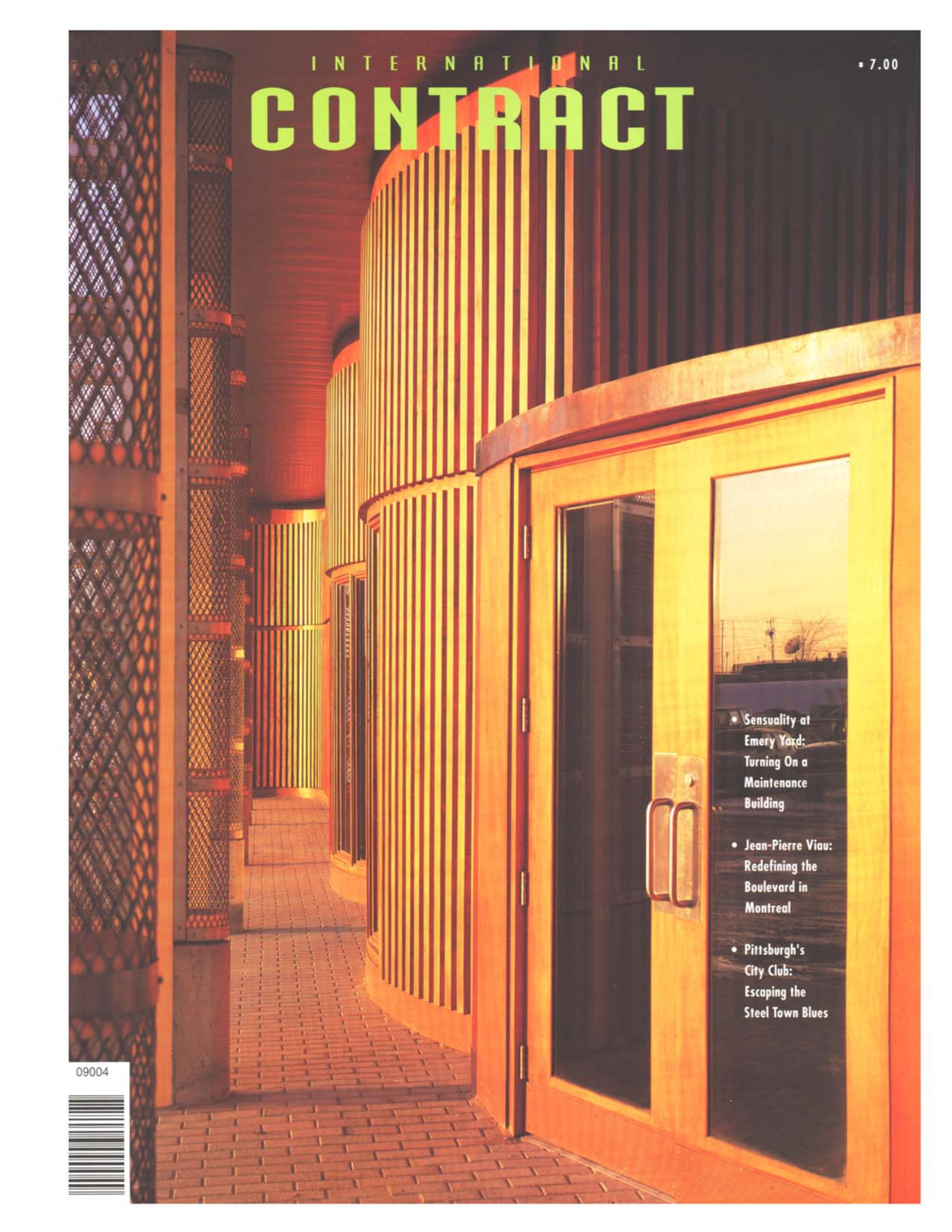


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THE SENSUAL RESPONSE OF EMERY YARD

BY RYSZARD SIKMOR

Any observation of Toronto's burgeoning hinterland inevitably leads to the dismal recognition that whatever the benefits of such development, its legacy remains a bleak atopic sprawl of building and landscape — Lewis Mumford's anti-city. The pale grey light of an Ontario winter does little to mollify this jaundiced view. As cultural tourists to these peripheral areas, we find that only the occasional surreal juxtaposition of roadside objects can prick our consciousness. But more often than not, as visitors we simply wipe the condensation from the car windscreen, shut down our critical gaze and drive on.

