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City Structure as the Generator of Architectural Form [Housing on Toronto's Main Streets]

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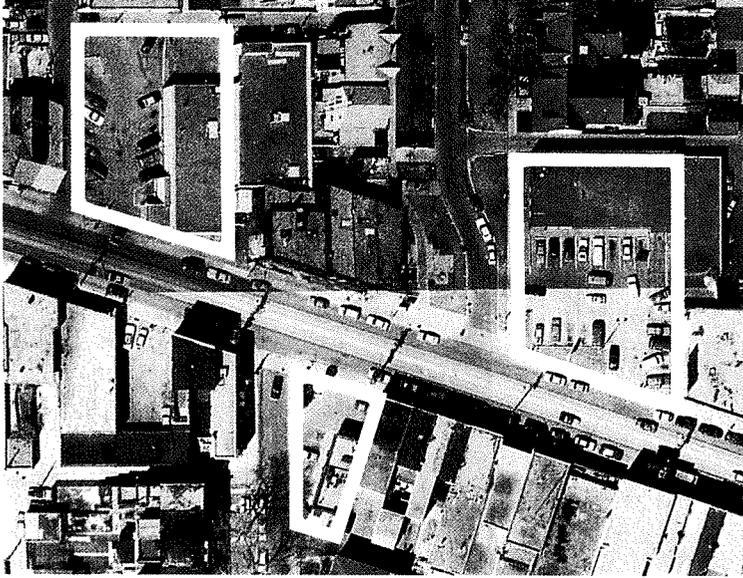
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City Structure as the Generator of Architectural Form

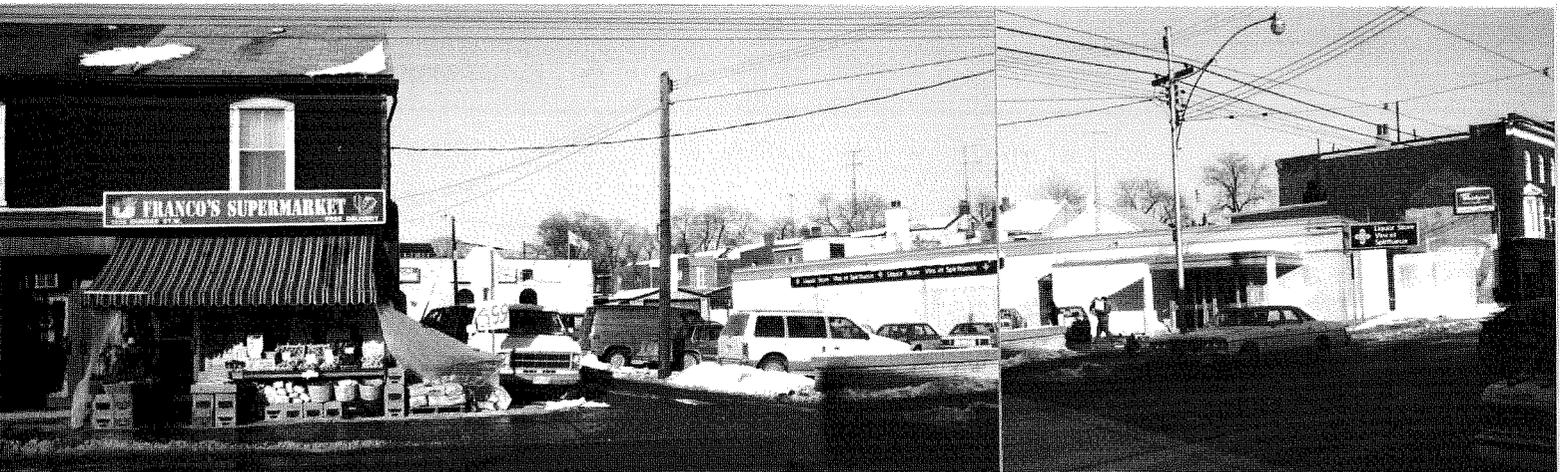
The Grand Award proposals are not easy to understand, particularly by those unfamiliar with or unable to assimilate the 20-year-old discourse about contemporary urban architecture. One has to study the drawings. They comprise three proposals, one for each category of sites, that were made by the same team. We lumped them together into one award because the underlying premises were similar.

