

ISSUES OF HIERARCHY AND SOCIAL RITUAL: Mississauga City Hall

By Anne Murray de Fort-Menares

Mississauga City Hall promises to be a phenomenal building; it is already a building of phenomena. It has been hailed in the international design press and vilified by Canadian detractors on issues of style, meaning, function and representation. The design constitutes a significant addition to the discourse on the nature of public architecture, a subject inflamed in recent years by Michael Graves' Portland Municipal Building and Whitney addition, and by James Stirling's Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. Critical debate was focused on the semiological and urban content of these buildings to the exclusion of programme, so dense and urgent are the issues involved.

In Canada the Edward Jones and Michael Kirkland scheme for Mississauga assumes relevance of a greater dimension, for the team has grappled with the quintessential crisis of urban design — the absence of context in the suburban void. Mississauga is an artificial municipality comprising nearly a dozen nineteenth-century communities amalgamated by regional development, physically characterized by clustered apartment towers and tracts of developer housing in a flat rural landscape. The new City Hall was expected to initiate the transformation of a mall-and-office complex, kindly described by the competition organizers as "campus-like", into a mixed-use high-density urban core: to create and nurture a city where none was yet seen to exist.

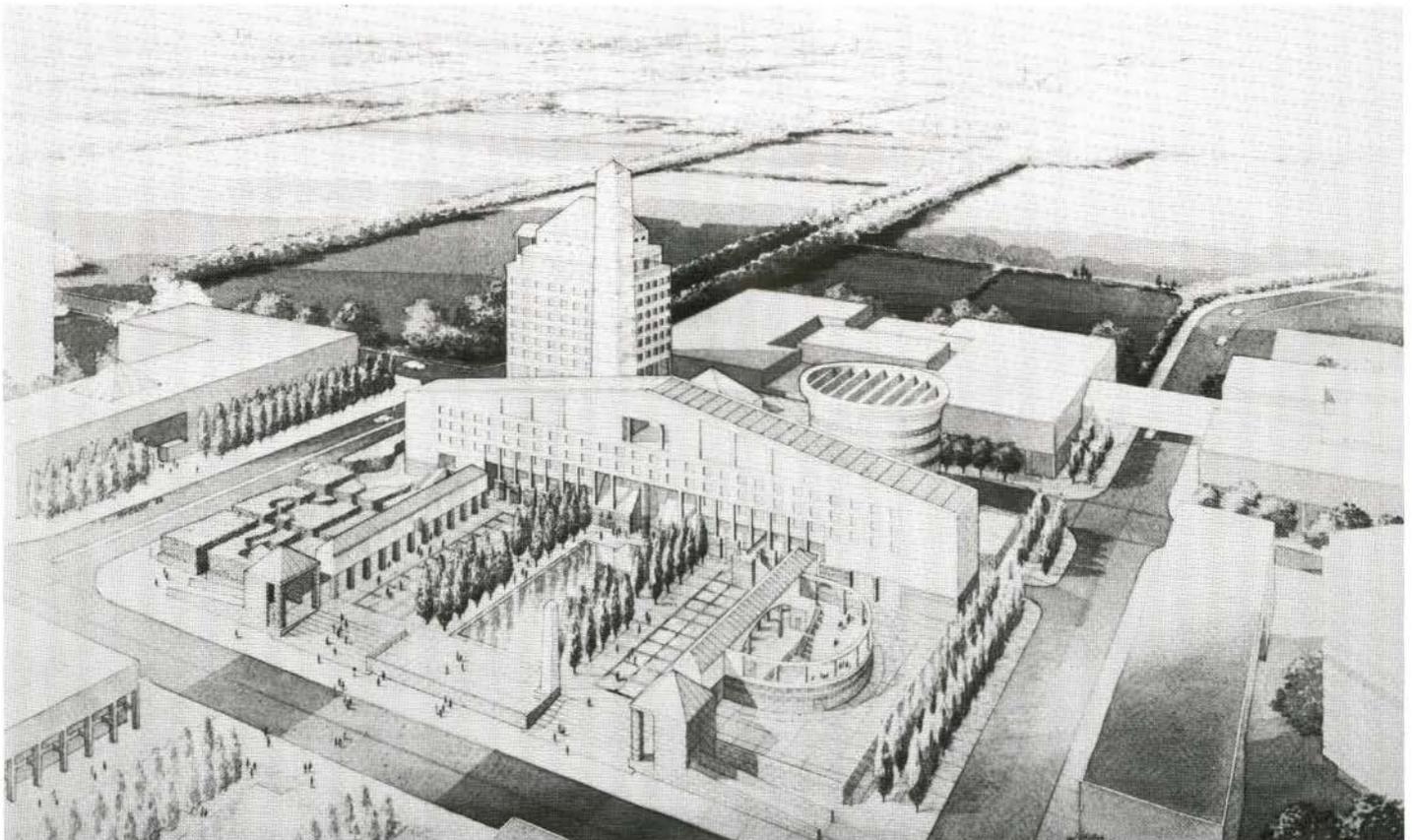
The architects confronted that problem squarely, acknowledging the "near amnesia" and disparate visual references typical of suburban development, while drawing upon the abstractions of a perceived tradition of building in Ontario to develop a City Hall that would be uniquely tied to its place and time.¹ Accordingly, the relationship of the building to its present and future environment is a crucible requiring a scheme both open and suggestive.

