



Photos, except as noted: Ian Samson

Urban Supertoy Subdues Renewal Bulldozer

The first urban development to be designed in the new aesthetic idiom proves that bulldozer levelling is not the only means to popular — or financial — success

With the twinkle-eyed daring of donning Mod in her advancing years, York Square is swinging like a flapper again, and luring the action — and the money — to her seasoned, but restyled doorsteps. The name for a new center of commercial buildings in Toronto, York Square is on the main strip of Yorkville — where the action is. As in New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's Waterfront, most of what's happening in Yorkville is housed in old buildings.

York Square, also, was originally a half-block site



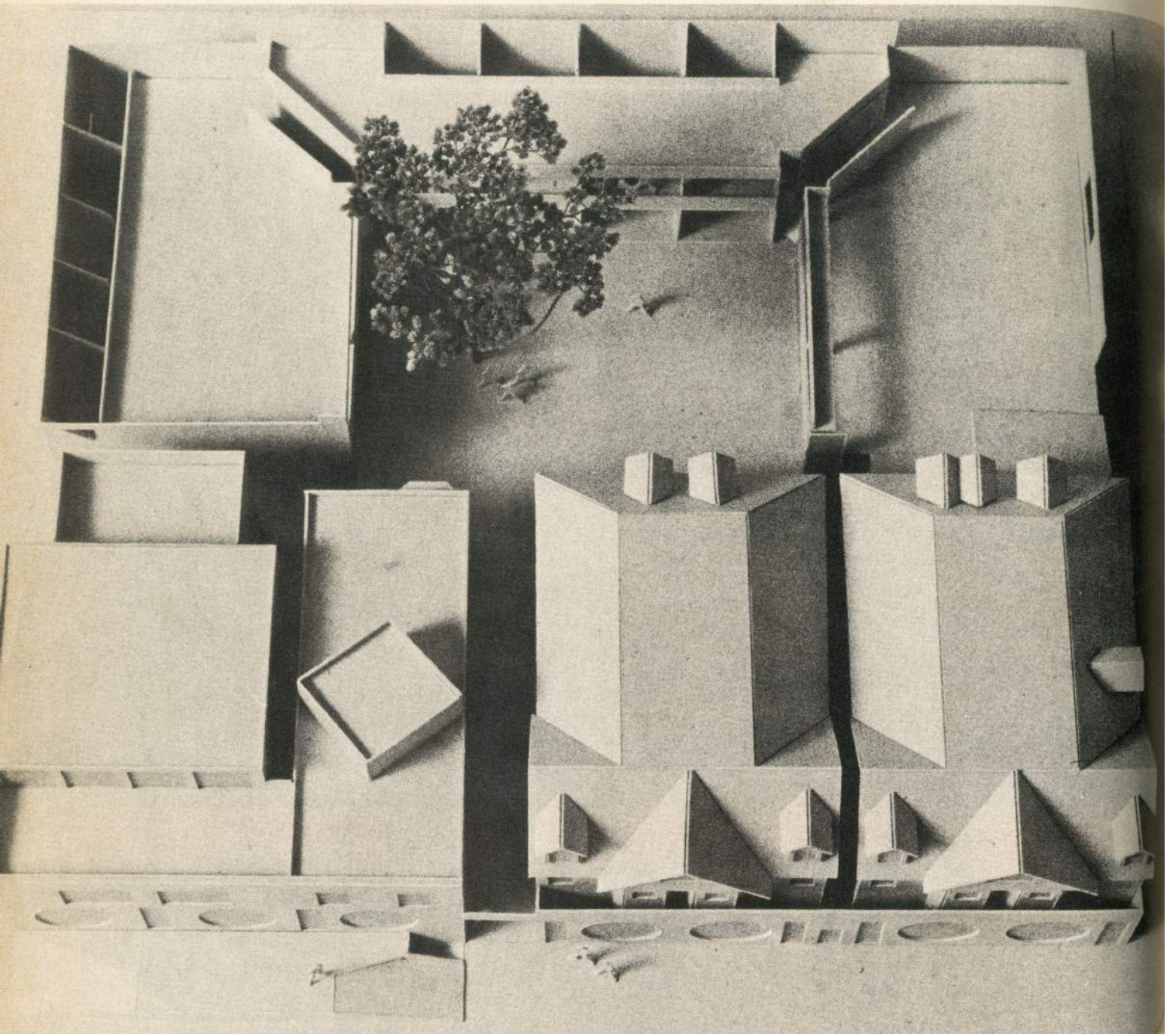
Photo: David Sierens

Photo: Robert Title

Photo: Robert Title



Photo: Panda Associates



Birds-eye view of York Square model shows the central courtyard, the U-plan building that encloses the back of the site, and the main passageway to the court from Yorkville Avenue (bottom center of photo).

