

# ARCHITECTURE

## Library building finally gives Concordia University a heart

### But ghost of Royal George still haunts campus

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

**N**ext month Concordia University officially opens its new \$65-million downtown library complex after more than a decade of painful negotiations with the city of Montreal, preservationists and tenants' groups.

The building itself is as big as the battles it incited. The library comprises more than a half-million square feet, stretching from Bishop to Mackay Sts. along de Maisonneuve Blvd. A 10-storey tower faces Mackay, descending to six levels along Bishop St. A monumental arcade wraps the library's ground floor on all three sides.

The building's contentious past is also expressed in the design of the new project. The most obvious reminder is the delicate terra cotta facade of the former Royal George Apartments, now totally engulfed by the monstrous scale of the new library. This architectural landmark, an eight-storey residential block constructed in 1912, was the focus of the disputes that plagued the new project from the beginning.

Although the Royal George was purchased by the university in 1979, organizers of the project met strong opposition to their plans for the older building throughout the 1980s. In 1985, the city refused the university's request to demolish the building on the basis of a bylaw protecting housing. Tenants in the building, some of whom had lived there for decades, mounted their own campaign to save the structure.

At the height of the debate over the Royal George Apartments, all sides stated their cases in the press with impassioned pleas for support. Opponents to the plan claimed the university had already displaced hundreds of downtown residents and saw the library as yet another example of large-scale development wiping out urban housing.

Heritage proponents called for the conservation of the entire building, rather than only its two-dimensional front, attempting to avoid another example of "facadism," which too often passes for architectural preservation in Montreal. As a warning, they pointed to the failed attempt to integrate the facade of the Cathedral St. Jacques in the huge mass of the St. Denis St. campus of the Université du Québec.

Concordia cited its dire need for new library space downtown; the site was ideal, located directly across de Maisonneuve Blvd. from the Henry F. Hall Building and apart from the Royal George, it was just a huge parking lot. The university administration refused to integrate the entire Royal George Apartments into the library scheme because of inadequate structural support in the older building — libraries require extra structure because of the enormous weight of books — as well as its low ceiling heights. Concordia representatives questioned the wisdom of preserving housing for 100 people over constructing a library for 30,000 students.

#### Keeping facade was mistake

Finally, following a series of public hearings, the city granted the university permission to demolish the building, but to preserve and integrate the facade of the historic structure into the new complex. In 1986, the Quebec Court of Appeal, to which the tenants had turned as last recourse, also sided with the university.

Now that the new building is ready to open, it is clear that the decision to keep only the facade of the Royal George Apartments was a mistake. No side gained from its retention; the tenants lost their homes; the preservationists lost their building (and gained another example of the hated facadism); the university administration and its architects — although gaining a library — were forced to integrate unwanted fragments of an unrelated building into the design for the new library.

The result is a building screaming compromise on the exterior, but which celebrates victory in its interior. Huge as the battle over the Royal George became as years passed, the architects based many of the new building's features on the historic structure.

The windows in the library, for example, are the same color green as the windows of the Royal George; the cornice, protruding balcony, and column-and-infill pattern of the older building also supposedly inspired the library.

Translated to pre-fabricated concrete panels and glazed concrete block, the architects of the new library followed the same basic pattern of the Royal George in using a matte material to indicate structural support and a shiny material for infill. The enormous scale of the new building, however, alters the perception of the window size in the library, making them seem much smaller than they are.

This "contextual" approach to design, in which existing buildings near a site provide the inspiration for new construction, was a hallmark of architecture of the 1970s and 1980s. According to the architects of the Concordia Library, Werleman & Guy/Blouin & Associates, the designs of all the buildings surrounding the site were acknowledged in the new building. The tower on Mackay built in the 1960s justified the construction of the new tower; the reddish colored glazed concrete blocks on the new building were apparently inspired by the brownstone Victorian houses south of the library on Bishop St. The relentless rhythm of windows in the modernist Hall Building is reflected in the repetitive structure of the new library. Like a book comprised solely of quotes, the exterior envelope of the library lacks a strong character of its own.

#### Interior is more satisfying

The interior of the building, however, is much more satisfying. An impressive six-storey atrium running south from de Maisonneuve bisects the building and recalls the site of an existing alley. This delightful space acts as a locating device for the entire building, as well as a framework for the library's stairways, which offer fabulous views into the library's atrium and outward to the city. The atrium is also animated by steel cross-bracing, designed by Concordia professor Avtar Pall to absorb the sway of the library in the event of an earthquake.

A generous tunnel from the Hall Building also leads into the atrium. Aptly titled Place Concordia, this monumental space will certainly give the university the physical and spiritual centre it now lacks in its scattered arrangement of buildings downtown.

The innovative plan of the new library also provides the university with much more than accommodation for its books. The library includes on its ground floor an art gallery, bookstore, student administrative services area, a restaurant, photocopy centre, a computer store, and a 200-seat cinema. These spaces are open and accessible in the new building from both the atrium and the surrounding streets.

