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Nasgaard on Richter

Kingston's Museopathy

Douglas Cardinal

The devil IN Ms. GRIFFITHS

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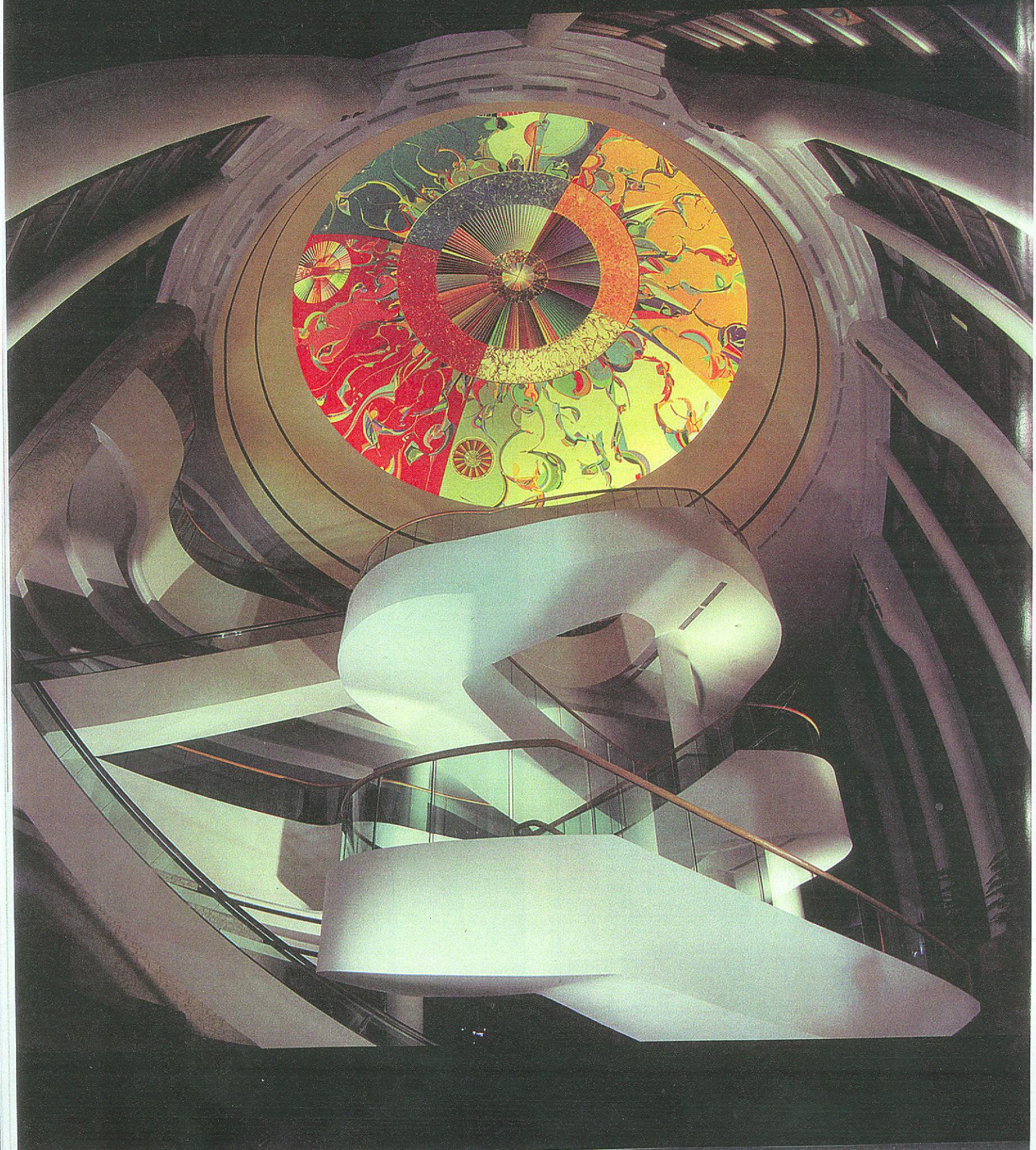
what on earth are we to



do with Douglas J. Cardinal?