When developer I.R. Wooley took over the site, the Yorkville Avenue front was a ricky-ticky row of undistinguished buildings.



CREDITS

LOCATION — Yorkville Avenue and Avenue Road, Toronto, Ontario

CLIENT & BUILDER — Iaver Investments (1963) Ltd. I. R. Wookey, President

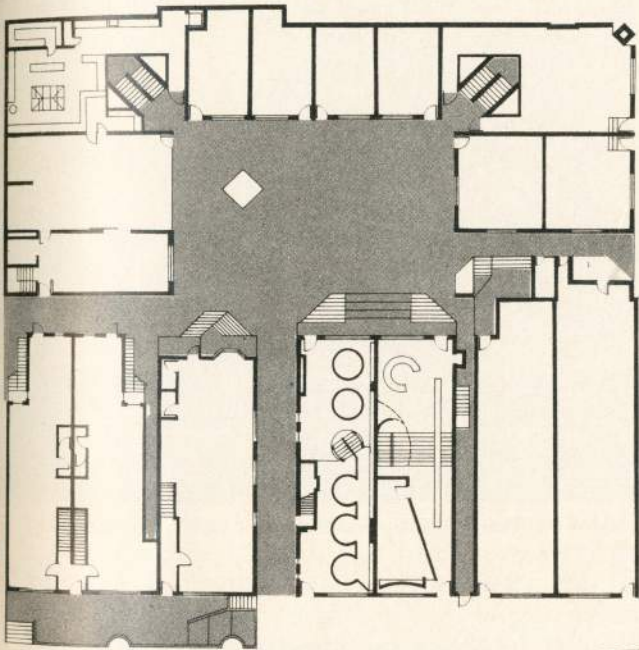
ARCHITECTURAL, PLANNING & INTERIOR DESIGN — A. J. Diamond and Barton Myers

GRAPHICS — Barrie Briscoe; A. J. Diamond and Barton Myers

FURNITURE DESIGN — Muller & Stewart; A. J. Diamond and Barton Myers

ENGINEERING — M. S. Yolles Associates Limited

MECHANICAL & ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING — Rybka, Smith & Ginsler Ltd.



of decayed and mutilated structures when Toronto developer I. R. Wookey commissioned architects A. J. Diamond and Barton Myers to plan and design a scheme to renovate the site and make it an economically viable urban commercial center.

As Diamond & Myers point out, when development capital is invested in a decaying urban area, usually the bulldozer is brought in immediately to level and destroy whatever made the area attractive in the first place. The reasoning behind this still prevalent "urban renewal" methodology is that renovation is more expensive than new construction and that, in any case, maximum coverage of a site must be accomplished in order to amortize the current high cost of new construction. "The consequence is," say the architects, "that maximum capital outlay is required for competitive rental returns."

This is the "urban renewal" method that Jane Jacobs so vehemently and outspokenly opposed in New York and other great American cities. If Toronto has lured urbanist Jacobs as a resident, York Square can show why. It will warm the hearts of all city dwellers for whom she has been the popular spokesman.

At York Square, the general condition and the scale of single buildings, "which were arrived at empirically," as the architects point out, were maintained specifically so as not to disturb the established flow of already interested people to the location. In fact, York Square now increasingly attracts a true urban mix of Toronto's population to its shops, activities, and restaurants: the young and the old, the curious and the dedicated, the window-shopper and the spender, the square and the hip.

This alternative renewal method — preserving the continuum of urban growth — minimizes fiendish leaps of scale in both size and financing. It is a method "that ought to be obvious," the architects say, "since, if pursued successfully, it allows high rental returns for small capital outlay, making the economic venture more feasible on smaller capital outlay."