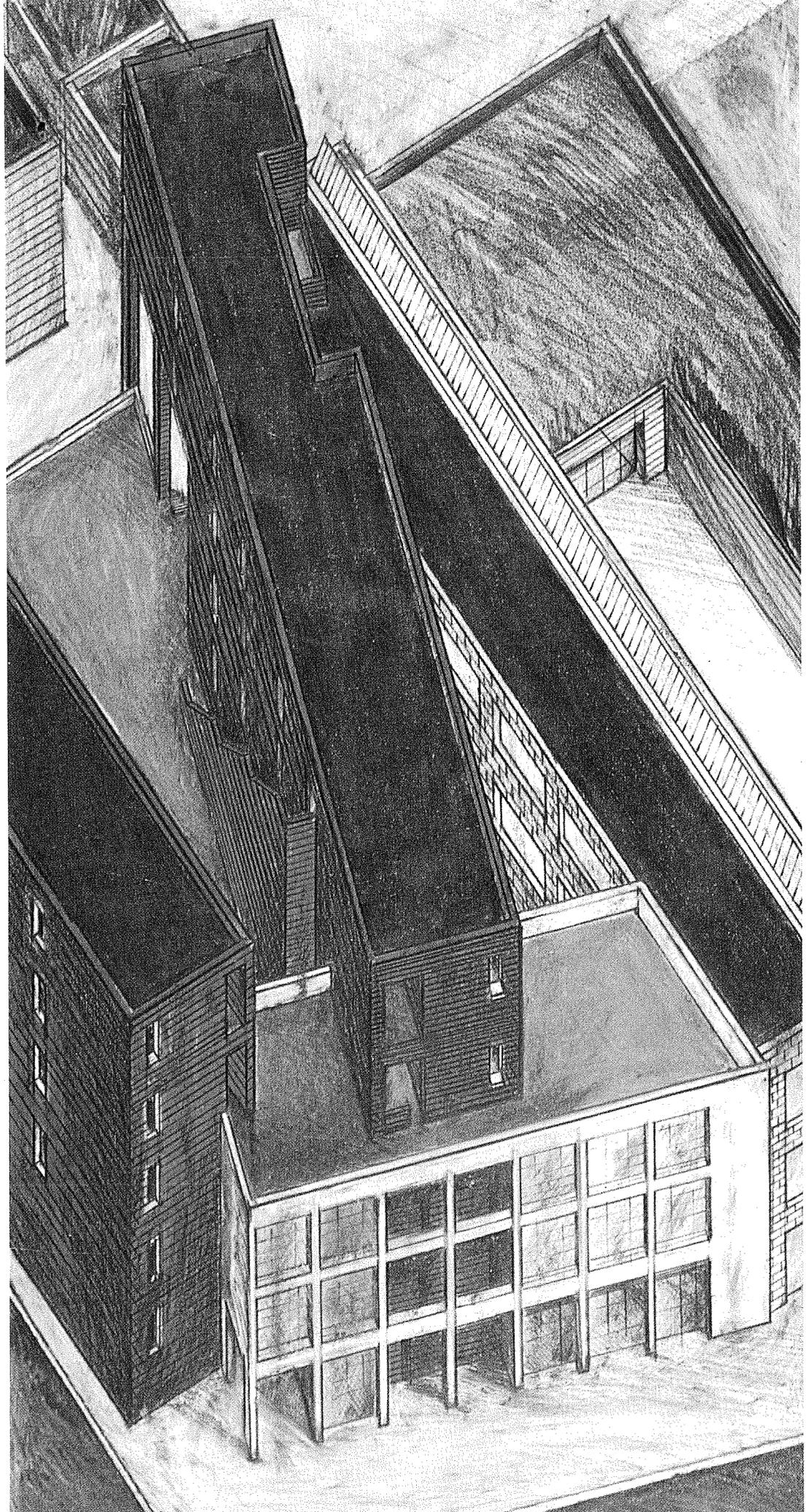
There are two points I will make. The first is about the nature of the proposals and their premises, and the second is about the content of the proposals as city architecture, an architecture that can sustain both private and public urban content.