As the National Museum of the American Indian heads for its opening, its architect finds his feet again

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

He is a persistent presence in contemporary Canadian architecture, while never sitting comfortably on any page in the country's architectural story. The irrepressibly opinionated American designer Philip Johnson has lauded him, but at home, colleagues and critics have never been able to make up their minds. As the decades of his career have rolled by, architectural writers have occasionally praised and sometimes damned Cardinal's distinctive styling, which is reminiscent of the weather-worn badlands and hoodoos and glacial flows of western Canada. For their part, the historians, by and large, have kept their commentaries safely bland. In private, the observers will occasionally drop their guard. I once heard one airily dismiss Cardinal's work as Prairie Dog Modern—by which he meant, I guess, the kind of odd, quaintly irrational thing you might expect an Alberta Indian to do.

Where are we supposed to assign weight to the various influences on Cardinal's practice? To what extent is he an architect in the Great Tradition, in what measure an aboriginal Albertan working in a unique but basically regional style?

His aboriginal credentials are definitely in order. Cardinal can rightfully claim Blackfoot, Mohawk and Algonquian men and women among his ancestors. In addition, he long ago abandoned the Roman Catholicism of his French and German forebears and embraced Native America's shamanic rites of sweat lodge and sweet grass. He continues to practice these disciplines. But given the fact that Cardinal is both aboriginal and an architect, does that make his work aboriginal architecture? This notion has been invoked by critics and historians to explain the idiosyncrasy of his architectural output from the 1960s and the 1970s, when he was making curvaceous buildings and everyone else was designing with a T-square. But now that we are able to take a long view, how do these descriptive categories hold up?

From the viewpoint of his clients, the designation of Cardinal as an aboriginal architect has served him well. It surely helped him snag the two most prestigious commissions of his career, and many smaller ones. The first of the large works came his way in 1983, when, after 20 years of practice, he was still languishing in near-obscurity east and west of the Canadian prairies. Pushing for aboriginal rights, he had caught the eye of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, who swung Cardinal the challenge of designing the immense, $250-million Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec. Cardinal's second massive opportunity came in 1992, when he won the commission for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, destined for the last available building site on Washington's National Mall, immediately adjacent to the US Capitol. If nowhere else, his roots counted mightily at the Smithsonian, which made its selection, according to an NMAI statement, "based on [Cardinal's] extensive experience in working with aboriginal groups."

But the bright virtue of that long experience has persistently been dimmed by his remarkable flair for getting into trouble. Some of this trouble cannot be fairly laid at Cardinal's doorstep. It was not his fault that Trudeau's warmly supportive Liberals were displaced

OPPOSITE: Grand Hall with *Morning Star* by Alex Janvier, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec Completed 1989 Photo Malak

ABOVE: Douglas Cardinal, October 2001

"The most **influential** architect I have ever studied was **Borromini**."

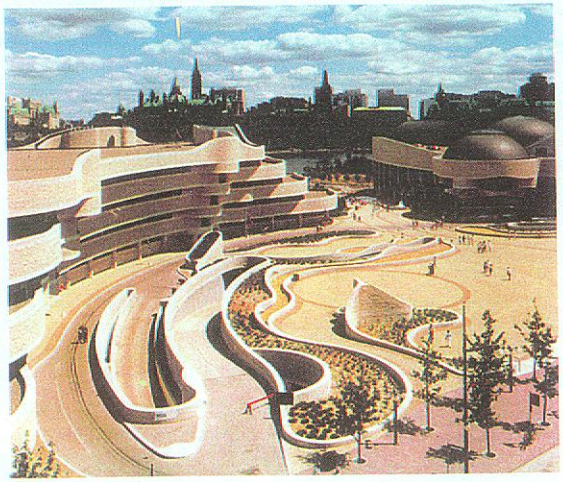
by budget-slashing Conservatives during the construction of the Museum of Civilization. The realization of Cardinal's design cost more than Brian Mulroney wanted to pay, which led to countless fights between architect and politicians. Unwilling to make the compromises demanded by Parliament Hill—the substitution of cheap brickbats for more luxurious limestone cladding, to cite one example—Cardinal went nearly $1 million into debt. Financial salvation came when he won the job of building a casino and hotel for the Oneida Nation, in New York state. But professional glory returned with the Washington commission and the universal enthusiasm of the US capital's tastemakers and power brokers for Cardinal's proposals.

