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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 promontory 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 in 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 Commission 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 Committees, 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 commented: “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...
actively purchasing the work of a new generation of

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