The street, the road and the square: these are social institutions

developed by and for a community, whose use and acceptance of them confers meaning no less significant than the recognition given buildings or natural landmarks. Indeed, in path form the road pre-dated urban settlement; in the history of urbanism the street has acquired metaphoric and cognitive importance beyond its obvious use.² These are the spaces which normally predetermine the character of a site. Mississauga however is an environment between two orders: the rural concession grid is not only physically blurring, but represents a scale and organization foreign to the commuter population, while no discernible urban milieu has evolved outside the few isolated nineteenth-century streetscapes. The reliance of city development on street patterns magnifies the immediate problem of establishing an urban square in an open field.

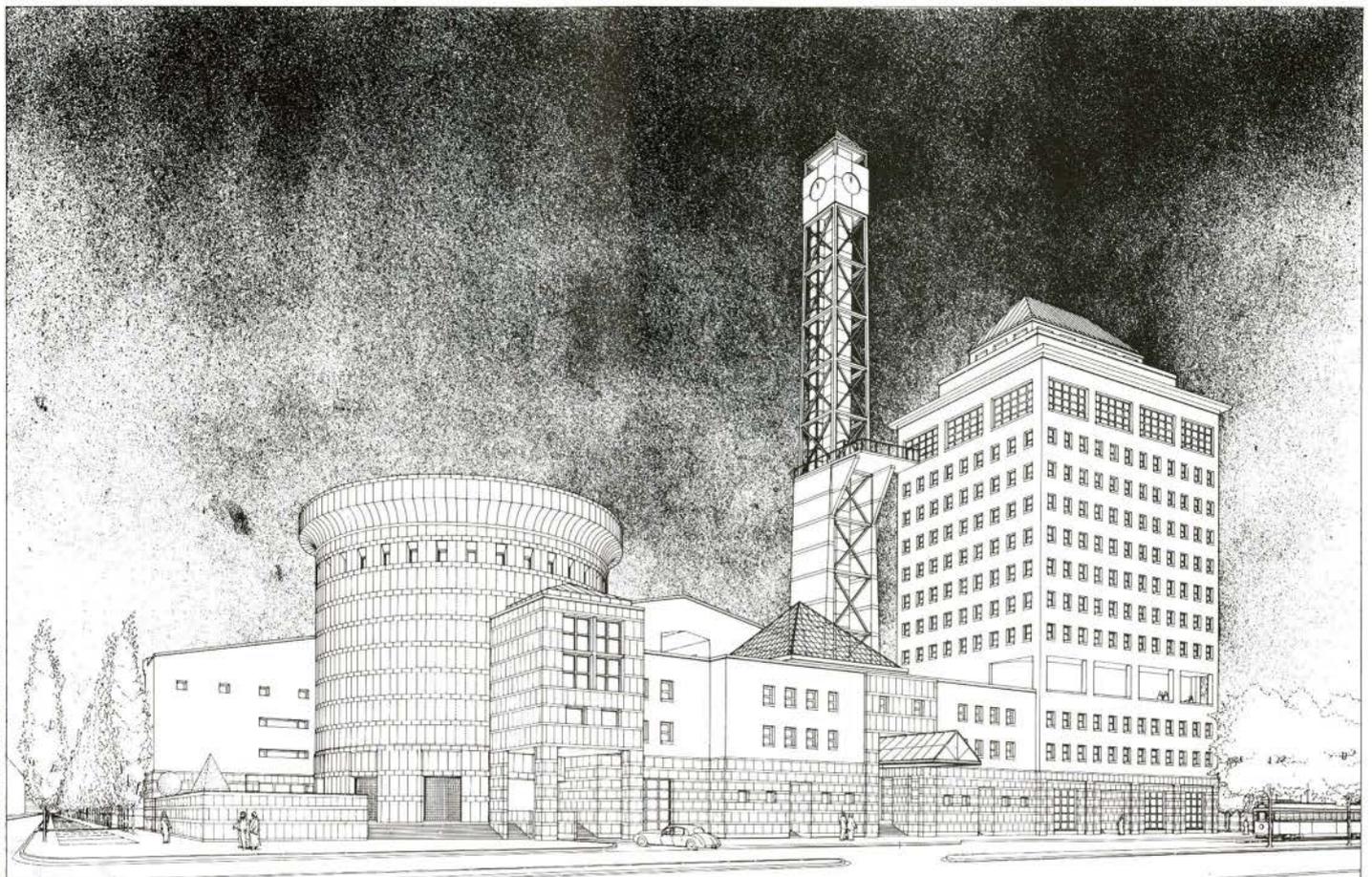
Jones and Kirkland have therefore doubly emphasized the act of intervention by, first, providing a paved square to differentiate the man-made from the surrounding landscape and, secondly, by elevating the whole square five feet above grade to provide a classicizing plinth (and underground parking for 900 cars). The overwhelming tendency to orient Toronto public buildings south to the lake has been consciously repeated, although in the larger tradition of facing the road no other orientation was logically possible on the site.

