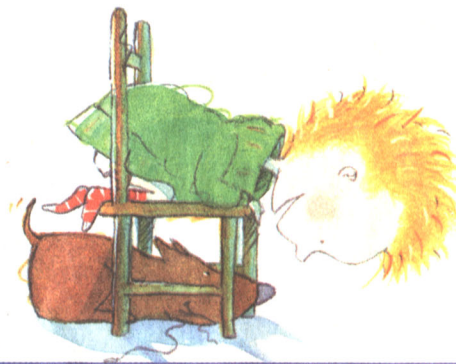


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Beauty on a budget

Five projects prove it's not the cost of the materials that counts but how they're used



Christopher Hume

If architecture were warfare, the main battle would be between beauty and the budget.

Or so we're told.

Many designers would have us believe that their striving for greatness is thwarted by stingy clients unwilling to pay the price of excellence. While one would

be loath to minimize the developers' responsibility for the poor quality of architecture in Toronto, there's more to bad architecture than bad developers.

Certainly, the industry's unwillingness to see beyond the short term has not been good for this city's image, but that alone isn't the problem. The proof lies in the growing number of projects that were built for little but accomplish a lot.

These buildings are more likely to be made of concrete block and full metal cladding than limestone, marble and granite, but good design goes beyond materials. Though most of us would agree natural stone is preferable to concrete, the architect's task is to extract the most from what's available.

Appropriateness, it turns out, is a hugely important factor in architecture.



A striking example of architectural simplicity and clarity, Ellesmere Community Centre brings a desperately needed sense of community to an area of the city formerly known as Scarborough.

Las Vegas is an example of what can happen when appropriateness is forgotten and incongruity becomes the norm. The architecture of Sin City has been lifted from the best sources and the finest materials, but the results are unrelieved kitsch.

On the other hand, a suburban community centre constructed of concrete block, vinyl tile and corrugated steel automatically feels appropriate no matter how ordinary the parts.

Take the Ellesmere Community Centre. Located at 20 Canadian Rd., on the southeast corner of Ellesmere and Warden, this is a building whose very obvious utility is raised to elegance through nothing more than the power of architecture. Designed by Toronto-based Julian Jacobs, the two-year-old centre cost approximately \$140 a square foot.

According to Jacobs, "You have to make fewer but bolder gestures. Contrary to what a lot of people think, you can use industrial materials innovatively and inventively. Once you escape from the tyranny of architectural history and all its restrictions, you're free to use these new materials as you wish."

The materials are modest. Jacobs used — what else? — concrete block, corrugated steel and linoleum tile. Despite this limited repertoire, the results verge on the spectacular. By concentrating on creating internal spaces and connections, by ensuring natural light wherever possible and adding colour, Jacobs has transformed the banal into something approaching beauty.

Inside and out, Ellesmere is a striking essay in architectural simplicity and clarity. The surfaces might not be warm and soft, but the centre possesses an airy sculptural quality that makes it memorable. It also helps bring a desperately needed sense of place and community to an especially anonymous area of the city formerly known as Scarborough.

Like politics, architecture is the art of what's possible, but all too often what's possible isn't what's probable.

This article has been abridged from its original format



At the Ellesmere Community Centre, utility is raised to elegance through nothing more than the power of architecture.