

ACROSS THE NATION AND OUT OF THE TREES

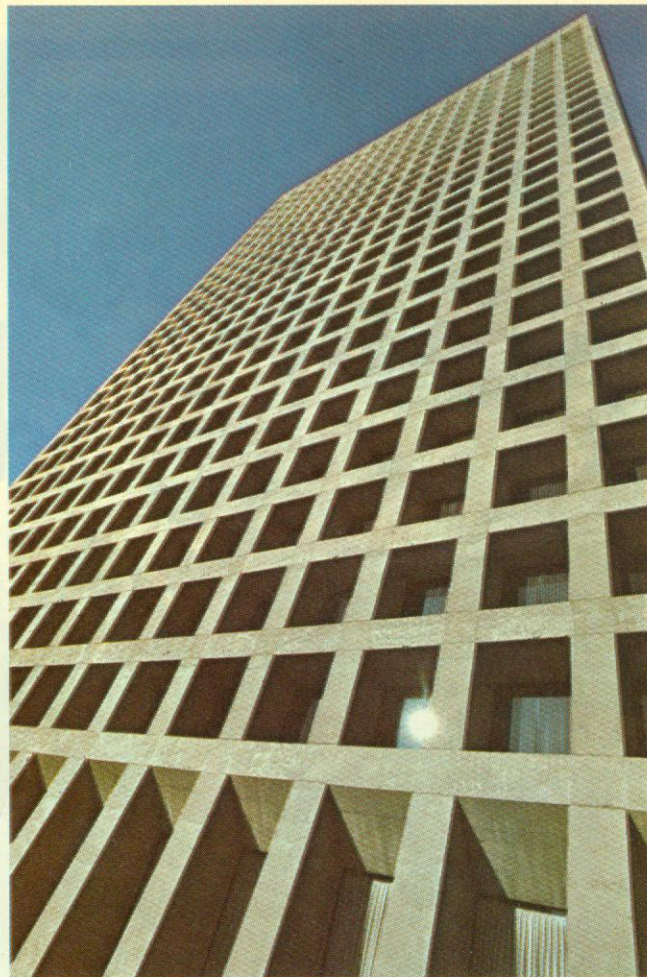
Aesthetics of the new Canadian architecture