As you look at proposals such as these, the first task is to establish in your mind a distinction between analytic and synthetic formulations in architecture. Architects use several types of drawings, although this is not always clear to people looking at them.

The Grand Award submission includes proposals for this site, which consists of three parking lots scattered along congested Dundas Street. The conceptual sketch (right) shows a prototype building form adapted to the site shown below.

Drawing courtesy Alain Carle, Denise Gauthier and Nicolas Roquet.



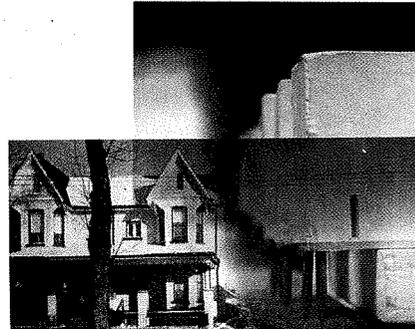
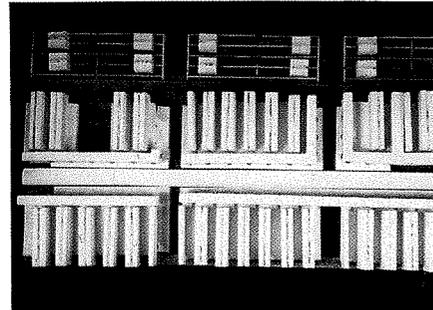
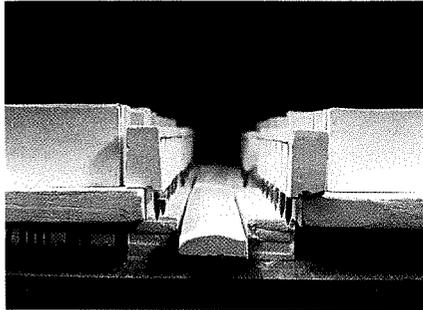
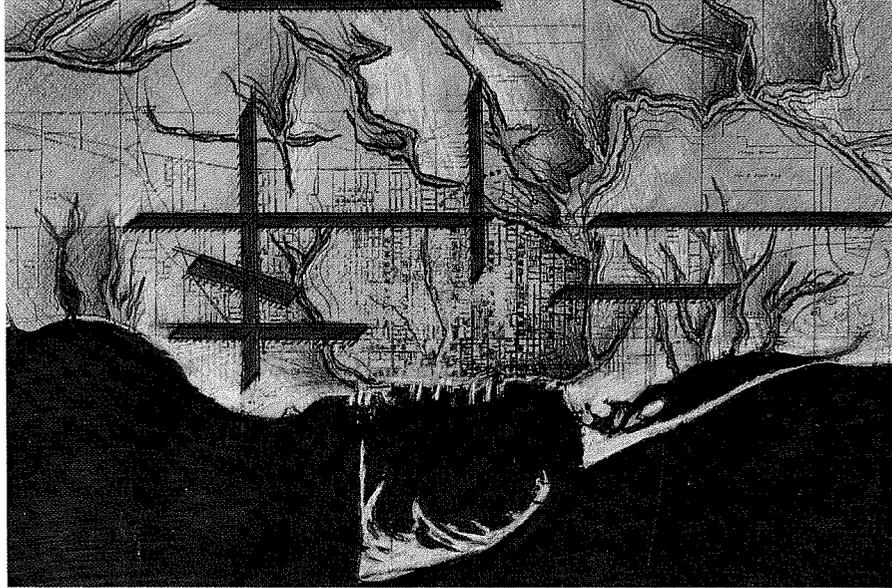


**Topography, Main Street,
Ravine and Lake**

The city itself is the genesis of the project: a mythical geography in which lake, ravine and main street are the specific actors. At this territorial scale, Toronto's main streets appear as an autonomous system in the city.