This unusual combination of commercial and academic functions reflects Concordia's fine reputation of accessibility and its responsiveness to the needs of downtown Montreal. Combined with the friendly arcade surrounding the complex and graced by colossal public art, Place Concordia is truly a public place.

The ghost of the Royal George Apartments, however, is omnipresent. Running along the floor inside the new building is a slender line, subtly demarcating the former outline of the demolished residential block. If the lonely, two-dimensional Royal George facade on Bishop St. has become the building's tombstone, then surely the structure's former outline is its grave. The battle is over. The surrounding library complex is victorious, though deeply scarred in the process.

■ Annmarie Adams is an assistant professor of architecture at McGill University.



Concordia's new library with Bishop St. and Royal George Apartments facade at left.

GAZETTE PHOTOS, PIERRE OBENDRAUF

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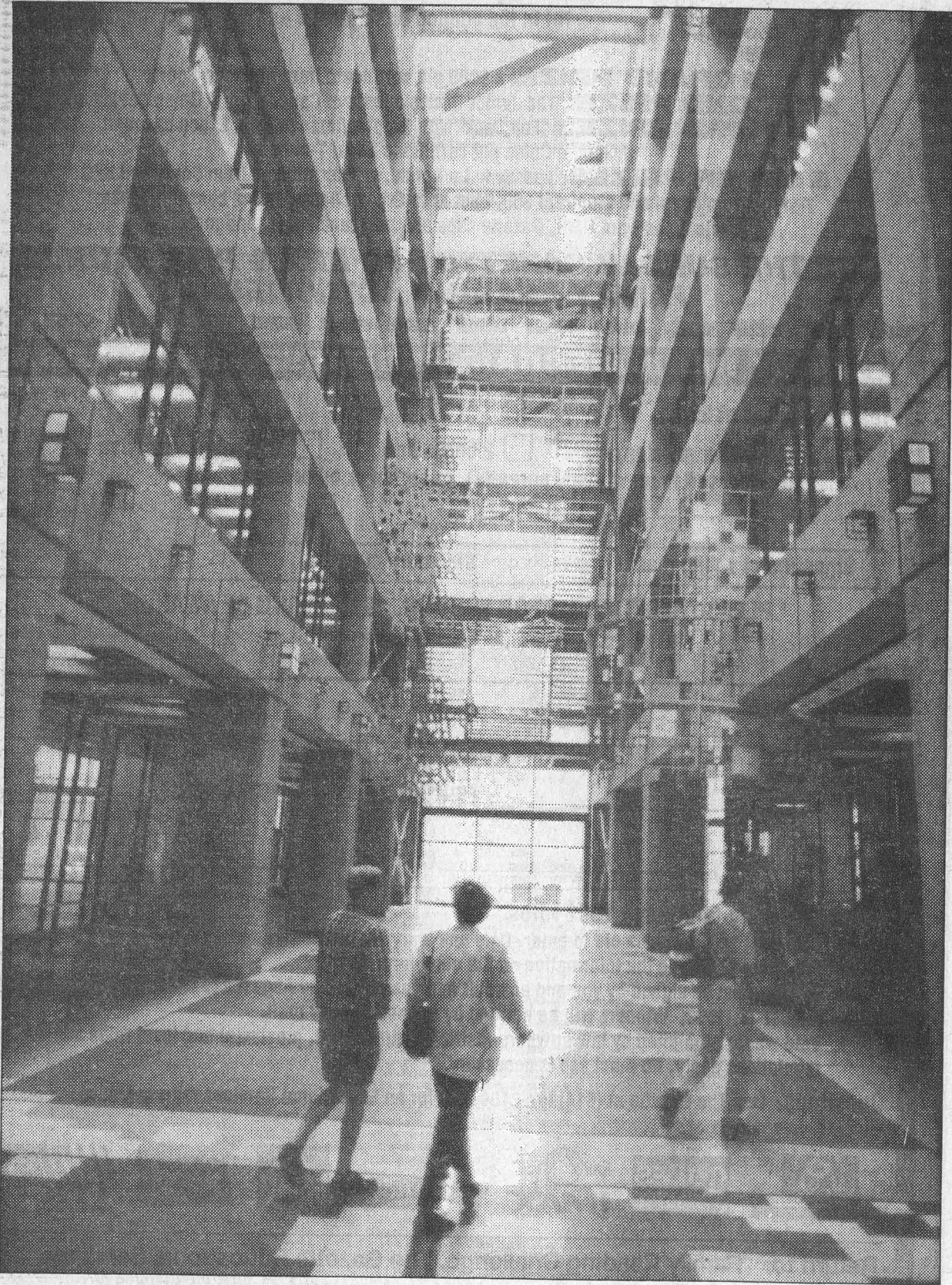
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