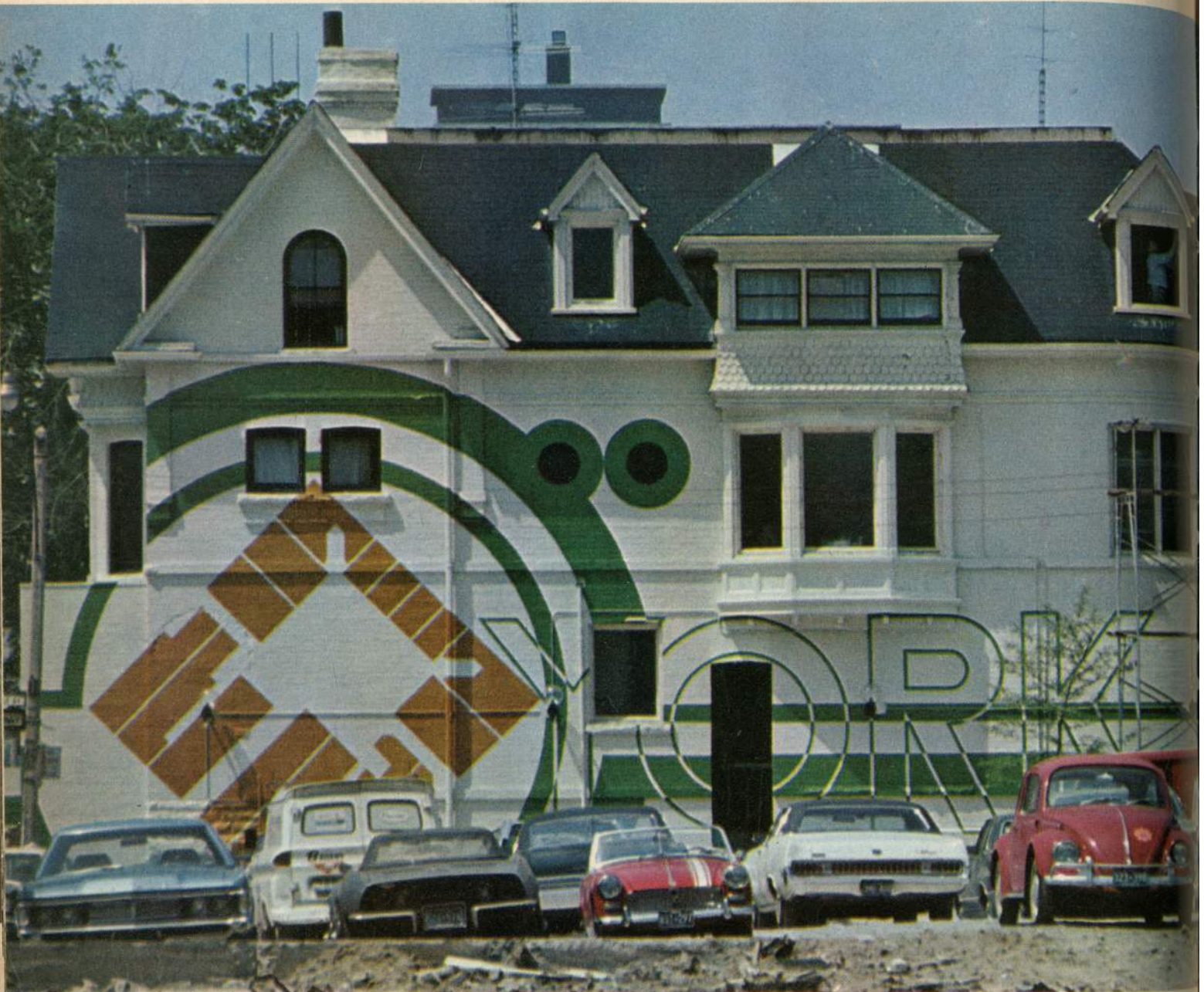
York Square, therefore, advocates urban evolution over urban revolution. Although the mainstream of

Architects Barton & Myers faced Yorkville Avenue with a screen of shopfronts that unifies the facade.



Photos: McAlister/Van Nostrand





Artist Barrie Briscoe painted a giant logo — the ochre plan of York Square on the diagonal — along with green signage and green-and-white circulation graphics on the Avenue Road facade.

current activism is against this approach, the development is an undeniable urban and commercial success. One store that was in operation before the renovation, for example, now reports that its sales have increased, first to 40 per cent, then to 100 per cent of its original figures.

