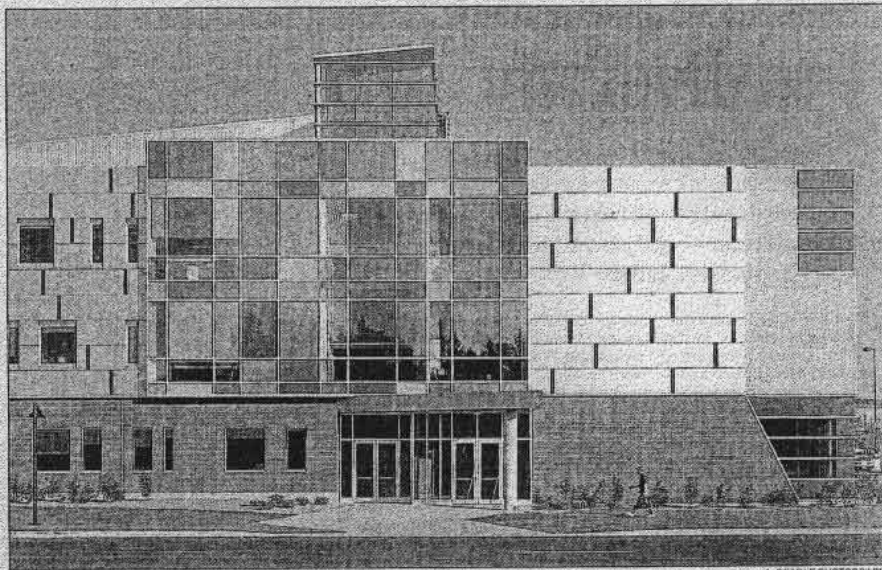


CITY SPECTATOR



A. SEARLE PHOTOGRAPHY

Algonquin College's new Advanced Technology Centre, above, designed by John Cook of GRC Architects, reflects its use with the use of transparent, multicoloured glass bays above the main entrance that express a pixillated image, and small black voids between the brushed aluminum walls that recall computer punch cards.

Good architecture on a budget



RHYS PHILLIPS

In Ottawa, Public Works Canada, most developers and many politicians believe good architecture is just too expensive. The Advanced Technology Centre (GRC Architects) at Algonquin College proves them wrong. It is a delightful, gem-like campus marker, rich in appearance but easy on the budget.

The centre is architect John Cook's fourth Algonquin building (a fifth is under construction) since the college set about re-establishing a legible consolidation plan. The first was the J Building, a three-storey, general-purpose classroom complex intended as the first component of an eventual academic quad, now realized with the centre.

The rectangular J Building is a light-red brick box atop a buff-coloured cast-stone base. An asymmetrical curved bay, also of cast stone, provides a strong visual element from College Drive. "This soft palette," Cook explains, "gives the campus a more professional, non-high-school environment reflecting the increasingly sophisticated skills taught and the increased average age of students (27)."

The subsequent Media Arts Centre continued this new architectural language with an L-shaped building that spans the quad's north perimeter, then bends to enclose part of the eastern edge.

Although campus consolidation dictated a uniform architectural identity, the idea emerged of a distinctive design element to make high-tech education a flagship for the institution. "The design door was opened a crack,"

Cook chuckles, "and we were invited to push on it to create a landmark."

With only \$17 million for a 120,000-square-metre building, Cook and his design team of Martin Tite and Alex Leung chose an economical rectangular box that encloses the quad, leaving a relatively small protected interior court. As a result, resources were freed up to crank up the expressive architectural content.

This is not to say that the plan plays second fiddle. Interior "race track" corridors are punched out to the exterior on each of the façades, twice on the northern wall. Two vertical circulation spaces were then sliced into the plan. The first, a clerestory tower with a light-filled student café overlooking the courtyard, accepts a second-storey causeway from J Building.

Most impressive, however, is the cross-building atrium that pushes through the roof line. Through this light-filled space ascends an impressive, suspended steel and glass staircase. This functional artifact becomes almost a piece of sculpture by being set against a steel-plated wall with horizontal blue slots lit with neon tubes.

A computer motif is reflected in both the design and the materials.

But how does one turn a simple box into a strong landmark? Cook first emphasizes that the centre both reflects and inverts his earlier J Building. "They both have distinct bases, an ordering of forms, boldly expressed entrances, and vertical spaces penetrating the interiors with daylight drawn into hallways."

But the J building facade is very much about the ordered placement of windows. "Each individual window is an important element in a room, providing that space with proportion and scale."

"With the centre, however, this regu-

lar rhythm of windows is replaced with irregularly sited placements that are made narrow or wide." And this is where the centre's imagery comes alive.

"The resulting irregular rows of windows act as a kind of binary computer 'data stream' where you get longer or shorter pieces of information." In other words, the centre becomes the digital building that counterpoints the "analogue" J building.

The idea of the computer is also reflected in the materials. "The soft sheen of brushed aluminum with its very beautiful, buttery metallic surface has an obvious relationship to high-tech equipment, particularly its moulded housing." The panels are also given a computer-punch-card-like appearance by pulling them apart at their vertical joints and then introducing a black void.

On the south façade, the metal both catches and reflects the strong southern light "while speaking about the high-tech function because it is a highly refined, sandwich panel that makes very efficient use of a small amount of material, is very flat, very controlled, and very industrial."

But the centre's most delightfully expressive elements are the transparent, multicoloured glass bays. They, too, reflect back a digital image. "The glass paneled sections have a pixillated quality," Cook explains. "We first took a digital photograph of J block, broke it into ever larger pixels, until you see that colours are made up of multiple colours." The J building was literally pixillated to create the glazing patterns.

Algonquin College wanted not a corporate-headquarter clone but a building that looked more a part of a college, of a creative, learning environment. It got more. It got a building that almost seems to sparkle, that responds beautifully to our rich Nordic light. It got a building that shows that talent can overcome budget.

Rhys Phillips is an Ottawa-based architectural commentator.