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Urban Design for Architectural Diversity

My conception of urban design can be characterized best as follows: Urban design as the organizer of the common realm has to have a degree of neutrality towards architecture. Urban design is about the creation of freedom; it should comprise a minimal set of rules that guarantees a maximum freedom to individual users.

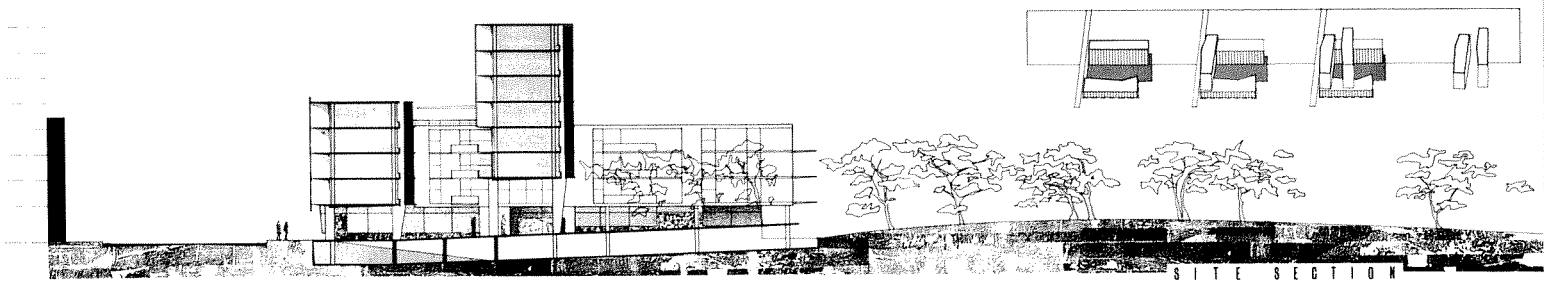
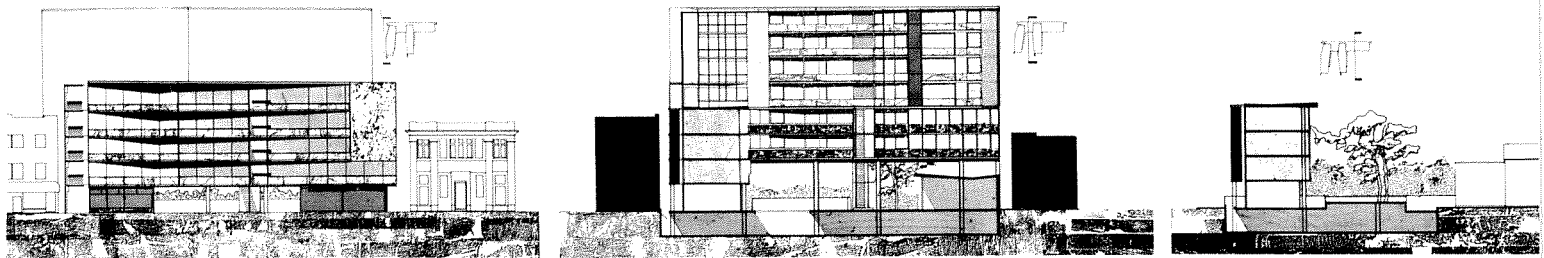
Kees Christiaanse

I discovered this idea about urban design as a result of our first studies into American cities, in which the neutrality of the street grid generates an enormous variety in the third dimension. What amazed me in the Toronto competition was that some participants had ignored this basic characteristic of the American city and based their designs on older, European concepts.

The view of urban design that I just described is extremely relevant to Toronto's main streets, along which buildings are generally organized in rows with ground floors dedicated to public

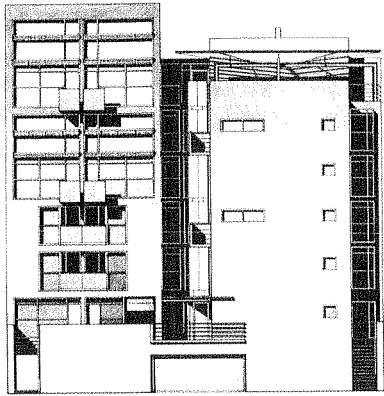
This mid-block site, which terminates the view from a residential side street, is used for automobile storage.



