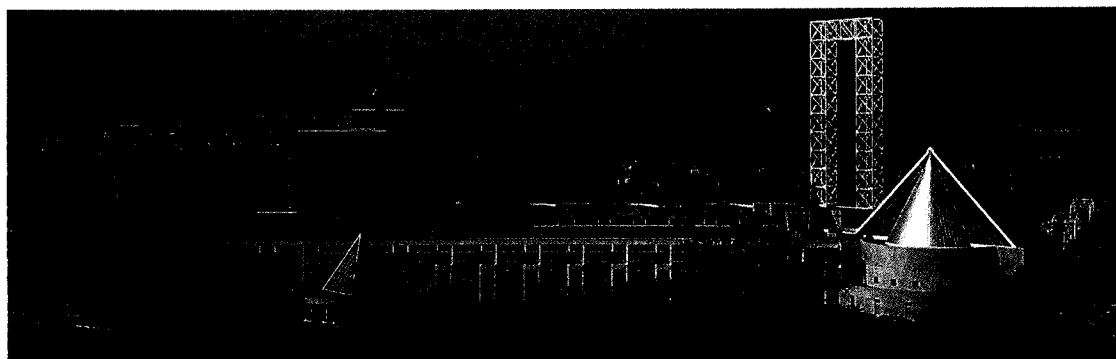
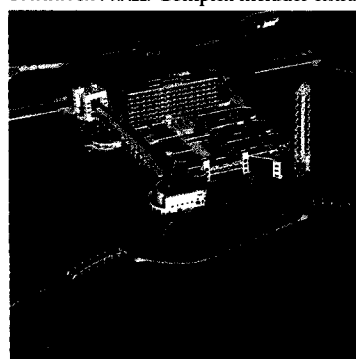


Protest

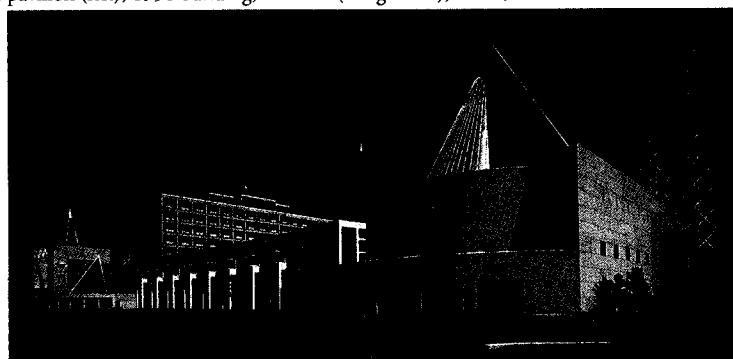
Ottawa's latest monument is suburban, not civic, in scale and demeanor.



OTTAWA CITY HALL: Complex includes entrance pavilion (left), 1958 building, cafeteria (foreground), tower, and council chamber.



AERIAL VIEW: Island isolated from city.



COLLAGE: Glass cones and pyramids top entrance pavilion (left) and council chamber.

A Mall, Not a City Hall

It's amazing what they're calling a city hall nowadays. Ottawa City Hall, completed in 1993, looks more like a municipal mutt than a civic pedigree. Moshe Safdie was awarded the job just as his National Gallery of Canada was being completed down the road. The mayor of Ottawa wanted a landmark just like it. That's what he got, more or less.

Safdie's big move at the gallery was a glazed porch housing a long stone ramp that culminates in a glassy Great Hall, his "giant candelabra." The corresponding gesture at Ottawa City Hall, located on Green Island in the Rideau River and linked to the rest of Canada's capital by bridges, is a glazed porch running the full length of the riverside facade, leading to a stone-clad bulge containing the council chamber.

Since Green Island is both geographically and psychologically remote from the heart of the city, the building makes as much visible noise as possible to compensate for its exile from Main Street. It's certainly teeming with things. There are plenty of giant candelabra, this time in the form of glass chapeaux touching the sky. Of course they all light up at night. A glass witch's hat shoots through the middle of a monumental stone frame to form the entrance pavilion, and a glazed

pyramid tops a café. A crystalline spire marks a reception area. The council chamber was fitted with the most elaborate of brittle millinery—a combination half-pyramid and cone. From across the way, you'd swear that you were looking at a shopping center—Ottawa City Mall. Entrance pavilion and council chamber could be anchor tenants, like Bloomingdale's and Wal-Mart.

The place is not all porch. There are two new wings joined by enclosed pedestrian bridges. They run perpendicular to the 1958 city hall, which Safdie was obliged to renovate and integrate. His precast concrete cladding was toned to match the limestone skin of the International Style neighbor. With the new so eager to upstage the not-so-old, this deference seems trite. Other echoes of a bygone era include an aluminum and glass curtain wall; but punched windows knock us into the present. A profusion of wooden screens, supposedly a Japanese motif, attempt to cut the interiors down to human size. Finding one's way around is still a problem, as several of Ottawa's elected politicians made sure I knew.

The 1958 structure, renovated as staff offices, a meeting room, and an art gallery, nonetheless remains a compelling piece of architecture. A composition of its time, it consists of a slab and boxy council chamber

standing forward on columns. For refinement of detailing and spatial clarity, the new parts can't touch it. It rebukes Safdie's lumpy collage of objects, which also includes "that tower," as it's come to be called—an infamous 56-meter-high guarantee of max visibility that was eliminated from the project in 1991 to cut costs. Safdie threatened a lawsuit, claiming infringement of copyright. One editorial writer compared the "amputation" of his scheme to the defacing of a Monet. In the end, Safdie got to erect the framework of his tower, originally conceived as an observation deck. It's a big "so-what?" on a full-up site.

Strangely missing from Ottawa City Hall is any notion of public life. It doesn't help that the building is oriented toward the river and federal officialdom and doesn't address adjacent neighborhoods, as it might have. For \$52 million, citizens do get a paved and landscaped plaza between the wings, but it's not a public square, it's a courtyard. Ottawa City Hall is scenic, not civic. For all the clutter and headgear, it still has an identity problem. It doesn't have a front or back, just sides. It can't be confronted: It's just there.—Adele Freedman

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