

Civic lessons: the striking forms of new city hall buildings in Ottawa and Edmonton speak about the nature of civic life in our times

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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The council chamber is raised on a pedestal, lifted in section and approached with some trepidation by petitioning citizens, who must mount a very visible stair from the City Room, then enter flanking circular corridors to arrive, theatre style, at the back of the chamber. That indispensable part of civic government which every architect knows – the hurried pitch at coffee break to a harried councillor – must by design occur in the open, a feature strongly desired by [Dub] after his own experience on council. The chamber itself is richly finished and appointed, with sight lines directed towards the councillors' chairs and the curving wall behind them. One sits and waits for the show, and is seldom disappointed, as Edmonton civic politics boasts a particular brand of showmanship. This effect is heightened by a huge skylight above the audience which splits and retracts as a provincial version of SkyDome's retractable roof. Sports and politics mixed? But then professional hockey and baseball survives in cities such as Edmonton, Ottawa, Calgary and Winnipeg by virtue of huge civic subsidies, subsidies which are perpetually debated in rooms such as this. Welcome to the new civics.

Edmonton's Council Chamber shares some formal similarities with Ottawa City Hall. Both continue the tradition begun at Mississauga City Hall of having a cylindrical volume as the primary form for civic functions, now something of a Canadian motif if not cliché. While Dub's drum reconciles with a cube above the audience, [Moshe Safdie] has fashioned a thrust-stage arrangement, with the audience splayed in tiers around the cylinder and the negotiation with the cube occurring behind the backs of the councillors. Ottawa is disposed with the public arranged more to look at each other than the ring of councillors, while Edmonton's theatre-chamber is committed to politics-as-performance.

FULL TEXT

The town hall has been one of the most important building types in Canada, for the architecture of these buildings defines, and in turn gains definition from, our notions of the Civic. Here I explore the civic lessons of city halls recently completed in Ottawa and Edmonton through their sources, their symbolism and their public spaces. First, though, some history.

Ottawa City Hall, completed in 1958 on Green Island, was a breakthrough building, an unapologetically modernist

conception in a country slow to warm to the new ideas. The architects were the Montreal firm of Rother, Bland, Trudeau, the last two partners being a prominent McGill design professor and a brother of the future prime minister respectively. The success of Ottawa City Hall and the debate about Modernism and civic symbolism which it engendered influenced a number of other city hall designs across the country. In Edmonton, populist Mayor William Hawrelak demonstrated his commitment to the new era by commissioning a new city hall from Dewar Stevenson Stanley and Hugh W. Seton, built in 1959. Lavishly finished in granite, slate and folded plate concrete, the building had a council chamber composed as a separate volume a la Pavillon Suisse by Le Corbusier, and banded ribbon windows with white spandrels, a lozenge - shaped tower floor plan, not to mention a Felix Candela - esque rooftop and cafeteria, a favoured station for city watching until the building was unceremoniously demolished during the 1980s oil boom.

The saga of the new Edmonton City Hall began while Dub was an Edmonton city alderman. He submitted a proposal for a national design competition to his fellow councillors, which was subsequently adopted as city policy. However, a fatal decision was made when a space list for a building ten times the size of Toronto City Hall was concocted by a wide - eyed programming consultant, encouraged by ambitious city department heads. The national open competition held in 1981 drew over 100 entries from firms across the country. Amazingly, a jury headed by Norman Foster and Ray Affleck selected from the anonymous entries a design by Dub, now plain citizen architect. A stepped megastructure clearly inspired by Erickson of Robson Square vintage (Dub had once worked for Erickson), the city hall spanned from Churchill Square, the heart of downtown, through to the CNR tracks to the north. Dub's design foundered when the 1982 - 83 recession brought building expectations back to earth. When plans for some -- any -- new civic building were revived in the late 1980s, Dub's moral claim on the commission was accepted by Edmonton Council, even though it was disputed by other recession - weary Edmonton architects who noted that Dub had collected a quarter million dollars of competition fees for the unbuilt first version. The new proposal was for a building with a much smaller program, but on the same site as before. About the same time, Ottawa decided to proceed with the long - delayed expansion of its city hall.

Ottawa City Hall

Safdie's new expansion for Ottawa City Hall (with Murray and Murray Associates) surrounds three sides of the trabeated frame of the Rother Bland and Trudeau building, virtually filling Green Island with extravagant forms striving after civic symbolism for the 1990s.

The design is caught between two key tendencies in post - war North American architecture, one acknowledged by Safdie, the other a striking and unexpected parallelism.