BY HARVEY COWAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HORST EHRLICH

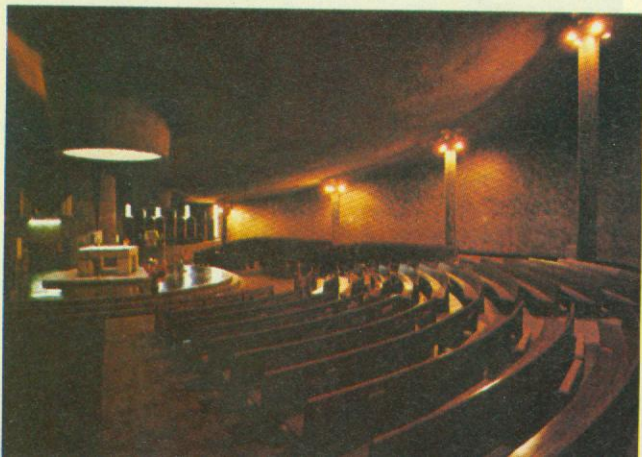
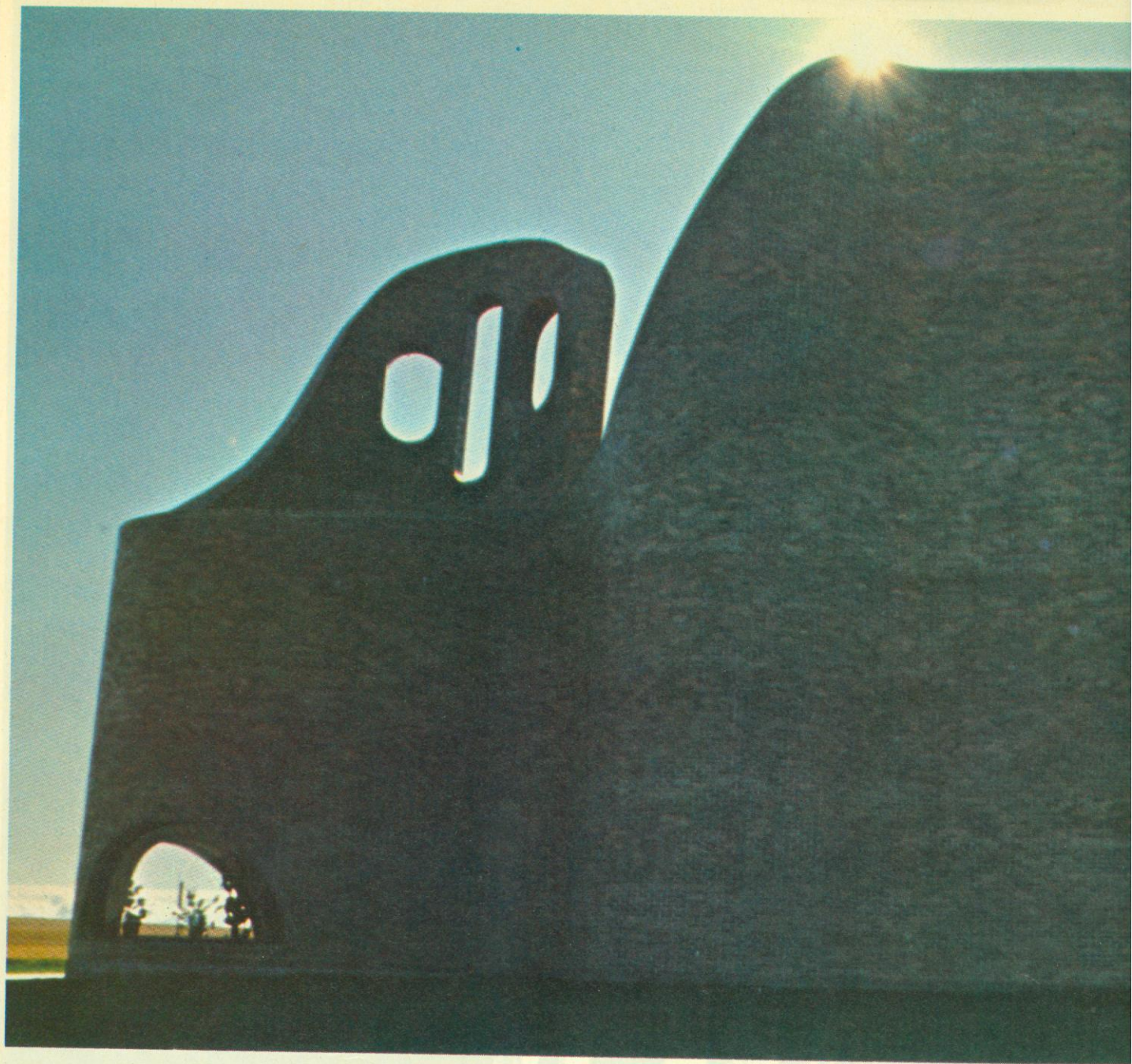
The trouble with most of us is we can't see the buildings for the trees. Our whole notion of beauty is trapped in the land — a jack pine standing in Algonquin Park, for example, or Tom Thomson's picture of one. A stand of BC forest, or an Emily Carr picture of one. To seek beauty we've always started by getting away from buildings. The weekend mentality. It's an old-style mentality and it has to do with enduring your weekdays and yearning for escape to the country. But life for most of us — and we may as well face it — is an urban event. We simply can't afford to keep on idealizing the big land and thinking of buildings as machines to live in, work in, and dream of dropping out of. Not if we want to have anything like creditable lives, we can't. In that light, then, architectural aesthetics can hardly be considered effete anymore; they can't be seen as expensive frills to be tacked on top of a design, like wallpaper. For architects, like artists, have the power to place you in just about any state of mind they wish (and society is so structured as to pretty well keep you there). So their aesthetics, or the ones imposed on them, are going to have — are already having — an awesome effect on the quality of Canadian life.