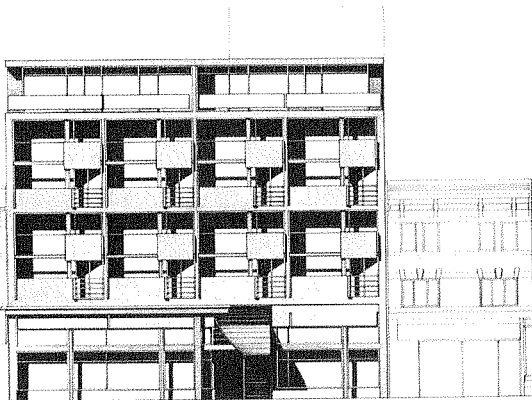
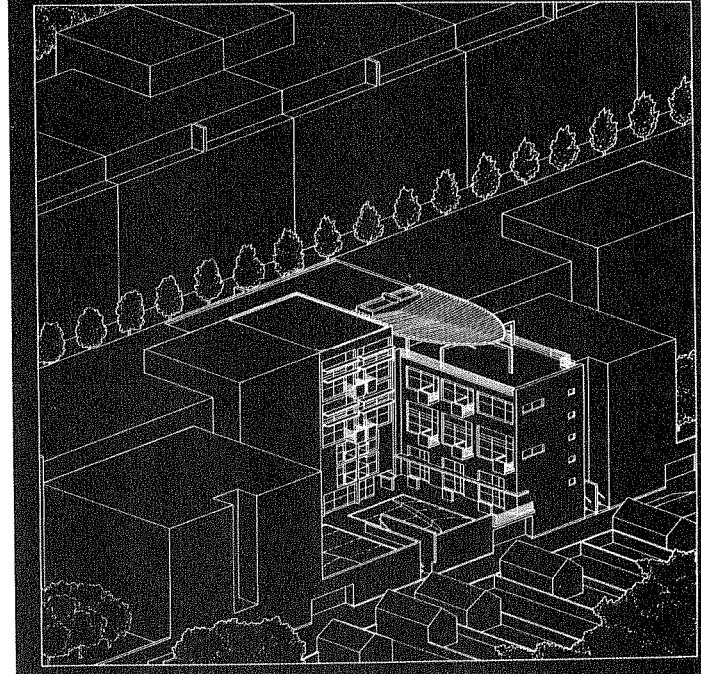
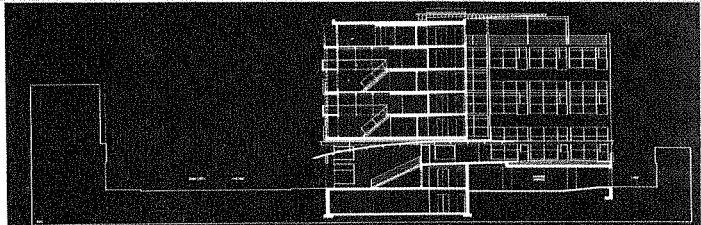


This proposal uses Modern idioms of rectangular building volumes, horizontal bands of windows and cantilevered upper stories as a departure point. It attempts to set apartment slabs, which are usually built on isolated sites, into an urban context. The submission, by Brown &

Storey Architects, of Toronto, was awarded an Honorable Mention. Project team: James Brown, Kim Storey, Derek Hardy, Eric Lee, Anthony Chong, Bernard Jin, Ian Panabaker, Anna Reason. Drawings courtesy Brown & Storey Architects.



4-66 SOUTH ELEVATION



NORTH ELEVATION

This proposal, for another mid-block site, contains duplex units, each of which is reflected as a single visual element on the facade. Although the height of each story is similar to that in adjacent buildings, the vertical

scale expressed on the exterior is different.

The submission, by Sterling & James Architects, of Toronto, was awarded an Honorable Mention.

Project team: Maxim James, Mary Lou Lobsinger, Jon Soules, Mark Sterling, Rohan Walters.



functions. In the early days many of these buildings were of Victorian or Georgian style; today they are in every possible style and non-style imaginable. Buildings of different ages stand side by side, reflecting the diversity of population in Toronto and in Canada. Buildings from different epochs contribute to the image of the street and show that the city is a live organism. The co-existence of various cultures and sub-cultures is the most important base for the attractiveness and liveliness of the main street and needs to be guaranteed in future zoning regulations.

This doesn't mean that a neutral, identical regulations should be imposed in an undifferentiated manner, just like the grid, on the city. Urban designers should extrapolate specific characteristics of an urban area and incorporate them into specific regulations for that area.

What can these regulations be? For a main street, the zoning regulations will be different and more specific from the general zoning regulations in the entire district. First, a maximum lot size must be enforced to prevent large-scale development. Second, the ground floor must contain only shops or public functions. Third, the upper stories must contain mixed use in sufficient density, and they must be able to support different configurations of housing units.

The regulations should deal exclusively with functional and organizing principles, such as the type and scale of functions, access, circulation, daylight and dimensions. Any regulations that deal with subjective issues, such as architectural style, use of materials, or ornamentation, should be avoided. This approach would guarantee a certain quality in terms of urban spaces and a certain diversity.

It was surprising that few of the entries tried to develop new concepts or typologies for the regulations that guide construction along main streets. Instead, there were many specific proposals for specific sites. The main reason that the grand prize winner was chosen was that it tried to explore zoning typologies in a very conceptual, almost metaphorical way. It should not be taken too literally; it is an intention that needs further elaboration.

In allocating honorable mentions, jury members could award interesting projects that were controversial in the jury or showed shortcomings in certain respects. I concentrated on projects that reserved the ground floor for public functions and explored, on the upper levels, different configurations of housing that resulted from various densities, distances between the building and the streetline, and other elements.

These projects included townhouses that propose a new elevation on the street; a combination of concentration and distribution of flats and a deck containing courtyard housing; a court behind a building with an arched entry; the idea of

making a setback that explores a combination of greater height and a setback from the street line; and the alternation of mass and void for terraces and good views from apartments.

By chance or not by chance, the projects I chose were all Modernistic; however, the jury attempted to look more deeply at the projects than simply responding to the idiom in which they were drawn. We evaluated the urbanistic concept (Is there an idea that can help the city formulate an operational policy that is applicable to those kinds of sites?), the architectural concept (How is the idea translated into an architectural proposal for the site?) and architectural elaboration (Is the design really operational on a practical level?). The projects that were given awards constitute a clear urban concept and a great concern for the basics of program and function.

Many of the modern projects that won awards appear to have been conceived by young architects from Toronto. I don't know if they represent a group or a school, but these people deserve to be involved in the further discussion about the shaping of Toronto and its main streets, and deserve to be taken seriously.



The proposal at left is for a site on a block of narrow buildings that rise one to three stories. Should design regulations address issues such as the height and bulk of new buildings, or architectural style?