

FASHION & DESIGN

Thursday, September 5, 1996

Section D

What do people want?

*Architect Julian Jacobs
begins with that question*

BY PAMELA YOUNG
Special to The Globe and Mail

ZIPPING past the strip malls and featureless apartment buildings of suburban North York, architect Julian Jacobs gripped the wheel of his Jeep Wagoneer and launched a verbal attack on his profession.

Working up a good head of steam, the 47-year-old ex-Montrealer wondered aloud why so many architects, so many decades after the crumbling of Modernism's absolute monarchy, still see themselves as exalted form-givers, put on this earth to design buildings that people *should* want rather than buildings that people *do* want.

Jacobs doesn't hire designers who think that way. "Architecture must be inclusive, not detached from life," he said. "People have to *enjoy* buildings."

I suspect many people will in fact enjoy two new projects designed by his Toronto firm, Julian Jacobs Architects, for the city of North York. One, which opened earlier this year, is part fire station, part firefighter's museum. Another, slated to open later this month, is a major addition that adds multipurpose space and indoor bocce courts to the Grand Ravine Community Centre's pre-existing arena.

Although obviously done on very tight budgets, both structures make appealing use of modest materials and natural light. (The same has been said of North York's Emery Yard complex of offices, workshops and garages, a Jacobs project that received a 1994 Governor-General's Award for Architecture.) And both reflect Jacobs's preoccupation with what he calls "getting away from the banality of the box."

As it happened, the starting point for North York's Fire Station No. 19 and its adjoining Museum and Education Centre was a 35-year-old box of considerable banality. A one-storey building, originally an architecture and engineering office, already occupied the site and would provide the framework for the new complex.

At first, the clients planned to tuck the museum in behind the fire station, which houses approximately six on-duty fire fighters, day and night. But the designers had a different idea. "We felt that the whole thing, inside and out, should be a museum," said Jacobs. They convinced the client that placing the museum on the front of the building, right beside the garage for the fire trucks, would make the complex a much more exciting place for schoolchildren and other members of the public to visit.

The original plan for the new complex involved incorporating the tower of North York's Fire Station No. 1 — the 1920s building that had been demolished, but the bricks of its tower had been preserved for future reassembling. However, when the fire department realized how expensive that would be, it balked.

In the end, an elegant, relevant and much cheaper alternative to a conventional tower received approval: The architects designed a flagpole-suspending steel cage that outlines the dimensions of Fire Station No. 1's venerable brick tower. As well, the flagpole calls to mind the traditional pole that firemen would slide down when the alarm sounded.

During the renovation, the old office building's small-windowed facade was demolished and replaced with revealing expanses of glass. The fire truck garage's transparent, roll-up doors are framed with glass brick. Adding to the sense of airiness in the garage is a new, vaulted aluminum roof that appears to float on a glass clerestory.

All that openness satisfies the public's desire to gawk at the shiny red fire trucks, but it is also an attempt to improve working conditions for the fire fighters. "Fire stations tend to be dark buildings with very low ceilings, which is really unfortunate — the people who work in them have to spend so much time there," said Gail Weininger, the senior interior design partner at Julian Jacobs Architects. (She is also Jacobs's wife.)

The firefighters' quarters are straightforward and include dormitory-style bedrooms, an exercise room and a spacious kitchen with a backyard deck. At the rear, there is also a nondescript little fire prevention and education office.

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Cheerful façade leads to flexible multipurpose centre

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In front of the museum side of the complex is a garden containing grasses of various heights, in hues ranging from green to red to near-black. This unconventional landscaping is supposed to represent flames, but the allusion is not particularly clear. According to the firehall staff, members of the public either make banks-of-the-Nile jokes or ask when the flowers will be planted.

In keeping with the idea that the entire site is a museum, other artifacts will soon join the wheeled, 1920s fire extinguisher that has already been installed there.

Items displayed in the indoor exhibition area include a spacesuit-style garment for fighting chemical fires, and some of the modern gas mask's cumbersome antecedents. But the star attraction — a beautifully restored 1936 Bickle fire truck — has pride of place just behind the museum's canted plate-glass window. The tiled stoop outside this window is a thoughtful touch; it creates additional outdoor seating and affords children a good look at the old truck even when the museum is closed.

One other child-pleasing detail stands out. When grade-school groups visit the museum, the kids can try on miniature versions of firefighters' protective suits. What enhances this make-believe experience is a window cut through the museum's wall; it faces onto the actual cloakroom used by the station's firefighters when they have to rush off to a blaze.

While the fire station museum welcomes the public with cordial little gestures, the addition to the Grand Ravine Community Centre is boisterously gregarious.

When people pull into the parking lot, they see the glazed outward curve of the new multipurpose facility's façade. Reaching out through the wall are nine finger-like concrete piers.

Viewed from the inside, this part of the complex is emphatically cheerful.

Its sprung floor — suitable for aerobics and dance classes — is covered with colour-flecked saffron-yellow vinyl. The 4,000-square-foot multipurpose area can be left open or partitioned.

A light-filled hallway connects this new facility to the pre-existing hockey rink and the new bocce courts. The hallway's windows facing onto the rink have nice deep ledges — perfect resting places for the elbows and coffee cups of hockey moms and dads.

To my eye, the lopsided butterfly trusses that spring across the multipurpose space and then span the much narrower width of the hallway are busy-looking and ungainly. However, the bocce-court building is stunning inside and out. According to Jacobs, its distinctive shape — wide at the top, then narrowing, then bulging outward again before tapering in at the base — was inspired by amphorae, the earthenware jars used in ancient Greece and Rome for storing oil and wine.

The image is appropriate not only because Grand Ravine is situated in a predominately Italian neighbourhood, but also because part of the structure nestles into the ground to negotiate a sloping site; in other words, it resembles something that has been partially

unearthed in an archeological dig.

For the exterior, Weinger selected a subtle, sandy-hued tile. "We wanted that calcified look of an urn," she said. "The texture was important. Something shiny and flat would look too much like bathroom tile."

Inside, honey and amber plywood warms up the walls of the lofty space. At the back, above the four bocce courts, is a spectator's mezzanine. On the west side, big windows face onto a park; the other walls block out less pleasant views, but let light in through a band of glazing at the upper edges.

At present, bocce aficionados are numerous in the vicinity of Grand Ravine. But studies indicate that the community's younger residents are much less likely than their parents to play this sport. For that reason, the bocce court structure had to be designed in such a way that it could be converted into a basketball court at some future date.

Some architects would probably condemn this condition as a means of compromising the esthetic integrity of the project. But it didn't seem unreasonable to Jacobs. "We're not fine artists," he remarked recently. "We're practical people."



An outdoor view of the entrance to the Grand Ravine Community Centre. The indoor bocce courts are in the background.