echoed in the interior to create corridors and functional spaces with visual interest. The effect is heightened by juxtaposition with the tough, industrial shapes and materials of the roof structure.