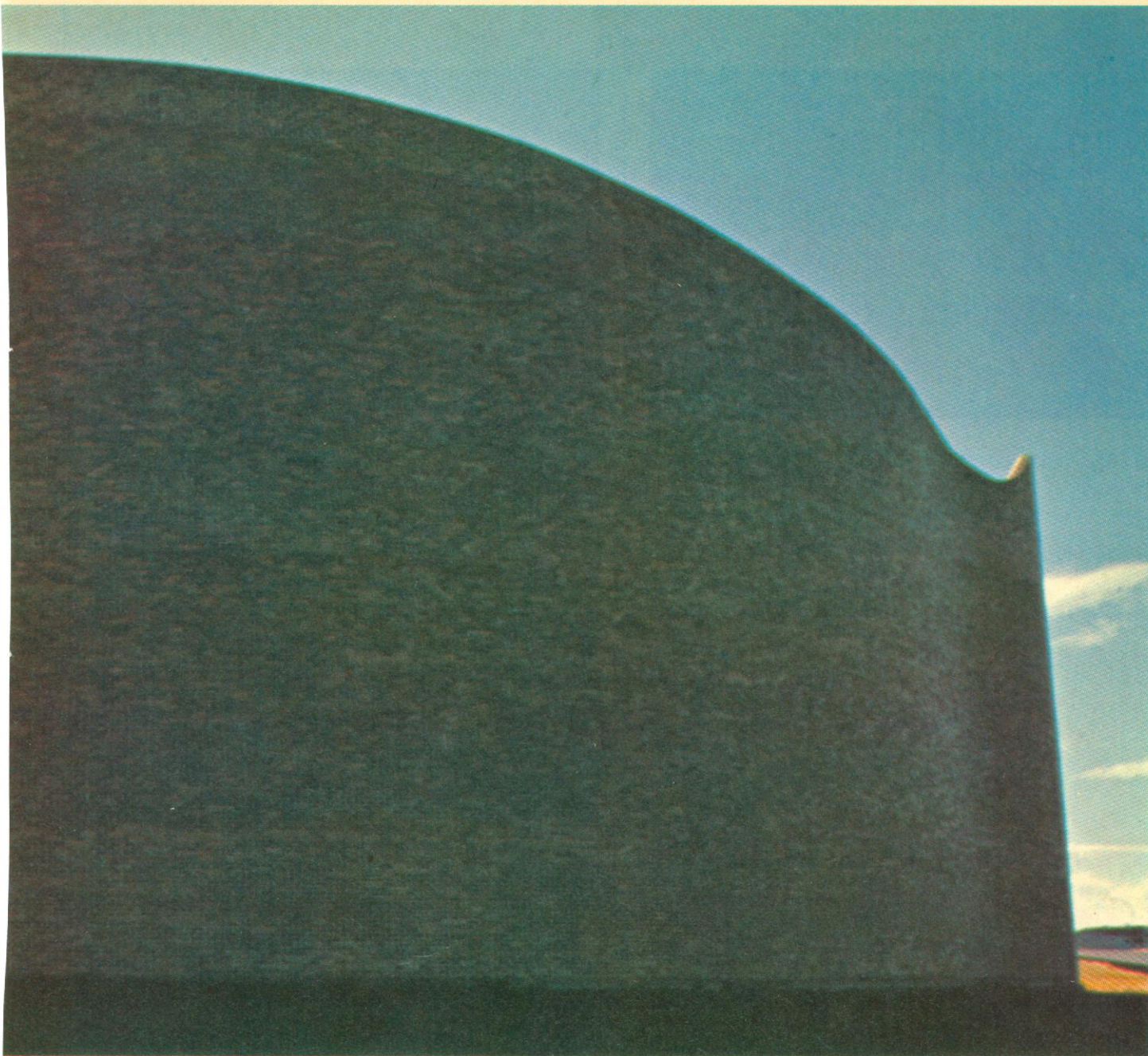
Now one of the great things about the quality of Canadian life is its regional variety. *One should never be where one does not belong*, Bob Dylan told us, and it's the same with buildings. They have to express the nature of where they are. And they're beginning to. Distinctive regional styles are emerging; the timber house at right, for instance, would be at home nowhere else but on the West Coast. This sense of place is inherent in the new aesthetics. It's an integral part of the solution the designers brought to the problem of how to build the house. And the way just such problems are being solved across the nation is the theme of these eight pages. For far too long Canadian buildings, especially institutional buildings, looked as if they were parachuted to their sites like some big-time political candidate. The new architecture is cutting loose from all that. Our buildings are becoming accurate reflections, not only of the way we live, but *where* we live. The examples we've chosen were not picked as the individual best in the country, rather as typical of the best. A lot of fine buildings — Habitat, Simon Fraser University, Place Bonaventure — had to be left out because they're too well known. Perhaps the most promising thing about the new Canadian architecture is that for every building chosen we could have substituted many others just as good.