The civic square is defined on the east and west sides by monumental arcades terminating in primitive-hut-like pavilions at the front edge of the platform. The square is paralleled by an interior conservatory and vast lobby totalling 1,560m². This sequence of alternating long and shallow spaces of the public square and lobbies echoes the larger rhythms of the site. The building does not border the principal east-west artery, Burnhamthorpe Road, but is instead substantially set back on a parallel road in order to develop an axial vista, and to encourage the growth of an urban fabric around this nucleus.



Lenscape Inc.

Mississauga City Hall perspective view of Jones and Kirkland Architects' design.



North elevation.

A miniature urbanism has been recalled in the massing of the building: five main components constitute an independent condensed landscape. Jones and Kirkland identified a set of concepts derived from looking at public buildings in Ontario, among them themes of monumentality, durability and distinction from private building, from which developed this series of discrete symbolic elements. The three major functional spaces are clearly articulated: the council chamber, the municipal offices and the public square.

The circular council chamber relates to the rural silo, bespeaking agriculture — the basis of Mississauga's early economy. The chamber dome will be painted to portray the evening sky at the building's completion, but instead of the familiar Graeco-Arabic constellations, the mythic images of the Mississauga Indian cosmos will be featured. In a similar gesture, possibly taking a cue from Lothar Baumgarten's exquisite installations at the Art Gallery of Ontario's *European Iceberg* show in the spring of 1985, the names of the historic communities of Mississauga will be painted in a frieze.

The twelve-storey office tower, slightly skewed in the overall plan, stands for commerce; the wistfully constructivist clock tower, industry; and in the broad organizing gable of the south front the exaggerated profile of the suburban ranch house is blown up to billboard scale suitable to the car-oriented context. Rendered in buff brick reminiscent of the exuberant Peel County domestic polychrome vernacular of the 1860s (the bricks now having to be imported from Pennsylvania) the sheer face of the main front is subtly relieved by "quoins" in a smooth limestone-washed concrete banding. The upper surfaces are articulated by piers and blind panels. The gable is pierced by an open-air attic platform through which peeks the steel apex of the Great Hall skylight pyramid. The building reveals itself, its programme and its sources through an admirable combination of devices.