By 1998, Cardinal had produced a superb design for the NMAI and garnered strong, unanimous support from the Commission of Fine Arts, the US government's official guardian of Washington's architectural beauty and integrity. But by then he had been fired for what the Smithsonian said was Cardinal's failure to meet deadlines and contractual agreements. While the facts of what happened in Washington are perhaps hopelessly obscured by the murk of charges and counter-charges, it appears that the architect's chief offences were stubborn opposition to proposed design changes, demands for more time to make more drawings and umbrage at the usual US government practice of having one architect design and another build. As matters stand now, a replica of Cardinal's exterior design—or, as he calls it, the "forgery"—is being planted on the Mall by New York's Polshek Partnership. The museum is due to open in 2004, with an acknowledgement of Cardinal's role as designer, but without any input from him about how the thing gets built. (The enthusiasm of the Commission of Fine Arts, by the way, has never slackened. The body approved the introduction of Polshek on the scene only after the firm promised to eliminate changes the commission denounced as "ugly," and to build exactly what Cardinal originally designed.)

I cannot say with any certainty that Cardinal has designed with high-handed inattention to budgets, deadlines and other realities of the architectural business. I can say that these charges have been levelled at him by exasperated clients more than once—which is quite enough times to win him a reputation as pariah, or persecuted visionary, or exemplary witness to integrity in the building art. (The Canadian architectural establishment, not astonishingly, has declared him to be all three over the years.) Nor has his standing as an aboriginal architect kept his proposals from coming into conflict with the demands of other aboriginal Canadians. Among the projects that have long engaged Cardinal's attention is the federal development of Ottawa's Victoria Island as an aboriginal gathering place and cultural centre. The possibility that this plan will be realized has become brighter in recent months, as Algonquin tribes in the Ottawa area have, one by one, gotten behind it. But the support is hardly unanimous. Asked recently to comment on Cardinal's scheme, Jean LaRose, of the Assembly of First Nations, said, "Our priorities right now are things like housing and roads and to make sure our people are cared for. Something like this wouldn't come cheap. It's not even at the stage of being a priority."

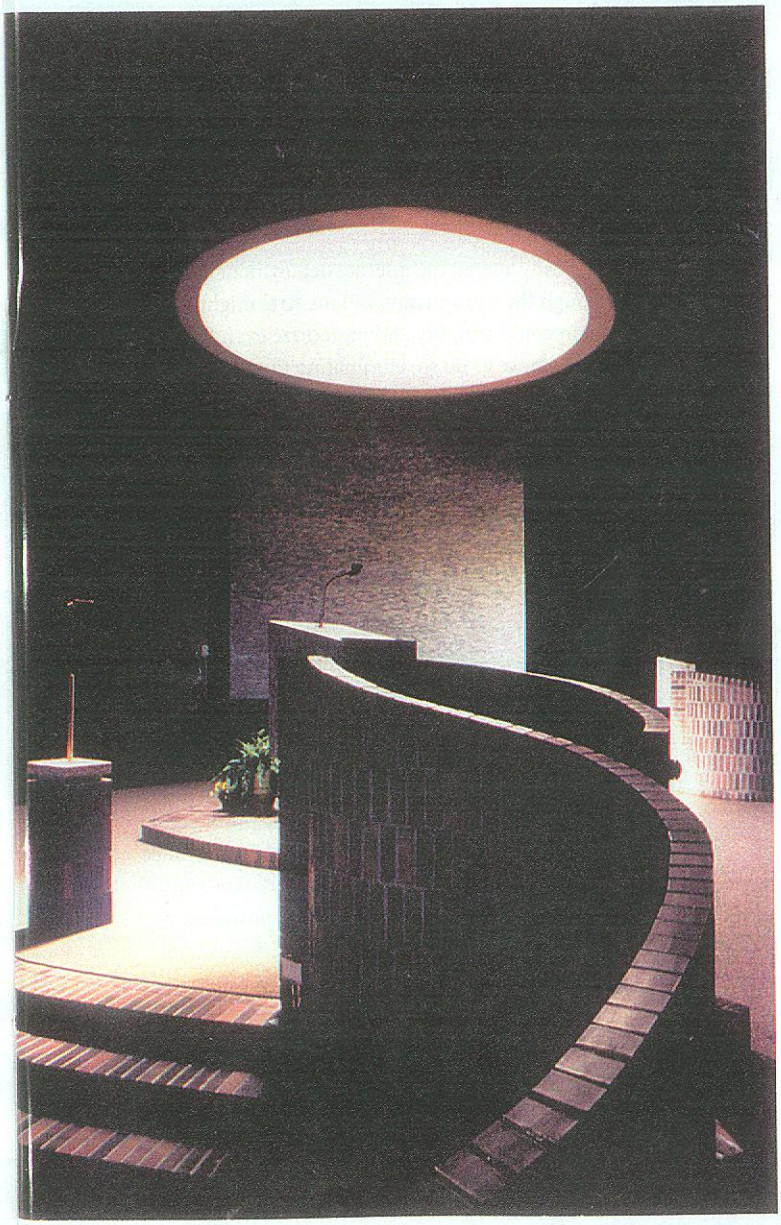
Last autumn's panoramic Cardinal retrospective in Chicago was, or could have been, an excellent occasion for the US architectural community to make up its mind about what's to be done with this controversial Canadian architect. Mounted by the John David Mooney Foundation and private donors with financial backing from the Canadian consulate in Chicago, the show had everything going for it: a panoply of models, drawings and photographs, interestingly installed by the architect's son and partner, Bret Cardinal. It documented nearly 40 years of work, from Cardinal's school days at the University of Texas and the launch of his practice in Edmonton during the early 1960s through projects great and small, down to the present.

