

Poetic architect says imagination is the only limit

A maintenance building isn't the sort of thing you'd expect would be awarded the Governor General's Award for architecture. But then, you probably haven't met architect Julian Jacobs.

By MICHAEL MCKINNON, TOWN CRIER

The Millgate Cres. resident and senior partner of Julian Jacobs Architects doesn't just design a big shoebox-structure for people to work and live in, he composes a building with metaphors like a poet might a poem.

Take Emery Yard, for example, which is the first industrial building of any kind to win a Governor General's Award. Built partly on a garbage dump, the maintenance building houses workshops, garages, offices and amenities for the North York Parks and Recreation Department.

But Emery isn't just a big, concrete shoebox, says Design for a Strong Ontario, published by the Ontario government.

The wavy wall of brickwork, textured to look like snakeskin and broken by an eye-shaped window, represents a reclining nude. Inside, winding paths flooded with natural light have replaced the standard straight and narrow corridors. The building materials may be typical of what comprises a public works building, but what Jacobs has done with them is not.

"Emery Yard building is an example of what can be done with nothing," says Jacobs, 45, who graduated with his bachelor of architecture from the McGill School of Architecture in 1974.

He could have designed something safe and conventional, but that would be cheating the public, he says.

"Everybody has to see these buildings. Architects have a moral obligation to deliver on buildings that are beautiful."

Jacobs, chair of the 1996 North York Awards of Excellence, says, "Architects constantly blame everybody for their bad buildings," listing limited budgets, poor sites and purposes as determining factors.

"But it's all nonsense. It's completely the imagination and the will of the architect that is the only limit."

Emery Yard is now cited as a goal other architects should strive for in Design for a Strong Ontario.

"Public works buildings in North York have typically been cookie-cutter structures, lacking any individuality or natural relations to the outdoors," Strategy says.

"But Emery Yard...quickly became a favourite of workers thanks to its abundant natural light, high ceilings and innovative use of colour and texture. And the 20,000-square-foot structure costs no more than 'regular' buildings."

Now Jacobs is trying to duplicate Emery's success with his



THE POETRY OF ARCHITECTURE: Julian Jacobs designed Fire Station #19, Curlew Dr., which doubles as a fully operational fire station and museum/education centre.

MALCOLM KELLY/Town Crier



second design for the city of North York — Grandravine Complex, a community centre that will include an arena and gymnasium. Jacobs says Grandravine will be his most powerful building to date; he already has a clear picture of the building's poetry.

Poetry? In architecture? A great building, he says, speaks to people through its own language. Through examining the building's function, landscaping and location, Jacobs determines what that message will be.

And then he has the building's poetry.

"It's in a way like writing literature that is very popular," he says. "I want to make great literature that you can't put down — that's what I want to do with my buildings."

The complex includes a Bocce court sunk about 10 feet into ground. Jacobs expanded that aspect into a building that represents cultural anthropology and man's

own struggle to break free, he says, because it is half-buried.

"Any great work of art must reach people at an emotional level," he says. "If I haven't done that, I've failed."

But you don't have to understand cultural anthropology to appreciate Emery Yard. You just have to be able to appreciate beauty, says Jacobs.

"I want people to love my buildings today. It's not good enough to love them in 50 years. I want people to love them today and 500 years from now. The bar is set very high and I want to jump that bar," he says.