The method used at York Square preserves the character and familiar charm of the old and adds a seductive set of hippy new accoutrements to make people take notice of it again, see it afresh, and therefore be attracted to it. This statement, in fact, is a basic definition of all art. In addition, as South African architect Diamond points out, "What is new today is old tomorrow; therefore, working with the old is perhaps the single most important aspect of design in cities." On the other hand, urban designers must always bear in mind that the only thing permanent in life is change.

Supertoy Shopfront

To change the old brick buildings on Yorkville Avenue, which were painted white, Diamond & Myers have overlaid a new row of shopfronts — "replacing the ticky tacky stores that had collected over time," as they recall (see p. 146). The new fronts are designed as a one-story high, perforated screen, linked to the old buildings by skylighted roofs.

The design motif of this peek-a-boo facade is that of a simple primitive signage at giant scale: huge, circular openings for show windows alternate with rectangular openings for doorways. Circles say "look through"; rectangles say "walk through." It is a Supertoy billboard.

"The language of the openings is really dumb," says Barton Myers, who not surprisingly studied with Kahn and Venturi at the University of Pennsyl-

vania. Its geometry separates the shops from the customary, undifferentiated, continuous glass shopfronts and focuses on individual establishments, since the architects see small openings as being no longer relevant to the scale of the new urban street. The geometry therefore also relates the Victorian detached and semidetached structures to the megascale of the new metropolis and the new mobile scale of the speeding auto. Everyone can read it. It is a linear motif that ties together a number of disparate elements and unifies the complex. An unflinchingly modern addition to the old buildings, York Square's shopfront screen is in the best traditions of Supermannerism.

Supergraphics

In collaboration with Barrie Briscoe, whose wraparound murals we have seen before (October 1968 P/A), the architects have superimposed Supergraphics on the Avenue Road and Yorkville Avenue facades, both as signage and as circulation indicators. On the wall of Bill Brady's Men's Wear, the Avenue Road corner store, a diagrammatic site plan of York Square set on the diagonal is painted in ochre inside a giant green circle — "the O of York," Briscoe says. Alongside, the name of the area is telegraphically billboarded in green letters. The entire design is superimposed over walls, windows, and doors indiscriminately — or "permissively," to use the language of the new idiom.

The overlaid site plan is about one-eighth the actual size of the site itself, but it is mammoth compared to the usual orientation diagram on a signpost, and even compared to an architect's customary documents. As a result, it makes a new-scale transition between the physical actuality and the in-orbit view of it, as well as providing a logo and identifying signage. Although this double-scale interaction is fundamental to all Supergraphics, the painted superimposition of representational material is a device that Briscoe has made particularly his own.

In the architects' minds, this technique is associated with the integral decoration of brick stringcourses that unifies single Victorian structures nearby (photo right); they also see it as related to the more modern stripes on airplanes. At York Square, as they intended, the Supergraphics are at a new giant scale that not only ties together the entire half-block complex, but, like the supertoy shopfront screen, relates the complex to the superscale of the street and the city. This is an exterior use of the technique that is exemplary of its potential in economically brightening our too-often drab urban environments.

