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John K. Grande

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After 100 years Canada's Gallery has a home

National Gallery of Canada, Musée des beaux-arts du Canada.
Photo : Fiona Spalding-Smith, Toronto

After a 100 year search for a permanent site, Canada's massive new National Gallery now stands on the Nepean Point promotory jutting out into the Ottawa River. Its crystal shaped-glass dome lights the sky of Ottawa like a beacon by night and reflects light brilliantly by day. Its setting is both dramatic and historic. Moishe Safdie, principal architect of the project, had as his imperative the integration of the building into Ottawa-Hull's present historic and natural surroundings. Upon entering one proceeds along the extended ramp of the colonnade which was inspired by Bernini's long corridor in the Scala Regia in Rome. From inside the glass vaulted Great Hall the view is spectacular — the Gatineau hills in the distance; the organic curvilinear form of the Museum of Civilization across the Ottawa River in Hull; and on an adjacent promontory beside the Rideau Canal Canada's Parliament Buildings, obstinately Gothic and stylistically a formidable remnant of Canada's colonial past.

Safdie's views on post modernist architecture were stated in an article which appeared ion *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1981 : "I believe that post modernism has merely absorbed into its dogma current values in the works of art, fashion and merchandizing, the rise of narcissism, the hunger for novelty and deep pessimism about the prospects for humanity that have descended upon us in the last decade." Safdie became an outcast in the Canadian architectural community, at the age of 29, shortly after he built Habitat, a modular design apartment complex for Expo 67 the project brought international awards but no commissions at home. Recently Canadian commissions have flooded in, among these the Museum of Civilization in Quebec City, the extension of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and, the Toronto Opera and Ballet Centre. It seems these are, in part, a result of the new National Gallery Commision which, for Safdie has been an outstanding personal success. Architectural critics have however made accusations of fence sitting, of trying to please the Director,Curators, Boards, and Commitees, and of adapt in the exhibition rooms according to their contents. The classical for example, received antique format rooms and the contemporary, boxlike, inauspicious cubes. The costs which exceeded $150 million are also frequently mentioned. Despite such critical reports, the real measure of a public museum's success or failure is attendance and the public has turned out in droves. 10,000 people attended the opening night alone. *New York Times'* columnist Anthony Lewis called it : "an art museum, but more. Its form expresses higher aspirations, human and national." *The Washington Post's* Ben Forgey commmented : "The Canadian display interests me a great deal. From my limited acquaintance with Canadian art it seems to be connected to the national experience in a variety of ways. So this gallery serves as a wonderful resource for the outsider. It offers me a perspective on this country."

It is the play of light on materials and public spaces which strikes one in proceeding up the gradual ramp of the colonnade to the Great Hall and continuing along the concourse to an octagonal rotunda which forms the outer public area. Classical in inspiration, and ancient-Egyptian in scale, these glass-vaulted

National Gallery of Canada, Musée des beaux-arts du Canada,
Rideau Convent Chapel.
Photo : Claude Lupien

outer structures which follow the L shaped, 3-story design of the building are a clear realization of Safdie's modular design principals utilizing the most modern design and materials technology. Safdie uses pink-grey granite from Tadoussac, Quebec, as well as concrete, steel and aluminum reinforced glass. The building, totalling 35,000 square feet has 30,836 square feet of exhibition space, double that of the former premises. There is a Special Exhibition Hall and 42 separate galleries which form the functional, working exhibits part of the gallery. One moves easily around the galleries which centre on the two pivotal courtyards where one can take a nature break before re-entering to look at more art. The Garden Courtyard was intended to create, "a kind of inner space, the souk, the bazaar, the hidden courtyard." It was designed by Cornelia Hahn Oberlander who also planned the outer landscape garden, a recreation of a Group of Seven landscape using indigenous, Taiga plant species. The sculpture courtyard has a glass botomed reflecting pool which is the roof of one of the gallery's three, reasonably-priced restaurants. Safdie's highly innovative use of Mylar-lined light shafts to diffuse natural light down into the galleries is an exciting innovation which has prototypes in Sir John Soanes' Dulwich Art Gallery and Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Gallery in Fort Worth, Texas.

The National Gallery's international and Canadian collections of art, already known to visitors of the old gallery site are predictably displayed chronologically and according to place of origin. Bernini's bust of Pope Urban VIII, Rembrandt's *Heroin from the Old Testament*, and Rubens' *The Entombment of Christ* hang from the red fabric walls of a Grand Old Exhibition gallery. There is a Canaletto room and a Marcel Duchamp room. The Rideau Convent Chapel, saved from the wrecker's ball in 1982 and the only known North American example of a 19th century ecclesiastical interior features a neo-Gothic fan-vaulted ceiling with iron column supports. The MacCallum Jackman room contains superbly decorative Group of Seven paintings on panels from Dr. MacCallum's cottage at Go Home Bay near Algonquin Park.

Recent American and European works are adequately represented in the National Gallery collection, but, ironically there are not enough recent works by new Canadian artists. Diretor, Shirley Thompson has said publicly that the National Gallery will be actively purchasing the work of a new generation of Canadian artists starting in September 1988. There are new Inuit, Asian and video exhibition rooms in the gallery. The International Prints and Drawings Gallery has fine 20th century European in prints and watercolours including the etching for Pablo Picasso's *Weeping Woman*, and pieces by Georges Braque, Ossip Zadkine, Wassily Kandinsky, Emil Nolde, Mary Cassatt, Edward Munch, Eric Gill and Aubrey Beardsley. The Canadian Print and Drawings section combines chronologies allowing us to compare and contrast. We see Paul-Émile Borduas' 1942 gouaches, prints by Michael Snow and Betty Goodwin, an Emily Carr watercolour, and works by Jean Paul Riopelle Albert Dumouchel, Sybil Andrews, Edwin Holgate and Clarence Gagnon.

The Photography Gallery is showing 129 daguerrotypes of European and American subjects donated by Phyllis Lambert, Founding Director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal to celebrate the opening of the occasion of the new National Gallery. Yosuf Karsh also donated 90 of his famous portraits of artists including those of Pablo Picasso, Man Ray and Andy Warhol.

The National Gallery evolved out of a nucleus of works of art donated by members of the Royal Canadian Academy which was established in 1880 by Canada's Governor-General the Marquess of Lorne. Beginning in 1882, the gallery shared a tiny workshop on Parliament Hill with the Supreme Court of Canada, moving in 1888 to quarters shared with the Government Fisheries Exhibit on O'Connor St. It moved to the Victoria Memorial Building on MacLeod St. in 1912; and in 1960 to the Lorne Building, a dilapidated 10 story government office tower on Elgin St. where it remained until this year. There have been two previous competitions for a National Gallery building in 1954 and 1976. Both failed to produce results, and the second spurned the resignation of then Director Jean Sutherland Boggs. It was the creation of the Canadian Museums Construction Corporation, under the aegis of the Trudeau Government and with Boggs as Chairman, that finally brought about the realization of the new National Gallery on Sussex Dr. at St. Patrick.

The new gallery will make a great venue for major national and international art exhibitions. This summer's Edgar Degas retrospective is the first.

John K. Grande