First, the graphic and spatial repertoire of the additions to Ottawa City Hall is influenced heavily by the work of Safdie's former employer, Louis Kahn, especially the range of Kahn's great works at Sher - E - Banglanagar in Dacca, Bangladesh (1962 - 74). It is as if an especially powerful set of bulldozers and cranes transported Kahn's complex from Dacca, then pushed together and piled up anew its platonically isolated buildings at the confluence of the Rideau and the Ottawa rivers, losing the location plan and operating geometric order along the way. Ottawa and Dacca both have cylindrical volumes perched at the water's edge; punctuation and division of a series of cubes by masses harking to other geometries; and ritual circulation space.

An overwhelming passion for manipulating primal volumes animates both Kahn and Safdie. The difference -- and it is so crucial -- is that Kahn's form - making is formed by, and takes its essence from, the deployment of inhabited rooms. Trained in the rigours of Beaux - Arts planning at Paul Cret's University of Pennsylvania, Kahn revelled in composing the "society of rooms," the disposition of functions through often symmetrically - planned sectionally integrated spaces. Safdie's manipulations are apart from the program needs and life's breath of inhabitation. They are formalist in inspiration and execution, and they avoid the planimetric and volumetric centring which is so important to Kahn.

At Dacca, for example, Kahn places the assembly hall, and ranks ancillary rooms around it, to form a focus and integration of disparate program elements (its power extending outside its walls to charge other elements); integration is the goal, symmetry is the means. Ottawa's conception is one of expressive parts separated and

ladled with individual identity, accounting for both its willed heterogeneity and the linked need for a surfeit of circulation to lace the ensemble back together again. Disaggregation is the goal, formalist tweaks and quirks the means.

The second and unexpected tendency of Ottawa City Hall is a formal and formalist similarity to the recent work of Peter Eisenman. Walking through either Ottawa City Hall or the Wexner Center in Ohio one comes quickly to feel manipulated, that some compositional conceit bends every walkway, frames passing thresholds, truncates each volume. Both buildings evince stunning scholarship dedicated to the proposition of architecture as an autonomous and self-validating discipline. To anyone immersed in architectural culture these exercises are profoundly seductive, but as paradigms of civic building in troubled times, they are surely wrong-headed and beside the point.

A case at Ottawa is the new entrance volume along Sussex Drive. It is as if Safdie could resist leaving no aspect of his former studio professor's building alone and felt compelled to do something dramatic here, though it is far away from the centre of programmatic and volumetric mass of the rest of the new building. Once one decides to spend a large proportion of a building's budget on a ceremonial route (as was done in the National Gallery and was done again here), its tentacles can be deployed anywhere on site like so much compositional squid, even wrapping and largely confounding the serene confidence of so strong a building as the Rother - Bland - Trudeau city hall, now surrounded like a shocked but trapped sea bass.

The entrance volume is a masonry-clad cube, whose false-stone detailing and similar colouration serves to mock, not enforce the older building. With its cranked plan and section skewered by a steep pyramid of metal and glass, it is one of a series of vapid "special effects" which ring the building like Britannia's lions or Spielberg's dinosaurs. What is striking about this volume is its emptiness – constructed at considerable cost, its functions consist of a security guard's desk, a pay phone and an ill-used entrance to the parking garage, all of which might have been located elsewhere. Oh yeah, the Queen comes in through here, thus sadly missing the much more interesting spatial progression through the old front door, past the Corbusian spiral stair to the splendid vista of Safdie's new garden court.

From the entrance volume one is led on another example of wild goose circulation; this one makes the wrapped arrival from the perimeter of the National Gallery look like tightly packed planning. One would forgive spreading the civic bureaucracies over nearly the entire terrain of Green Island if the journey between the offices were not distracted by so many competing geometries, and the plan had not so often compromised the workability of many of the office spaces; civic workers are often significantly removed from exterior views, not to mention from each other.

I propose a tour of the main floor plan: proceeding akimbo from entrance, one gains entry through compressed junction to curving splayed and ramped singly-loaded Civic Corridor, to be deflected off the rotation of the Council Chamber and octagonal foyer, and thence through funnelled walkway (note splayed spillway on right), to be deflected once again by tectonic memory of unbuilt tower listing Rideau-ward, and bounced once again into the central courtyard to enter the 1950s pavilion at the orthogonal angle not achieved at first. PINBALL!

Lording over all of this is the frame but frame-only of the planned observation tower, which the Mayor works to complete by valiantly if hopelessly fund-raising among Ottawa's miniscule private sector.

