

Maintenance building has 'sense of joy'

It says everything about the state of suburbia that more thought goes into maintenance yards than houses.

This may not always have been true, but it is now that the North York Parks and Recreation Department has built its new Emery Yard on Toryoak Dr. near Finch Ave. and Weston Rd. As designed by Toronto-based architect Julian Jacobs, an otherwise strictly utilitarian structure

has been transformed into something delightful and engaging.

Compared to the endless anonymity of the surrounding subdivisions — and other commercial, industrial and civic buildings for that matter — the Emery Yard represents a revolutionary change in municipal attitudes: the city that has spent millions turning Yonge St. north of Sheppard Ave. into a high-rise wasteland, has suddenly and startlingly realized that urban doesn't have to mean ugly.

Considering that the new maintenance facility was constructed on a limited budget of \$2 million, that the client has historically sought nothing more than mere practicality, and that the site was (and still is) a dump, Jacobs's is no mean feat.

Among other things, the 20,000-square-foot building includes workshops, storage rooms, offices, a garage and cafeteria. The elements haven't changed, but Jacobs has rearranged them so that the architectural whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Perhaps the best example is the front facade. Although the building is

essentially a large one-storey box, it looks like anything but. The view from the road is of a wavy wall decorated with patterned brickwork and a mysterious eye-shaped window smack dab in the middle.

Traditionally, of course, civic maintenance yards are plain masonry affairs with little to break the monotony save an entrance or two.

Down the east side of Emery, the side most visible to passersby, Jacobs has broken up the exterior by adding a series of "fins." Concrete on the bottom, steel mesh on top, they are wrapped around yellow I-beams that form the skeleton on which the building rests.

These yellow girders are visible throughout, providing visual continuity and, maybe, a means of expressing the structure of the complex as a separate entity from the walls both inside and out.

In the rear section, for instance, where the garage is situated, the roof is suspended by a row of steel trusses and beams all painted yellow. As a result, we get the sense of a distinct box within a box. The effect is enhanced by a band of glass that runs around the garage between the ceiling and the walls. For an instant, the roof appears to be floating.

The waves that appear on the front facade show up again on interior walls. They're made of bent plywood and extend up from the ground about 10 feet. The material may be ordinary, but the curves change all that. The inside feels organic and almost chic. Is this a trendy downtown advertising agency, or the entrance to a fancy restaurant?

Yet the closer you look, the more you realize it's an illusion. Above the plywood, the walls consist of nothing more than galvanized steel liner panels. The floors are vinyl. Many rooms have been carved out of space with

unadorned concrete block and white drywall.

Jacobs's approach was to carry on regardless and treat these unremarkable materials as if they were precious and exotic. At the same time, however, he remains faithful to their unique qualities, and makes the most of them all.

The exposed ducts are an architectural cliché at this point, along with skylights. But both are employed effectively throughout.

What enlivens the place is the inter-

play between the hard (concrete blocks, steel) and soft (curved wood); between square and round, closed and open, masculine and feminine.

The landscaping, when completed, will continue the dialogue; a paved circle with benches will occupy most of the space — a rectangle, of course — in front of the building.

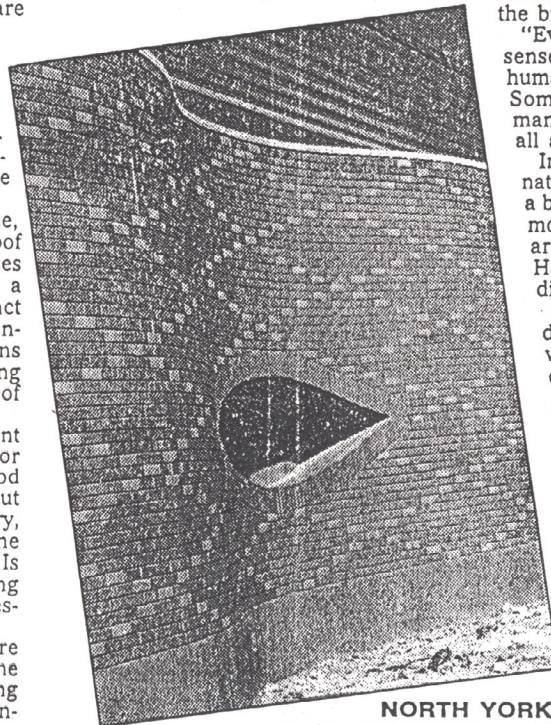
"The design was based on the human form," explains Jacobs, a former Montrealer who studied architecture at McGill. "We tried to put the dollars into areas that would have the biggest impact."

"Every building should have a sense of joy. We need to bring humanism back into architecture. Somewhere we forgot that human beings are at the centre of all architecture."

In North York's case, unfortunately, the awakening has come a bit late. Since at least the '80s, money has been at the centre of architecture in the City with Heart. Money, that is, an inordinate desire for profit.

One maintenance yard doesn't change that. And whether it's the first example of a new civic sensitivity, or a unique instance remains to be seen. It's too bad Emery wasn't built earlier, before North York embarked on its disastrous and self-aggrandizing scheme to create its own "downtown."

My guess is that this particular structure will be one of the few to survive the wreckers' ball when the rest of North York is being torn down. It will still be there long after Mel's Bells and the rest of the whole civic centre have disappeared.



NORTH YORK
civic structure's wavy
exterior a pleasant surprise.



Architecture

Christopher Hume