But any chance that this intensive survey would become important was undermined by the Canadian government's usual stinginess in matters of cultural promotion. The exhibition simply appeared from nowhere, without a fanfare loud enough to be heard over Chicago traffic, and without an important publication to demonstrate that, in sponsoring this show in the United States, the Canadian government was out to make a statement. Apart from the interest of artist and benefactor John David Mooney, whose not-for-profit foundation is notably



LEFT: Front Plaza, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec Photo Malak

BELOW: Interior view, St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Red Deer, Alberta Completed 1967



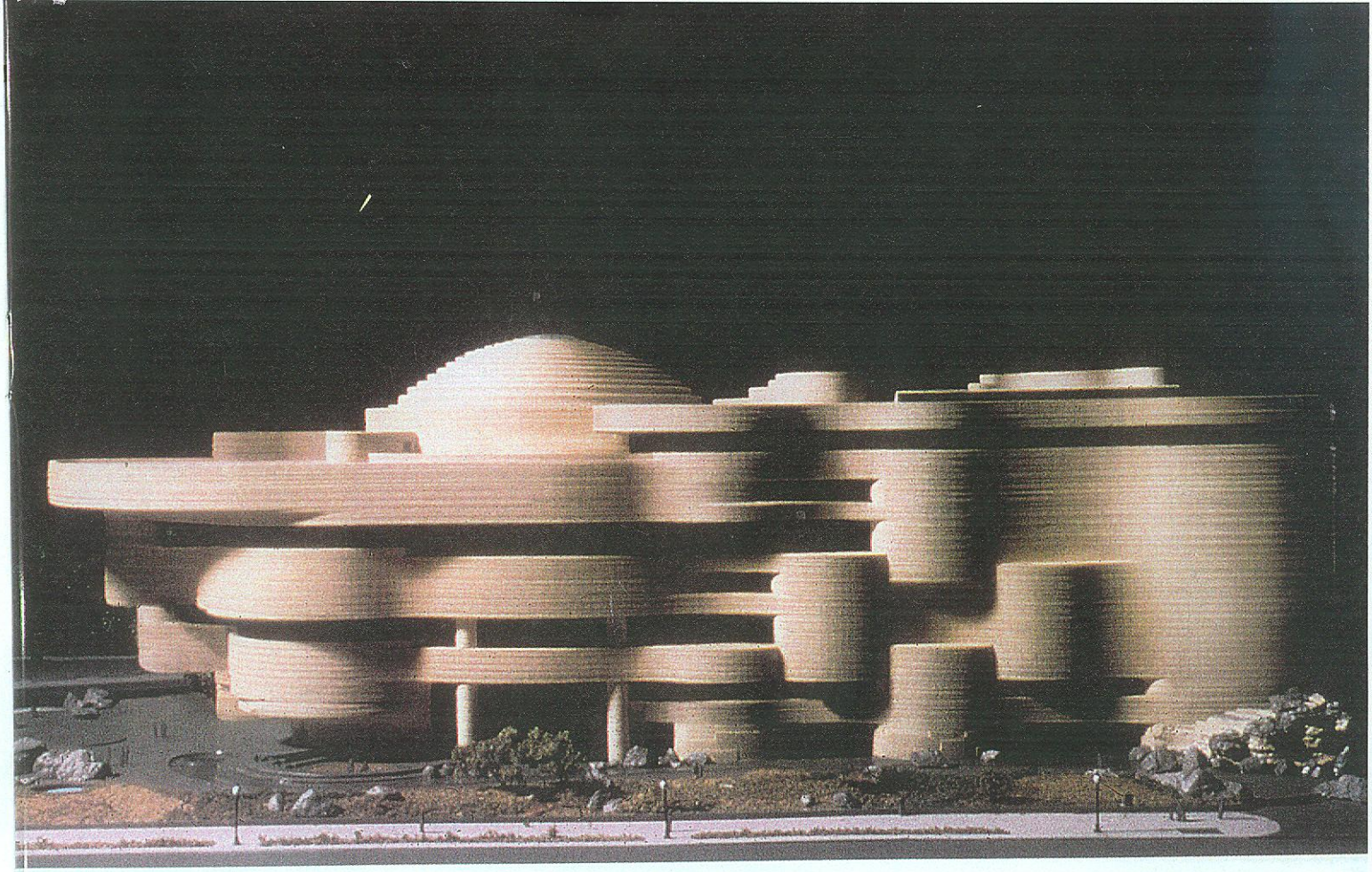
busy with creative people from abroad, nobody was working full-time on the ground to give Cardinal's presence in Chicago urgency and weight. The result was "Canadian culture" as the Department of External Affairs and Trade and do-gooders understand the phrase: an expanded tourist brochure, displaying picturesque things to visit and see in Canada, Land of Enchantment and the Fifty-Cent Dollar.