The opposite relationship of form to function typifies the architects' awareness of "metaphysical power" — the associative power of forms and the institutions they represent.³ The public nature of building has been eradicated by the avowedly egalitarian humanism of Modern Architecture, or what sociologist Richard Sennett has termed the politics of power and silence. In Mississauga the architects are attempting to restore to the municipal legislature the dignity and importance it lost in occupying nondescript developer offices around the shopping mall. Local culture and history have provided geometries and decorative nar-

ative; a broadly allusive late modern aesthetic dictated the many architectural quotations evident even in the present half-built state.

This dazzling mesh of public prominence and architectural signage boasts a complex and incestuous lineage; the amphitheatre and elaborate commentary on nature in a western garden and eastern sculpture court layer and further enrich the possible readings and recollections.

The multivalency of the building rests in its physical and conceptual possibilities. Each form is associated with a familiar built archetype — the house, the village clock tower, the farm; each relates to an idea; and each recalls a host of architectural precedents.

David Hockney's observations on seeing, quoted elsewhere in this issue, are particularly apt: "The general perspective is built up from hundreds of micro-perspectives. Which is to say, memory plays a crucial role in perception."⁴ The Mississauga City Hall, like a city block, alters its appearance radically as one moves through or around it. Unlike the self-referencing monoliths nearby which characterize every Canadian city, boring objects consumed in a glance or less, this building demands a process of discovery: Hockney's myriad micro-perspectives. Memory is required to interpret the experience of the building whose physical and spatial interrelationships are only comprehensible from a sequence of perspectives; but the memory of what each space is and has been is no less potent an element. The simple, clear lines of the major forms evoke memories of other archetypes, other places, and of the themes of architecture. Both the memory of individual psychology and that of social transmission are necessary to a full perception of the building.⁵

Whether the building will communicate the message intended by the designers must be central to any examination of its architectural content. The architects hope to invest hierarchical authority and space for social ritual; the architectural content is somewhat more ambiguous. Canadian public building in the recent past has tended to indicate an increasing obsession with the permeation of a corporate image adaptable to any site at the expense of local vernacular and urban contexts. Under the circumstances, the architects had a limited model from which to develop a contemporary tradition of public-ness.

The archetypal city has a strong public realm distinguished from the private by its representational character: it both accommodates and symbolizes the public and collective activities of the citizens. An image of centralized authority normally resided in a collection of monuments consisting of a typological range of geometric forms, engaged in a hierar-

chical interplay of dominance and subordination.⁶ The hierarchical structure was such in Sumerian ur, for instance, that only the priests and kings were permitted to enter the sacred precinct. In Hellenistic Athens or in Priene, the array of public buildings and monuments in the agora were the concretization of the polis. The ancient and sacred associations of the Capitoline Hill in Rome were transmogrified by Michelangelo into the supreme centre, the *caput mundi*.

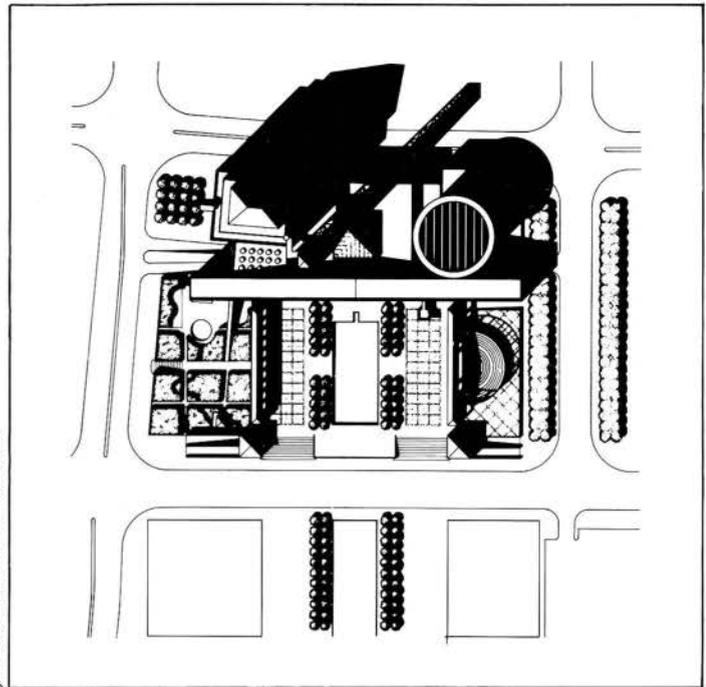
In the light of this illustrious urban tradition, the Mississauga City Hall tries to be a small city unto itself. It does manage to achieve a representational public stature by virtue of its allusive and metaphorical symbolism, and by the more explicit expression of the parts of the facility. Symbolism is a fickle creature, however, and once created is likely to generate a host of meanings to the susceptible public that might never have been anticipated.