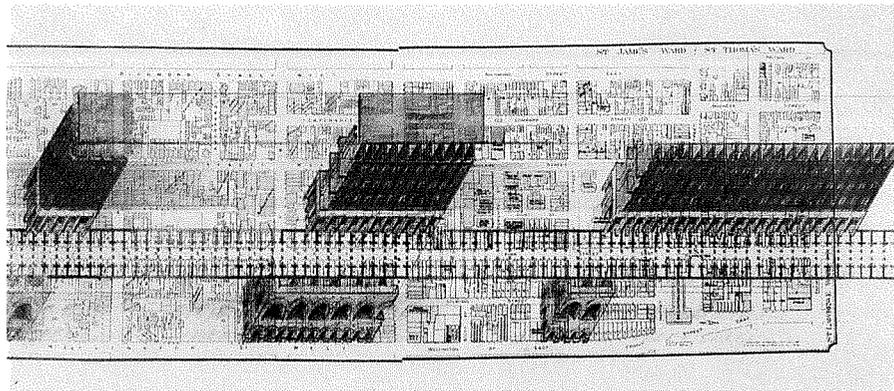
Beyond the limits of downtown, main streets propose an alternative model for the construction of the city: They constitute a linear and sequential public space for display and parade. They are a public equipment irrigating the neighborhoods through which they pass. They compound individual and collective uses. They are both homes, therefore, permanent, and stage sets for consuming, therefore, ephemeral.

The main street is stripped down to its essential elements and translated into a conceptual model. Projected onto the existing city, it acts as a catalyst.



Toronto's grid of main streets and its pattern of small lots are reduced to a conceptual model, and a prototype building form is extrapolated. This form can be superimposed at will along main streets, just as building lots extend repetitively from the streets.

Drawings and photos courtesy Alain Carle, Denise Gauthier and Nicolas Roquet.



We use *analytic* drawings, which examine what exists and try to grasp, through the drawing process itself, what is inherent in the urban form with which we are dealing.

We use *analogic* drawings, which have to do with the unknown: You don't know how to describe something, so you say it is like something else. This type of drawing is difficult, at first, for the viewer to grasp. The Grand Award proposals include analogic drawings, and the jurors had to be careful not to interpret the analogies as actual proposals.

Finally, we use *synthetic* drawings, which suggest propositions. In the Grand Award proposals there are also drawings that show how these propositions could be and are responses to specific sites.

At first the jury was fascinated by a drawing called "Topography, Main Street, Ravine and Lake," which was the departure point for each of the three proposals (it was positioned on the upper left hand corner of the first board of each proposal). This drawing, an overlay of both analysis and analogy, helps clarify issues. It does not say what is to be built.

An accompanying text explains that the city itself is the genesis of the proposals and that an appreciation of Toronto rests upon the recognition of a paradigmatic construct in which main street, ravine and lake are the principal elements. Toronto's main street grid is thus taken to be as autonomous a construct as the geographic formations of its site. The propositions that follow draw out that autonomy. Main street is the main frame of Toronto; street car lines and bus routes, nourishment and distraction, are all on main street.

These drawings establish a potential for revitalization: the validation of main street as a frame and support for the city. Few of the other proposals took this approach.

The caption for another set of drawings was "The Memory of a Site is Construction." It suggests that the specificity of "Toronto" is rooted in the physical traces of constructions engraved in people's memories; the city can no longer be moved kilometers to the east or west without it affecting our conception of its urban form. Collective memory now serves as a point of departure.

This idea of collective memory suggests, furthermore, that there may be a coming of age in the architecture that we see here. Culturally, society comes of age when it recognizes where it lives and transforms that recognition into its art, be it painting, literature, or architecture. If one considers English-Canadian culture, it is not the architects who have recognized this. If you read Canadian authors, you know exactly where you are (even though you are reading their work in the *New Yorker* or a Paris journal). This coming of age happened in the culture of the U.S. at the turn of the century. Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings knew exactly where they were.

Walt Whitman's poetry was dedicated to a love of his country's landscape.