A final element of the Supergraphic design — a

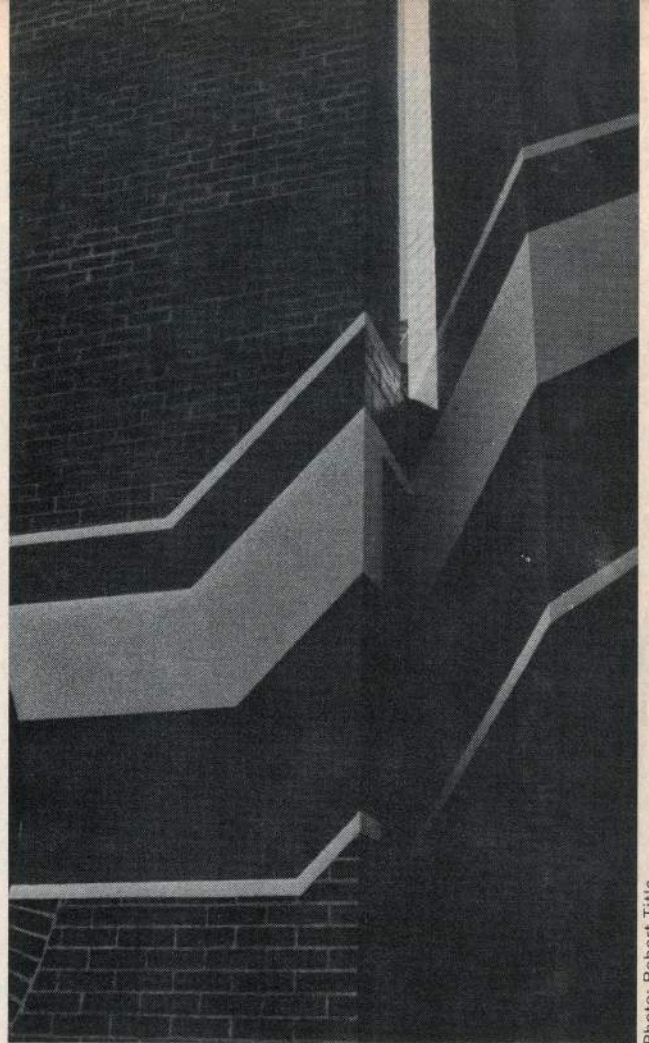
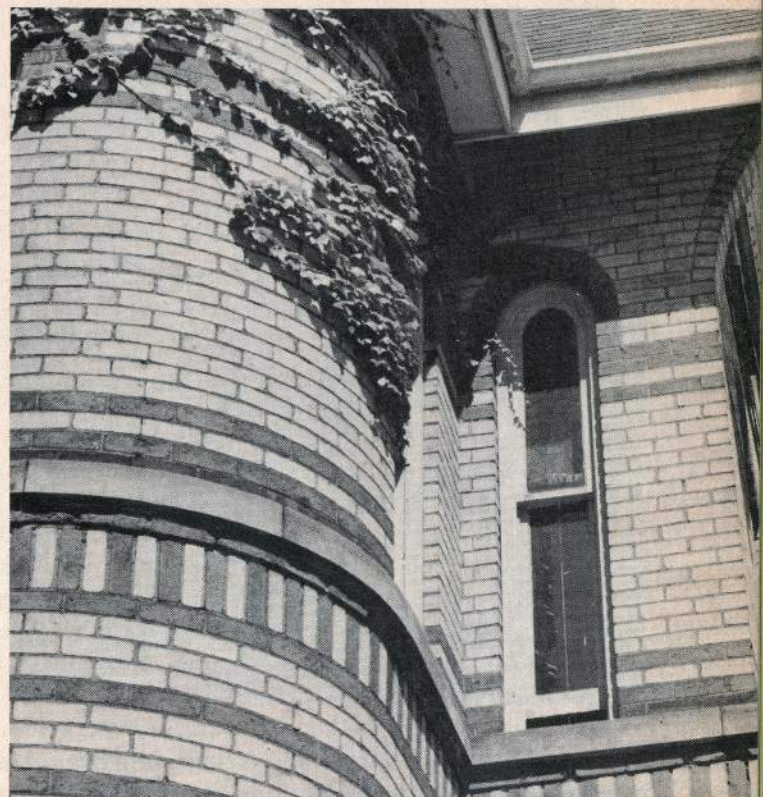


Photo: Robert Title

Architects Barton & Myers see the exterior graphics, which were done in collaboration with Barrie Briscoe, as a device that enhances the larger scale of the new complex and ties it together, "much as the Victorian string course once did," they say. "Toronto is rich in such examples of Victoriana (photo below) "the architects explain," but where once diverse building elements were combined into a whole, now groups of buildings are united together for the superscale of the street."





green circulation strip — leads the eye around the corner to an arrowhead indicator toward a passageway at the center of the Yorkville Avenue facade.

York Square's Square

The passageway between the stores leads past the irregular backs of the old buildings to a brick-paved courtyard that gives York Square its "square." It is a more pastoral respite than the busy street traffic can provide — "a place for pedestrians away from the automobile," as the architects say — presided over by a grand old maple tree, perfectly sited years ago, which spreads a leafy shade over the court.