The semiological dialectic of urban forms has developed a language of terminology descriptive of non-verbal communication which is useful for understanding the associational power inherent to architectural expression. The writings of Roland Barthes (*Elements of Semiology, Mythologies*) illuminate this interplay of image and perception. The potential for unintentional symbolism is always present, particularly when such figurative forms are involved. By contrast, the intentional symbolism relies on the communication of widely understood, unambiguous images and related ideas which together constitute a 'sign'. In Barthes hierarchy, the intended message or 'sign' of a building consists of signifier (form) and signified (idea or concept). These relate to the physical realities of the City Hall building and to the institutional existence of municipal government. The Mississauga City Hall building is the "sign" embodying that government function, but on a more abstract level also represents a realm of higher concepts — city, Mississauga, representational democracy. This is Barthes' second-order system: a mythic representational association in the public consciousness which confers a status on the building transcending its mere form and concept.⁷

Clearly an articulate and sophisticated design, the programme offered exceptional opportunities to competition entrants that the mundane office tower does not. The adroit double coding throughout the winning entry is in paradoxical contrast to the deceptive simplicity of forms and the outstanding spatial clarity that distinguished Jones and Kirkland's submission from the other 245 competition entries.

In these self-imposed demands to create an environment of meaning, and introducing familiar elements into an unfamiliar context⁸ the building would appear to fall in the camp of Post Modern, but few architects are amenable to stylistic categorization except as an indication of ideological leaning. The architects claim to pursue a basically modernist idiom and have developed a precise vocabulary of detailing to maintain a rigorous logic throughout the project. In every respect the design departs dramatically from the standard corporate architectural office product. This in itself is symptomatic of the concerns shared by the jury and many of the competition entrants.

Partly as a result of the limited indigenous media devoted to architec-



Site plan, Mississauga City Hall, north at top.

tural design, Canadian corporate clients are notoriously conservative when it comes to aesthetics, and the profession itself assiduously polices any emergent vestige or real criticism. Like Stirling's Staatsgalerie, the Mississauga City Hall is rife with jokes and quotes, direct or otherwise, from greater and lesser buildings of the century. The sources range through the alphabet from Aalto to Venturi to the obligatory acknowledgement to Palladio. Lifting an image is easy; incorporating it to seem fresh isn't. At Mississauga the effect is entertaining to the cognoscenti and without compromise to the layman's use and enjoyment of the building. And enjoyment there is sure to be.

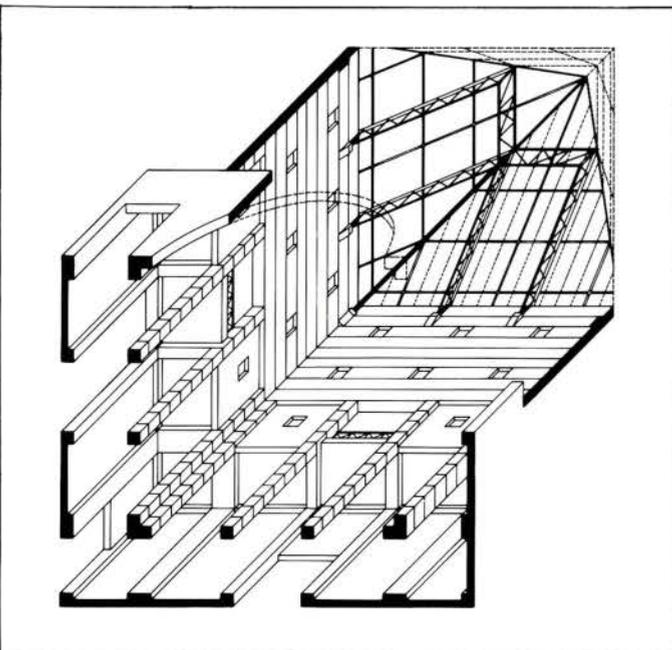
The lay perception may be another matter. The building might be a text of intentions, but is not likely to be read as such by the average passer-by. The strong gable compensates by being an arresting and archetypically familiar form, despite its distorted scale and schematic facade. Highly imageable, the gable has already made its way into the popular imagination as evidenced by restaurant place-mats sporting its elevation. There seems likely to be no problem in the public acceptance of this new civic centre.