For those jurors who could not grasp the analytic and analogic nature of some of the Grand Award drawings, the drawings at first seemed to be proposing totalitarian architecture. "Stalinist, East Berlin revisited," said one of the jurors. But what the authors are getting at is something else: The drawing of a repetition of blocks superimposed on the city plan signifies the return to the city block and the potential development of the city within the block. There is no nostalgia in these proposals. They simply deal with the city as it is, including the traces of a Modern city.

It is interesting to look at the specificity of the insertions, for example, at Avenue Road and Eglinton Avenue. One starts with a low block that maintains the street front. Set in relation to the low block, and as a transformation of this lower block, is a taller building block, derived from the long plan of railroad flats, and set perpendicular to the street. Examine this transformation closely and you will find it is both precise in formal terms, and in terms of a highly "useful" (that is, adaptable) urban dwelling. Most important, this transformation sustains a differentiation of the "self," a differentiation between the public and private city.

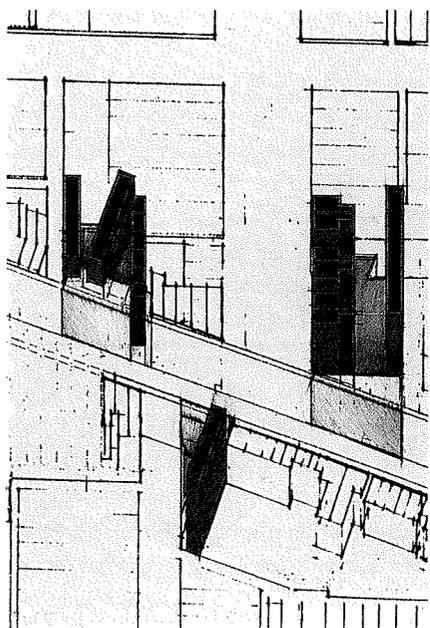
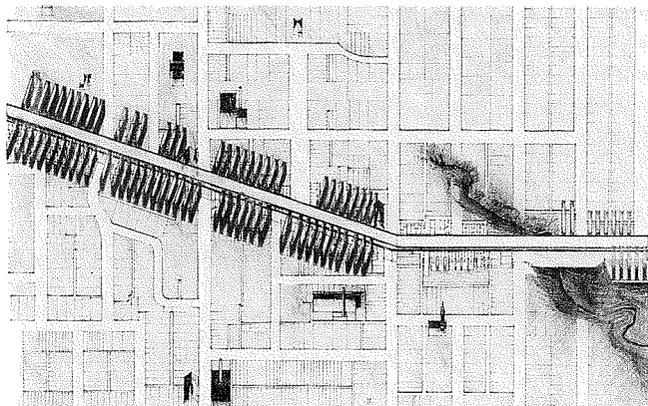
My second series of points has to do with the Grand Award proposals as city architecture. Urban architecture is presented as a conscious, generative process, in which there is a generic derivation of a series of pertinent insertions. Every time we looked at other projects we seemed to be thrust back upon these proposals because they seemed to get behind what the other projects were doing in very straightforward and, sometimes, very conceptual ways. We could evaluate other proposals on the basis of whether the ideas behind the Grand Award proposals sustained them through their analysis and propositions.

One of the jurors put it very well, saying that she found in the Grand Award submission an articulation of the unspoken. In science, you can perform an experiment in a laboratory, implicating a tacit level of knowledge, and then spend years working out the mathematical formulae behind the experiment; major breakthroughs occur in that painstaking way. In urban architecture, we do things the same way. The city preceded zoning. Only after we lived in cities for some 10,000 years did zoning come about, and zoning is still a rather crude instrument for guiding what has always been shaped by the tacit understanding and regulation of a city's physical form.

We found in these proposals something about that tacit understanding that was rendered conscious. We could, therefore, look in a more comprehensive way at the nasty problem of urban intensification.

The prototype building form can be multiplied, re-oriented, or even reconfigured depending on a site's shape, surroundings and history. Together, the case studies along Dundas Street show time and chance acting on and dislocating the original paradigm.