Already the court has become a popular place for performing groups: carollers at Christmastime, and, during this summer, the recitals of the Toronto Dance Theatre. Local papers have acclaimed this sequestered open-air arena as Toronto's "mini-center for the performing arts."

To frame this courtyard, Diamond & Myers demolished half of a semidetached house and designed a new two-story brick building at the back of the deep

site as a social center; it houses ground floor shops (with large circular shop windows such as those on the street front) and a restaurant, a glass-enclosed lunch terrace, open-roof coffee terraces, and a small fondue-and-chocolate shop. This U-plan building has stairs set in its corners diagonally, "making obvious by breaking the building, where the access to the roof is," the architects explain. Since the corners are the dark spots in the square plan, they are also used for the service cores. Industrial designer Earl Heland executed the restaurant interiors.

Diamond & Myers in addition designed the interiors of two of the old buildings, one for Vidal Sassoon, the English hairdresser of Mod-bob fame, and one for the Poupee Rouge Boutique, a woman's dress shop. Both of these interiors (see next pages) fulfill the promise of the exterior with its permissive interflow of scales and history.

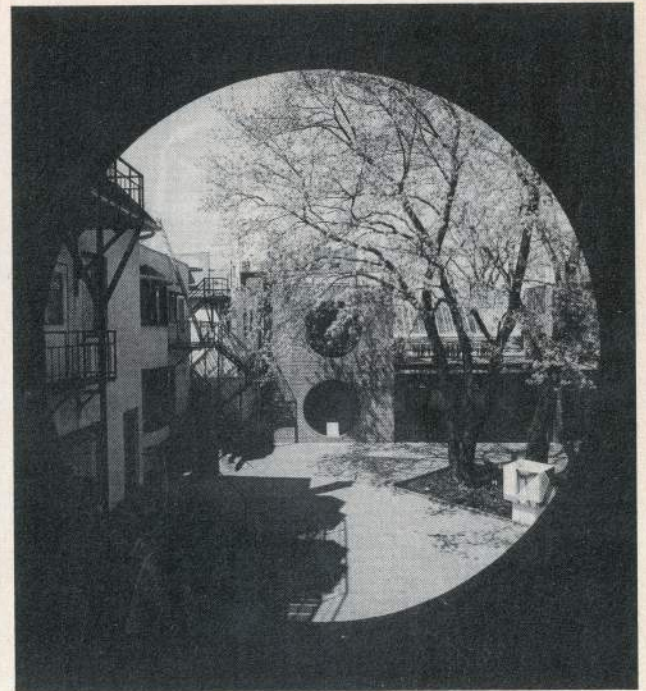
Conclusion

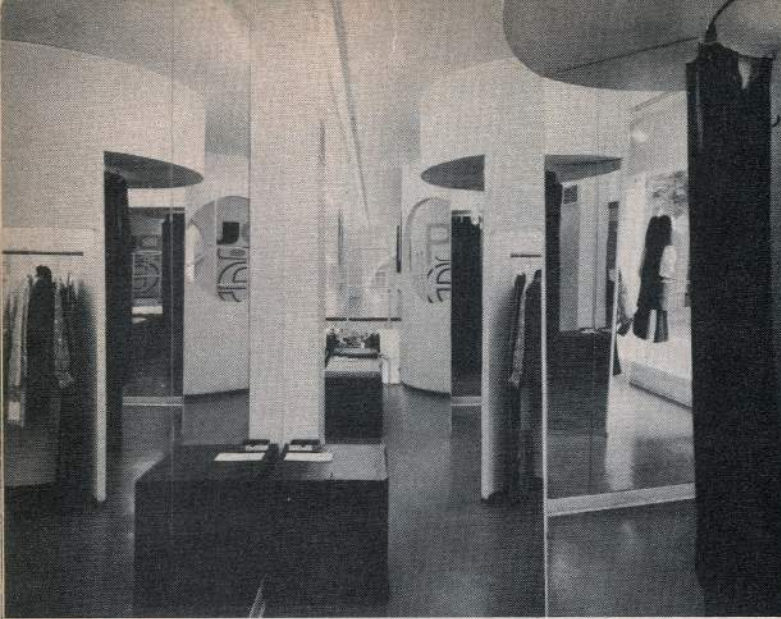
York Square, then, is a paradigm of our inclusive design age: it exhibits the double scale of our all-at-

Photo: Robert Title



The courtyard at York Square (this and facing page) is a social center that is also becoming an outdoor setting for the performing arts. Shops, restaurants, and open-roof terraces surround the tree-shaded court — all with the motif of the street-front screen.