There is, however, one undistracted place in Ottawa City Hall where the special effects fade from view and where Safdie's quiet strengths as an architect shine through. This is at the south end of the large courtyard, where sublimely detailed ranks of civic offices defer to the trabeated frame of the Rother - Bland - Trudeau building's south elevation. There is contemplation, true reverence and quietness to be found here. To date, Safdie's post-Habitat Canadian career has been one of great commissions, not great buildings. There is hope here at the heart of Ottawa City Hall. As well, the brittle realities of public building in the 1990s, coupled with the regimen of new private clients such as Garth Drabinsky, may bring discipline and economy to the architect's work.

Edmonton City Hall

While Safdie had the 1950s city hall as muse, frame and occasional psychic sparring partner, Dub had only the

dismantled parts of the original city hall in Edmonton. As demolition proceeded on the building, Dub had the granite and travertine pieces conserved for use in a series of decorative embellishments. Some are used to line window sills set in the bizarre but somehow appropriate rhomboidal motif which runs through the building. More is used to surface the row of massive columns facing Churchill Square, set like Hutterite farmers against the prairie wind. Pieces of slate are used in a new floor in the curved geometry, which inform carpets and other appointments designed by Dub's spouse and collaborator Eva Bartel. These details serve to temper what might have easily become a very pompous building.

Asymmetrical glass pyramids provide natural light for the two most significant interior spaces, the City Room and the Council Chambers. These forms, in combination with the rusticated treatment of the tyndall stone exterior and asymmetrical composition of tower and colonnade, create something of the effect of large - scale landscape, as they were intended to do. While Dub bristles at suggestions that this building is a literal "prairie to Rockies" geomorphic emblem of Alberta, as some have suggested, he does extend the building - as - landscape strategy initiated by Erickson, whom he continues to admire.

The planning of Edmonton City Hall is nothing if not straightforward, but then straightforwardness has always been prized as a prairie virtue. The complex is set foursquare facing Churchill Square, with a long pavilion containing aldermanic offices above, and, public facilities such as stake changing rooms and cafe below. Dub's tower is complete, clad in light - catching tyndall stone, topped by the inevitable clock hands (the architect fought hard to prevent a tacky digital version; such are the unheralded triumphs of practice in the 1990s).

To enter Edmonton City Hall one passes through a double row of columns, the framed views between windowed wall and stark columns imparting dignity and spatial power. There is a Nordic, social democratic quality about this elevation, a muted and schematized version of Dudok's Hilversum or Eliel Saarinen's Helsinki. At the centre of the plan is the City Room, a surprisingly successful space, home to noon - hour concerts by the symphony, locale of trophy - awarding and athlete - greeting, and in quieter periods one of Edmonton's only non - mall wintertime people - watching places.

The council chamber is raised on a pedestal, lifted in section and approached with some trepidation by petitioning citizens, who must mount a very visible stair from the City Room, then enter flanking circular corridors to arrive, theatre style, at the back of the chamber. That indispensable part of civic government which every architect knows - the hurried pitch at coffee break to a harried councillor - must by design occur in the open, a feature strongly desired by Dub after his own experience on council. The chamber itself is richly finished and appointed, with sight lines directed towards the councillors' chairs and the curving wall behind them. One sits and waits for the show, and is seldom disappointed, as Edmonton civic politics boasts a particular brand of showmanship. This effect is heightened by a huge skylight above the audience which splits and retracts as a provincial version of SkyDome's retractable roof. Sports and politics mixed? But then professional hockey and baseball survives in cities such as Edmonton, Ottawa, Calgary and Winnipeg by virtue of huge civic subsidies, subsidies which are perpetually debated in rooms such as this. Welcome to the new civics.

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Both these city halls show an interest in the Picturesque. Both evince the contrast of materials, the asymmetrical composition, the concern with skyline, profile and pictorial effect which characterized the Victorian Picturesque and which saw some of its greatest triumphs in Canada. Ottawa's Parliament Hill ensemble is an unsurpassed example.

With its heterogeneous volumetric forms, each asserting its individual identity, unity achieved only through over -

circulation – and then only just – the new Ottawa City Hall might be seen as a pungent symbol of civic politics in the era of identity politics, a kind of tectonic response to the ethos of multiculturalism and fiercely competing interest groups. Its indulgence in imagism, and a formalism of the most advanced type, its mannered roofscape which gives new meaning to the word picturesque – all of these devices are comfortable in the trajectory opened up by a particularly American version of the Post - Modern in architecture, and which continued through the Deconstructivists to the brittle spatial rhetoric of Peter Eisenman.