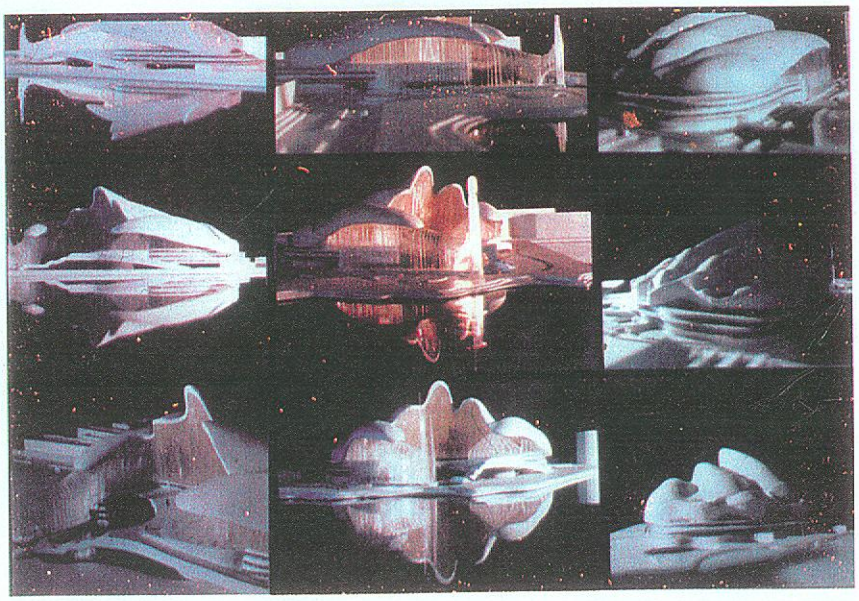
Given the fact that Douglas Cardinal is the Canadian whom Washington's cultural bureaucrats currently hate most, Canada could have used this opportune moment to become a useful nuisance, to slap down a challenge and provoke fresh discussion about the Smithsonian's treatment of Cardinal and its purloining of his design for the National Museum of the American Indian. Had some sparks been allowed to fly, they might have ignited a genuinely illuminating discussion about Cardinal, the sources of his forms and strategies, the significance of his travails and triumphs. Seeing that none of this was likely to happen, I decided to put the exhibition in Chicago to work in an experiment. The question I posed was a simple one. What on earth are we to do with Douglas Cardinal—if, for once, we consider his architecture exactly and exclusively as he wants?

To find out what he wants, I rang him up at his Ottawa office and asked him. Is he an architect whose work embodies aboriginal inspirations, notions or visions, as almost all his friends and foes maintain?

"No! No!" he told me. "They don't get it. I'm not. You don't call I. M. Pei's architecture Chinese. You can't call my architecture aboriginal. I'm descended from nomads. We have no architecture." If we must call his designs anything, and I suppose we must, Cardinal prefers that it be baroque, in the technical sense—stylistically akin to the work of the overhaulers of 17th-century Rome, Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Carlo Maderno and, above all, Francesco Borromini.

"The most important influences on my work have been my studies in classical music—I began taking piano lessons when I was six—then drawing the human figure. Then came baroque architecture," he said. "The most influential architect I have ever studied was Borromini." Cardinal's honours thesis





TOP: Model of the National Museum of the American Indian
Courtesy the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian

BOTTOM: Views from design proposal for the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 1991