On paper, the Emery Yard project — a maintenance building for the North York Parks Department — would do little to raise our expectations. The site is bounded by indifferent industrial and commercial structures (products themselves of similar low-budget restrictions), and maintenance building type (low, brown, boxy; with a higher rear wing for vehicle storage). Pretty depressing! Even with the best of intentions, the project appears laden with the trappings of a Commission from Hell.

There is, however, something intriguing about the negative qualities of these environments. People live, work and die here, after all; if we could gather the traces of these events, perhaps amplify the whispers — better still, if we could rediscover the sensuous in the everyday and find a client open to such speculations in the building process, then the practice of architecture and design might still have some relevance.

By all appearances, architect Julian Jacobs and his design team have benefitted from such a collaboration, transforming a basic industrial type with dramatic effect.

At the outset, a planning decision was made to shift the entrance to the side and set up a centralized plan organization within the linear format of the building. As a consequence, our first experience from the road is of an undulating clay brick wall from which a large eye-shaped aperture returns our gaze through the wire mesh fence that marks the property boundary. This wall terminates a long, narrow single-storey warehouse structure which is capped on the long elevation by a continuous profiled metal fascia. At the far end, the roofline is punctured by a low-arched silver roof structure over the vehicle service bays. Here, a series of bowstring trusses create a clerestory light that intensifies the sense of airiness in the space filled with the Parks Department's bright yellow vehicles.

An exposed steel frame acts as a rectangular ordering device throughout the building and can be imagined as a kind of architectural skeleton. As you walk around the building, each elevation undergoes subtle modification, setting up a series of different cues as to its importance. The two short elevations are basically solid brick walls. They bracket the pair of long elevations sheathed with a skin of glass and silver panelled doors that enclose the maintenance programs.

The formal significance of the elevation to the entrance court is emphasized by a layer of vertical fins, which extend the column order of the building onto a narrow apron of clay-coloured pavers. In the middle of this principle façade, the architects introduce another spatial schema for the entrance, visitor and staff facilities. The sheathing function of the skin takes on a more emphatic interpretation. A language of biomorphic forms is introduced, as if to recover a sensual ground for the place of human inhabitation. At this point, a



Left: Inside the building, undulating woodwalls contain the office, meeting room, lunchroom and other components. The black terrazzo floors are speckled yellow, white and black in a green epoxy base.



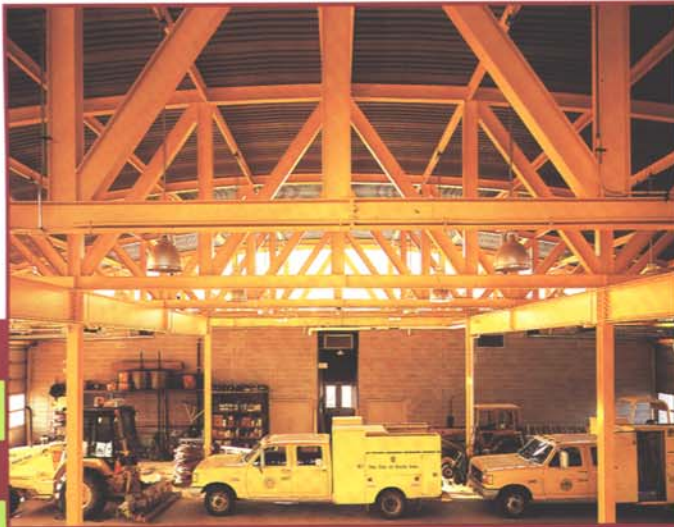
loggia is established between the exterior metal fins and a sinuous exposed skin of stained birch ply clad with vertical wooden fins. Acting as a counter theme to the rectangular order of the warehouse structure, the wall is pierced in two places by pairs of entrance doors. Beyond these, the birch ply skin, now shorn of its fins, continues its undulating geometry inside.