By contrast, Edmonton City Hall proposes an idyllic simpler time when government was more open, the bureaucracy more responsible, the media more attentive than when Dub sat in Council in the 1970s, never mind today. This is a simple, perhaps even simplistic, building in many ways, but therein lies its virtue at a time when the concept of the Civic is under attack by down - sizing politicians, and by a media - driven public which demands imagistic spectacle, no matter how vapid, and which can find architects ready to deliver it. Edmonton City Hall is no masterpiece, but its quiet confidence, its implication rather than harangue about the place and scope of civic government, make it easily Dub's best building to date and an earnest example for the necessarily modest civic building in decades to come.

Ottawa City Hall

Moshe Safdie and Associates (design architects) Murray and Murray Associates (associate architects)

The modernist block of Ottawa City Hall has been transformed with an assembly of animated forms.

The complex is on the park - like Green Island in the Rideau River and off Sussex Drive, the capital's ceremonial route. It incorporates the existing city hall, a 1950s modernist block, on its western side.

The design proposes a city hall district – not a singular building but a series of varied indoor and outdoor spaces. It aims to create a place of community, pluralistic, democratic in its imagery.

Facing Sussex Drive in front of the existing city hall is a new entry pavilion and plaza. The entry pavilion leads to a colonnaded promenade which curves for 140 metres along the south edge of the complex and forms its main circulation spine. The spine culminates in the council chamber and ceremonial hall at its eastern end. Departments requiring moderate public access are located off a secondary colonnade to the north.

At the heart of the complex is a stepped garden which begins as a formal paved courtyard, and ends as a cascading pond of water on the east.

The cylindrical northern walls of the new building rise dramatically out of the river, offsetting a tall rectangular observation tower (still a steel skeleton awaiting funding to have its cladding installed) at the northeast extremity. The tower proclaims the presence of the city hall on the Ottawa skyline.

Conical forms of stainless steel interpenetrate clear glass, shed - like forms. These change through the day and seasons, reflective at some moments, transparent at others, and glowing at night. They act together as an assembly of elements.

The scheme won a limited design competition in 1988.

Edmonton City Hall

Edmonton, Alberta Dub Architects Ltd.

The final version of Edmonton City Hall combines monumental drama with civic openness.

Edmonton City Council has been vacillating for more than a decade over plans to build a new city hall. Dub Architects has produced at least three controversial schemes for a city hall of varying program size, including one scheme which won an open design competition in 1981 and then was rejected by public plebiscite in 1981 (TCA March 1981), and a cone - head version that was rejected after a public outcry in 1988. Other options considered since then include renovating the 1950s city hall opposite Sir Winston Churchill Square in downtown, buying and renovating the Hotel MacDonald, and adapting the Convention Centre.

When the council finally made up its mind in 1988 to build a new structure on the old city hall's site, it rehired Dub, and drew up somewhat ambivalent design parameters. The building had to be a "people place" that would symbolize an open and inviting democratic government, and yet it also had to be a distinct signature piece for the city, and project an image of stability, permanence and importance as befitting a civic legislative building. Dub's

response this time was two back - to - back leaning glass pyramids, one reaching to eight storeys, set atop a tyndall stone base. The building faces and partially embraces a plaza to the south which has several mature trees and a 60 - metre clock tower. The scheme combined the requisite civic virtues with a dramatic signature image. A three - storey pedestrian colonnade across the front of the building creates both a grand entrance into the city hall, and serves as a north - south pedestrian connection across the site. An underground pedway links with the Churchill LRT station.

The largest pyramid sits over the "City Room," an indoor urban gathering space for public assemblies of up to 1,500 people. Stairs lead directly ahead to the council chamber on the second floor which is below the second pyramid. The most public functions such as information, the restaurant and finance offices, etc. are on the ground floor, mayoral and aldermanic offices are on the second, and the city administration offices are on the third. Troubles continues to beset the project during the construction period when councillors tried to keep the project's rising costs down by measures such as cutting off a whole wing and proposing to eliminate the clock tower. The latter was eventually built thanks to private fund - raising which raised half the cost, and since the building opened in 1992 it has been generally well received by the citizens. An editorial in the Edmonton Journal, for example, called it a building of "unexpected refinement [which had managed] to overcome even the interference of politicians whose previous esthetic pretences were limited to finding space on their lapels for more pins."

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