Poupee Rouge Boutique is one of two interiors at York Square designed by Barton & Myers. For a long narrow space, which had been completed to the point of wall-restoration and electrical and air-conditioning work, the architects designed a series of cylindrical "dress towers" to display the stock and to serve as changing booths. The straight long wall is mirrored; the irregular one painted Poupee-Rouge rouge. The circle motif of York Square is reiterated.

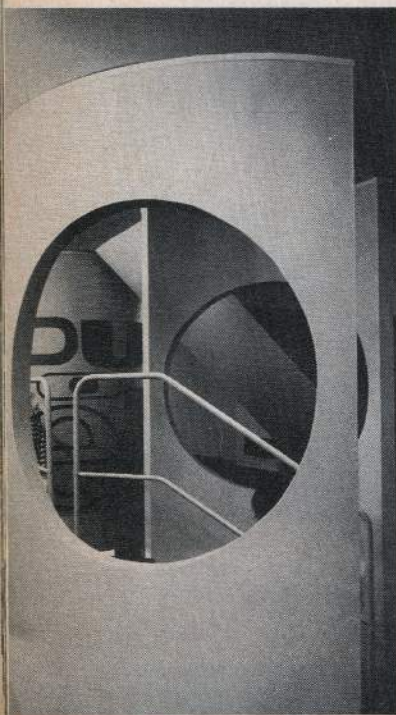
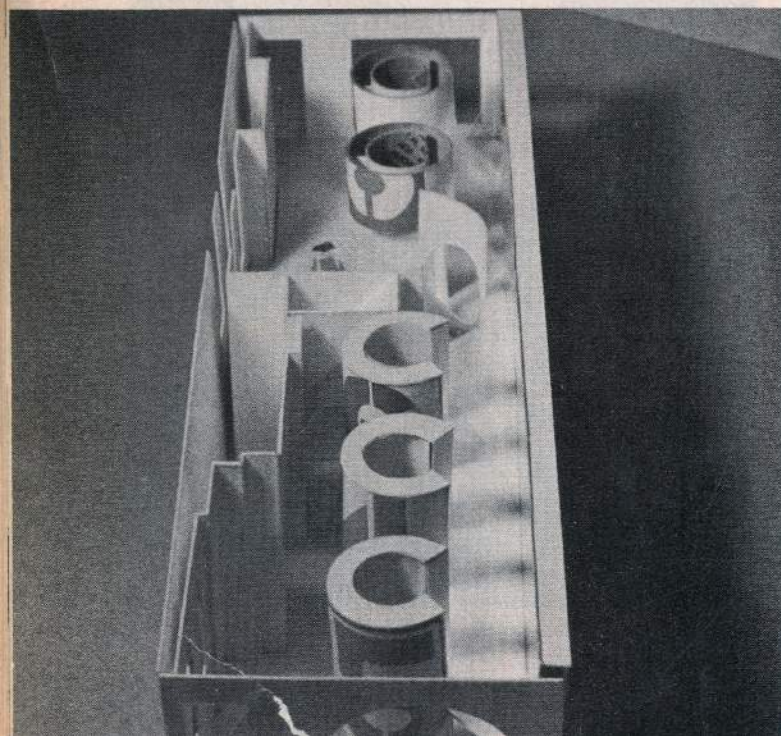


Photo: Soltay



once vision—the overlay of old and new, preservation and construction, pedestrians and cars, bustle and peace, facade and mass, structure and paint. All are put at the service of urban revitalization. If last month P/A published two different banks to show the widely separate dual design directions current today, this month we show these two dualities in the same project.