Here is something of an anomaly in the doldrums of the eighties: a beautiful, intelligent building capable of grabbing public attention in a big way, in an unexciting suburb like Mississauga. Notwithstanding the rarity of commissions such as this, the project represents a shift from centre in more sense than one.

The absence of a central image for Ontario corresponds to the intellectual nihilism induced in European theorists by the fragmentation of industrial societies into pluralistic cultures. Public architecture presupposes not only a public realm, but the capacity to transcend cultural barriers as well: contact with mass culture is the essential bridge between a public architecture and a public realm.⁹

How ironic then that the architectural nurturing of a public realm is occurring in a distant suburb of a major city in a community with no social centre and virtually none of the street life that characterizes urban life. This apparent inversion has a precedent in urban history: the cyclical emulation of the countryside on the core fringe, and the push of urban typologies into the countryside. Recent development in Toronto, as elsewhere, continues to ridicule the subtle urban morphologies of which we can only dream. Planning commissioner Stephen McLaughlin recently remarked that despite forty-three design guidelines on the Bell Canada project adjacent to both of Toronto's city hall buildings, the city still got a terrible building. The rampant "forces de l'oublie" that Maurice Culot decries in Europe have never been displaced in Canada, where our most vivid collective built memories reside in artificial reconstructions like Louisbourg, or massive reclamations on the order of Place Royale in Quebec. The transferral to Mississauga of the memory of the urban place is in itself a critique indicative of current development standards, and a perplexing commentary on the rural order it finds there.

Considerable emphasis has been given by some critics to the idea that the farm has been intentionally referenced in the design. While the



Worm's-eye axonometric of Great Hall.



View of Great Hall looking toward main entrance.

rural context is acknowledged, regionalism per se has little to do with the phenomenon this building represents. If regionalism implies finding a solution derived from the site and the context, virtually every building period in history, with the exception of International and Heroic Modern, would have to be considered 'regionalist'. It seems instead to be the way in which theoretical issues are addressed which are of interest, and which project the building into the international forum that competition juror James Stirling predicted for it; and this in itself is uncharacteristic of Canadian architecture.

As the acceptability of the abstract corporate object is eroded in polite urban society, and with it the deplorable one-dimensionality of the present standards of public space, concerns for context and appropriate local tradition should become commonplace. Then perhaps architecture will be able to return to an exploration of its own themes, fulfilling the missing pillar of the Vitruvian triad — that of delight.

Notes:

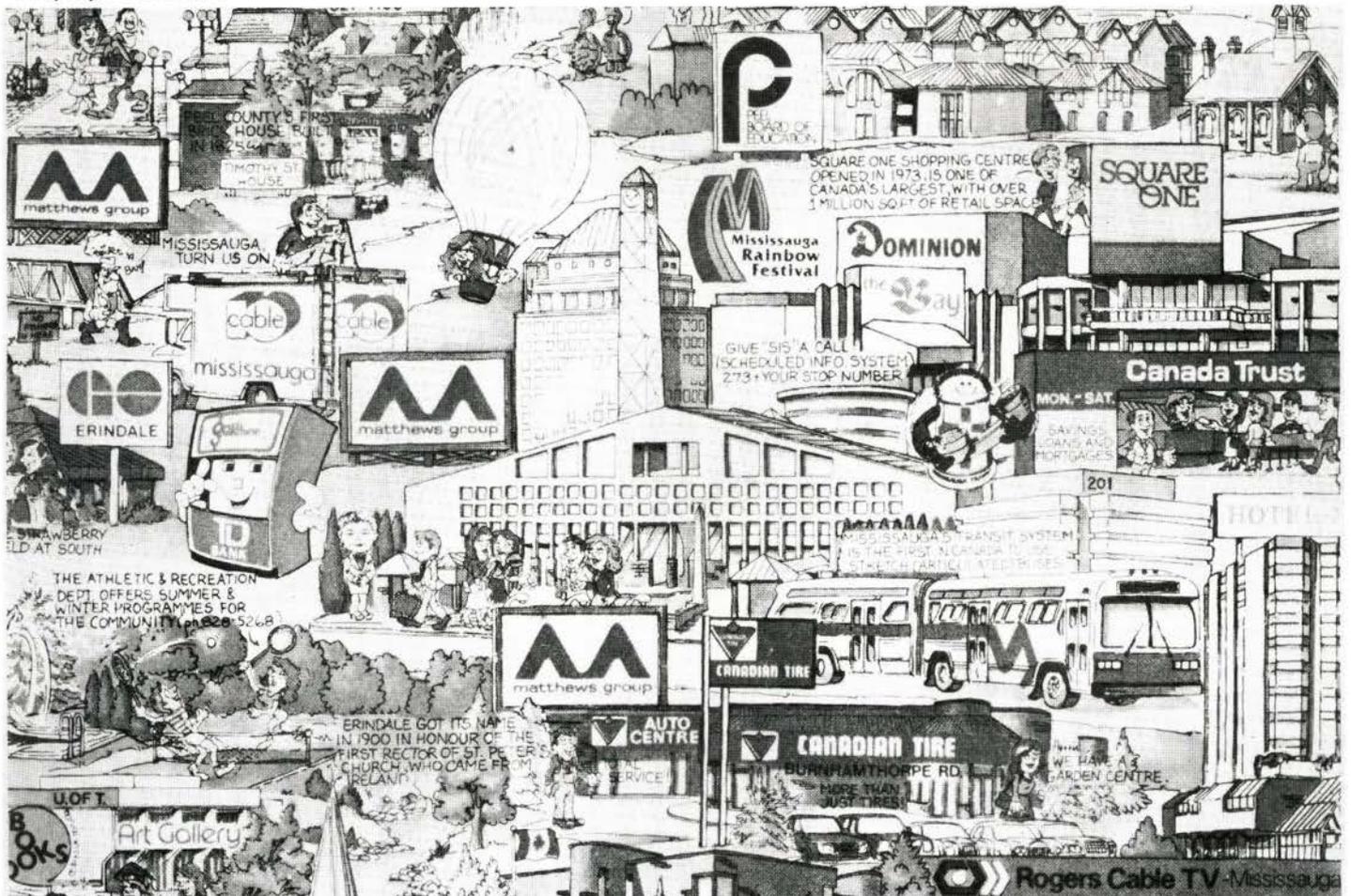
1. Edward Jones and Michael Kirkland, "The Design of the City Hall" *Mississauga City Hall: A Canadian Competition*, ed. Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford (New York: Rizzoli, 1985) p. 135.

2. Joseph Rykwert, "Learning from the Street", *The Necessity of Artifice* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982) pp. 105, 111.
3. Jones and Kirkland, p. 136.
4. David Hockney, quoted in *Cameraworks* (New York: Knopf, 1984) p. 16.
5. Alan Colquhoun, "Frames to Frameworks", *Essays in Architectural Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981) p. 125.
6. Colquhoun, "The Superblock", *ibid.* p. 83.
7. Discussed in Colquhoun, p. 83. Cf. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1982), pp. 93-149.
8. Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Towards an Authentic Architecture", *The Presence of the Past: 1980 Venice Biennale* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980) p. 21. The actual phrase is from Venturi.
9. Charles Jencks, *Abstract Representation* (Architectural Design, vol. 53, no. 7/8, 1983) pp. 10, 20.

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View of City Hall in context.



Enlarged detail of restaurant place-mat showing the City Hall.