Drawings and photos courtesy Alain Carle, Denise Gauthier and Nicolas Roquet.



Another jury member pointed out that a problem one must deal with when considering urban intensification is the failure of the superblock, so dear to the Modern movement. For years we have been trying to break the idea of the superblock and get back to the basic building unit of the city: the city block. Streets and blocks restore the democratic process by restoring one's right as a citizen to be in the street.

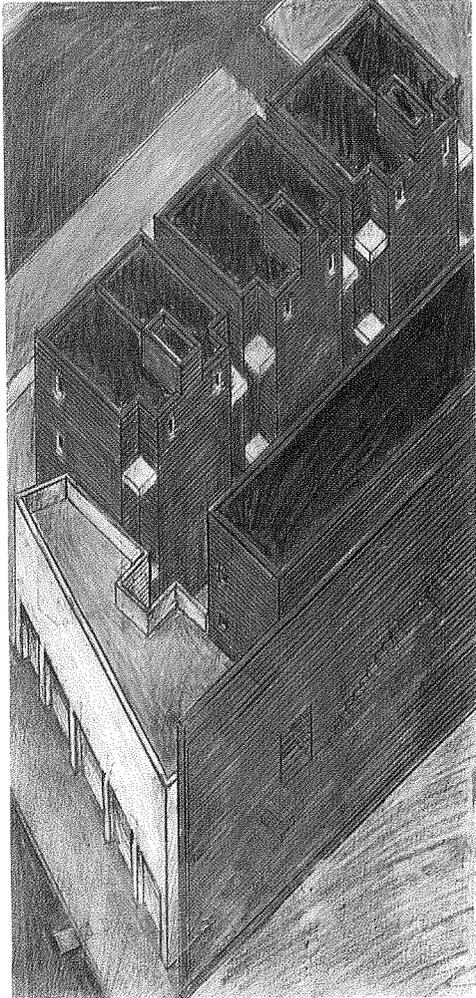
Even though we've known, this in principle, it has been very difficult to know how to execute specific projects. The Grand Award proposals provide, in a direct way, the elements of how to get back to the city block as a formative device. The authors came to grips with what generates urban form.

To focus on the city block, one must do more than define the edge of the street. If you have lived in Paris, you know how the buildings there work into the depth of a site. The richness of Paris or Montreal, for example, is the richness of the streets in juxtaposition to the interior development of blocks. In the Grand Prize submissions, the building that is used to maintain the definition of the street is situated in a dialectic relationship to a second building that penetrates the inside of the block. Moreover, horizontal surfaces, shown in green on the drawings, signify the penetration of "front lawns," so dear to Toronto, into the interior of the block in the form of terraces or roofs adaptable for appropriate use.

As a footnote, I would like to pose a question that preoccupied me during the four days of judging: Why did so many competitors propose a neo-Modern style in Toronto?

It struck me that this may have had to do with the history of Modern architecture in this city. It can be said that while proto-Modern, if not Modern, buildings were invented in North America (including some that can be found in the industrial fragments of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Toronto), the basic discourse of the Modern movement was institutionalized in the *ateliers* of Europe. After World War II, many refugees came to North America, and a kind of Modernism was implanted, to me in a very uncomfortable way. I had to grow up with it, and I rejected it totally.

Now one is thrust back upon its presence in this city and upon a continuity that has to do with what is intrinsic to our North American experience. I was touched by the number of solutions that came to this competition and clearly espoused an attempt to express a certain "critical Modernism," including the buildings proposed in the Grand Award. I found in those, too, a certain coming of age. But it is not clear whether the desired critical edge can ever cut deep enough to come to terms with a profoundly anti-urban architecture that has decimated our cities.



Housing

The traditional main street apartment is extended to its limits. In this way, the housing unit is a representation of the street: a passageway slung from room to room.

The exaggeration in scale encourages a collective appropriation of the flat.

Without eliminating traditional uses, the multiplication of single, private rooms allows independent individuals to cohabit.

The facade negotiates the variable conditions of the main street and acts as a public extension to the flats behind.