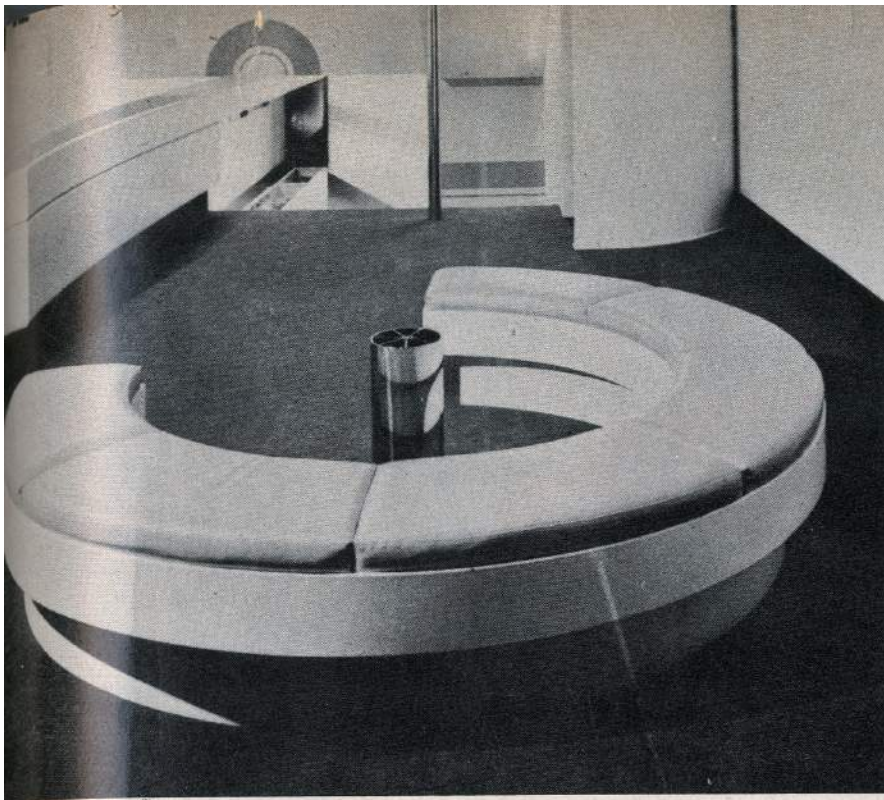
Furthermore, York Square is not merely a project entirely within today's most avant-garde aesthetic; it is also the first large-scale exterior project in that idiom. As the first urban renewal development in the idiom, it helps to prove, at last, that the "super games" (as the *Architectural Review* has sardonically dubbed them) are valid and meaningful when put to urban uses.

This artistic contemporaneity is responsible not only for the artistic success of York Square's design, but for its popularity with the citizenry of Toronto—however controversial the new idiom, mysteriously remains within the architecture profession.

Jane Jacobs told P/A that she is highly gratified by York Square. "It is a Pygmalion operation. Inevitably, in a healthy, developing city," she explains, "buildings built for one purpose are transformed for other purposes. Diamond & Myers have sensitively used the old buildings without trying to pretend they are something else; they have made them not in the least bit quaint, but of our times. To see the possibilities in what to most people would have appeared the most humdrum materials is one of the great contributions that architects can make." Urbanist Jacobs concluded, "The uniqueness and promise of York Square, though it cannot and should not be copied in carbon, should be an example to all developers."

These are meaningful words, especially to Toronto's Yorkville, which is even now threatened by other developers who want to demolish blocks of old buildings under the ironic guise of cleaning up the hippies. Those developers propose, as one solution, a 21-story apartment hotel on a sweetly arcaded, one-story podium—that high-rise towers can "preserve the character" of the present low-density, low-rise area. Nor have Toronto civic officials been exactly the watchdogs of urban continuity, since they have somehow permitted an unsympathetic parking garage to rise in the midst of Yorkville.

York Square, however, sets a better example. And developer Wookey and his architects, Diamond & Myers, can be proud of their achievement. Other developers and architects, and especially other civic officials, would be well advised to consider York Square's respectful yet hip new example.—CRS



For the Vidal Sassoon Salon, another branch of the English hairdresser who popularized the mod-bob, Barton & Myers continue the circular motif of the complex and give the salon a distinct look at the same time. The salon is unified by the stair that penetrates the entire building. "This is the vertical extension of the horizontal street-square movement," according to the architects. The stair rises in a cylindrical well to a skylight; it connects floors in an ascending order of privacy and function — from entrance on the ground floor to changing on the mezzanine, to cutting and shampoo on the second floor, and so on. Landings are made when the stair intersects the curved well, which maintains the continuity of each floor. All furniture was designed in collaboration with industrial designers Mike Stewart and Keith Muller.