In the interior, the tall vertical spaces combine with the black terrazzo floor, to conjure up analogies of dark, sylvan interiors. The effect intensifies in the deepest part of the building, where a pool of overhead light illuminates a gathering area along the circulation spine.

All the amenity areas — locker rooms, washrooms, offices, meeting room — are inflected by this sensual order. It is clear that the architects have put most of their efforts into the lunch room/training area. In plan, its torso-heavy imagery is symmetrically disposed at the building's heart. An almost theatrical sequence of movement is set up from the darker vertically proportioned circulation area. As you enter through one of a pair of entry doors on each side of a brick alcove, you find yourself drawn along the curving side walls to an inverted bay window, which opens onto the (as yet undeveloped) landscape beyond.

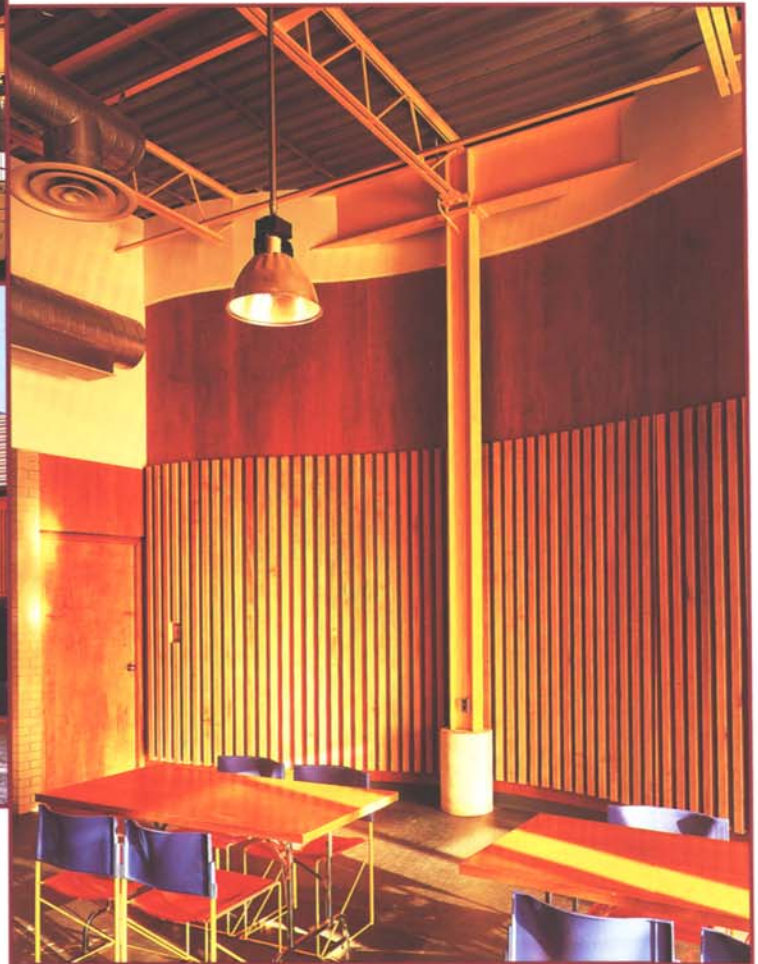
The detailing is robust, and yet recognizes the fiscal restraints on the building. While observing the client's requirements, the architects have succeeded in giving everyday social rituals a pre-eminent setting.

Emery Yard has shown that though a singular planning intervention or architectural project may not overcome its context, it can certainly provide the means of questioning it. For the ambition and passion that brought it into being, it deserves high recognition. **IC**



Top:
The garage space is vaulted by a curved silver plane supported by bowstring trusses. The frameless glass under the roof gives a sense of levity to the roof.

Bottom:
When it is eventually completed, the front yard landscape will contain a 50-foot-diameter seating area.



Above:
Plywood sheathing and white drywall define the torso-like shape of the lunchroom/training area, which is in both design and practice the heart of the facility.