

concrete toronto a guidebook to
concrete
architecture from
the fifties to the
seventies

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Ross Social Sciences and Humanities Building, York University

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The Ross Social Sciences and Humanities Building, opened in 1968, was designed to act as a grand front door to York University. Master-plan drawings dating from 1962 show the building as the key to the entire campus, its huge slab forming the edge of a pedestrian-oriented podium circled by a necklace of landscaped parking lots surrounded by farm fields. Gordon S. Adamson & Associates designed the project within the University Planners, Architects and Consulting Engineers (UPACE) group, a joint venture that included John B. Parkin Associates, and Shore and Moffat and Partners. The group was directed by Thomas Howarth, then director of the School of Architecture at the University of Toronto, and Hideo Sasaki, head of Landscape Architecture at Harvard.

The Ross Building was designed as an open framework with evolving functions, organized around a massive concrete frame. The building was conceived as the headquarters for a revolutionary new way of education, an integrated curriculum of two years of liberal-arts studies that encouraged general holistic thinking before moving on to advanced specialization. Exposed rows of rough-cast piers at the eastern edge, fronted by an enormous ramp stretching down from the upper podium level into parking grounds, made a great open stoa, a primordial temple front recast as an institution for the Age of Aquarius in the 1960s. Specialized areas – lecture rooms, elevators and stairs, a floating senate chamber at the top – were informally woven into this frame. In contrast to these elements, a unified swath of recessed buff precast-framed glazed openings formed a general-purpose field of six upper floors standing above the free-plan

main podium. These levels were deliberately left without complete programming when the building opened, encouraging the campus to evolve.

In contrast to the east exterior front, which stood high above parking lots and farm fields, the west flank of the Ross Building shifted upward to a car-free podium. This sanctuary was intended as the main public level of the university. The Ross Building formed a porous edge to the inner campus stretching outward from the podium, cradling an open-air amphitheatre and gathering spaces that could be commanded by speeches and student demonstrations, convocation, plays and chance events. Contemporary photographs above and below the podium demonstrate the planner's vision of a labyrinthine world with chasms reaching to the underground and floating levels far overhead. This collective 'in-between' space acted like an opening within a casbah. The complex was completed by the front edges of neighbouring buildings and connected by a field of walkways, underground tunnels and interior bridges organized by slippages and offsets, making innumerable paths through the campus.

The project shares an architectural language with contemporary projects – Wallace K. Harrison's soaring acropolis of Albany, New York (begun 1965) and the lofty piers of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh (1950–65). Like those projects, the sheer primal force of the Ross Building's structural frame was conceived as a kind of counterpoint, an archaic foundation supporting the turbulent action of a free new society. Amidst the corn and potato fields of Southern Ontario, the York University designers conceived a foundation rite



Fig. 52. The Ross Building, York University

embodied in the Ross complex. The procession led from the east through a march of piers that reached down through the silt plains of agriculture into the bedrock below. Rising up the enormous ramp and through the open frame, the building gave way to the enlightened upper ground of the campus.

Windswept Canadian winters were not kind to Ross Building users, and in 1988 the building was fundamentally changed by the demolition of the entry ramp and addition of a new layer of enclosed walkways and central rotunda that emulated Thomas Jefferson's 1802 plan for the University of Virginia. The central axis of the university has since shifted eastward, moving from the pedestrian-oriented world offered by

the eastern flank of the Ross Building toward a new car-oriented plaza of shopping centres served by bus drop-off lanes. Ironically, this new development renews the peripheral parking that formed the outer fringes of the original plan for the campus. The planners of the Ross complex may not have anticipated such a wholesale change, but their concrete frame still forms the robust core of this system.

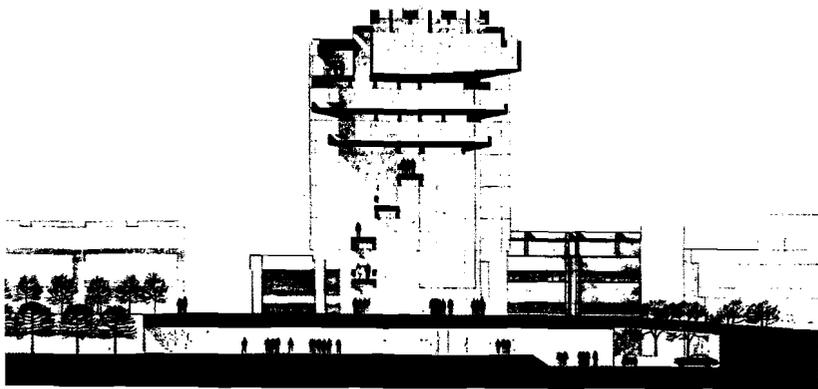


Fig. 53

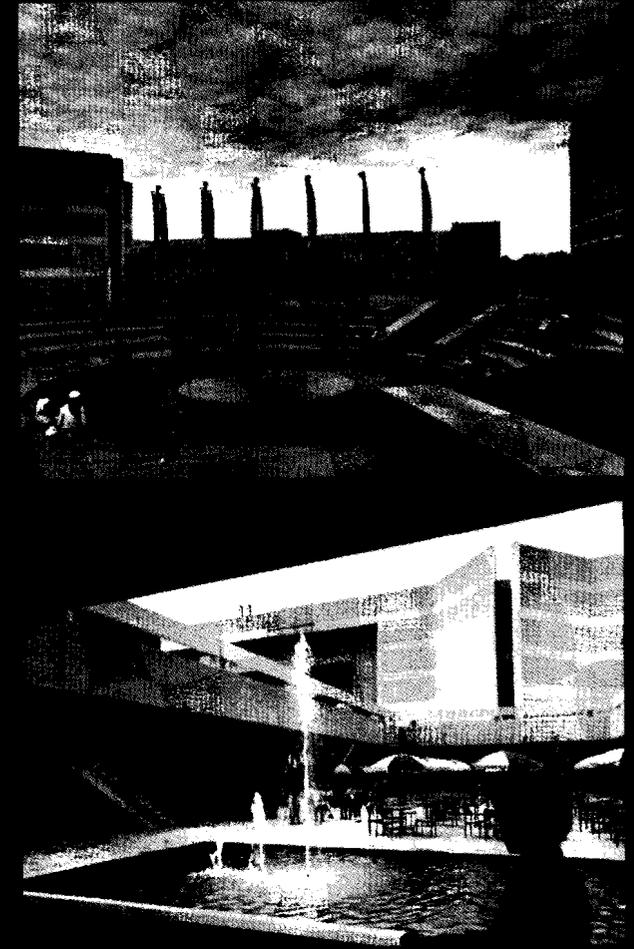


Fig. 54

Fig. 55

Fig. 53. Ross Building, section

Fig. 54. Students gathering in Ross forecourt

Fig. 55. Ross Building, interior courtyard



Fig. 56. York University site under construction, Ross Building in centre of surrounding ring road



Fig. 57. Student lounge, Ross Building

Fig. 58. York University master plan, site model

Fig. 59. Ross Building, presentation model

Fig. 57

Fig. 58

Fig. 59

