

Architectural Critique Fine and Performing Arts Centre



The proposed Fine and Performing Arts Centre looms above the students attempting to cross the street at the dangerous intersection of Salem and Main Streets. Its monumental mass rises high above a raised podium set in an array of cascading red sandstone planters attempting to deal with a difficult site. Walking east along the sidewalk up a busy curving treeless Main Street you arrive at a large exterior staircase in the middle of the north-facing façade which leads up to the top of the raised podium and straight ahead to the sheltered main entrance set in an expansive wall of transparency. This is an entry that will seldom be used and will be treacherous in the winter. On the interior a tall corridor runs from end to end dividing the building volume into three blocks. Looking east you capture a view of the end of the Avard Dixon building, west the traffic on Salem, and north through the main entry transparency a perfect view of the heating plant and maintenance sheds. There is no view from these interior public spaces into the beautiful campus.

In a critical planning error the proposed building turns its back on the campus. It ignores the potentially warm and inviting sunny south-facing façade and the old academic quadrangle, even separating itself by a wide and deep moat as an impenetrable fortress. Like a cruel joke, remnant stones of the destroyed Memorial Library are arranged in an amateurish way in the old quadrangle to suggest an amphitheatre, supposedly an 'echo' of the Cenotaph, indeed an

empty and pathetic gesture. The planning of the proposed Fine and Performing Arts Centre is simply not integrated into the campus.

On the exterior the building volumes are defined by imposing rectilinear planes of red sandstone detailed to create the impression of floating free of each other with the illusion of great cantilevers. The design is completely insensitive to the building traditions of the campus other than the use of red sandstone. Ironically the only building on campus with a comparable detail is the wall of the Tweedie Annex facing Main Street, the very building determined to be needing demolition because of its unpleasant appearance; and the proposed stark walls are even more substantial. One of the design objectives was to create a 'stunning new presence' on this corner as a gateway to the university and the town. It fails miserably. Dr Diamond would be very disappointed at this lost opportunity.

The preliminary drawings have not changed appreciably from the concept drawings of a year ago, other than the removal of the sky lighting and the delineation of the boxes. Because of the six meter drop in elevation from the existing entry to the Memorial Library to the road level at the corner, the selected building site is a challenging one for a large level volume. This has resulted in an elaborate array of retaining walls, ramps, podium, moat, stairs and planter retaining systems that will add several million dollars to the capital and maintenance costs. The expansive use of red sandstone and high envelope ratio will also add to these costs. This is not an inexpensive building.

The preliminary drawings illustrate a design solution that can be described as mediocre. It has the look of an unresolved student project in architectural school. When a big name firm is retained to undertake a commission like this, you should expect to be dazzled. This design is not brilliantly conceived.

Robert Eaton
McGill Architecture 1964
135 Main Street Sackville NB E4L 4B2
bobeaton@nbnet.nb.ca