The one Canadian architect who really has his aesthetic together is Arthur Erickson. Until his master plan for Simon Fraser University came along — backed up by Moshe Safdie's Habitat — most of our monumental buildings were the work of big guns brought in from America. But Erickson's vision showed us that Canadian talent could create the kind of prestigious architecture we always thought we had to import. With his MacMillan Bloedel building (above), I think he was trying to make a structure of great strength and elegance. And, of course, he's succeeded. His sense of siting and composition is unerring. The building is not only at home with Vancouver's mountain skyline, it's of a piece with it. The sort of fragile glassy tower you would expect to find in Toronto would never work here. The recessed texture of Erickson's design has a protective quality for the people who spend their day in the building. In a way, it's its own mountain. Architects: Erickson-Massey, Vancouver.

The concept of the West Coast timber house at right was to make it an extension of the environment — and vice versa. The designers have married natural and man-made elements using common materials. They have made sensitive use of the sloping site by putting the house on stilts that blend with the forest and give it a nice spidery quality. Both the site and the building are separate entities but they respect each other and enrich each other. The sum, then, is much greater than the parts. The house is the Hemsworth residence at Deep Cove, BC, about 10 miles northeast of Vancouver. Designers: Hassell, Griblin, West Vancouver.



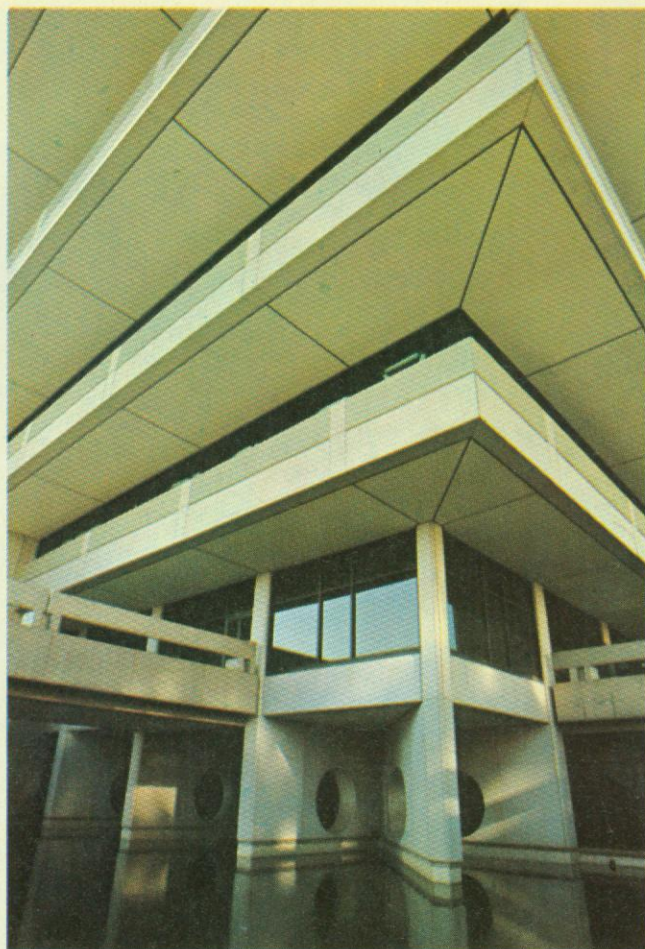


The church at left is a geometric tour de force, but its exterior motive is exactly the same as the one in the large photograph above: it reads as a strong organic form sitting there, snail-like, on the flat landscape. The interior motive, though, is just the opposite: the

same sense of mystery is evoked but instead of calm there's great excitement. The spiraling ceiling (above) represents a kind of continual reaching up. The church is *Paroisse du Precieux Sang* at St. Boniface, Manitoba. Architect: Etienne J. Gaboury, St. Boniface.



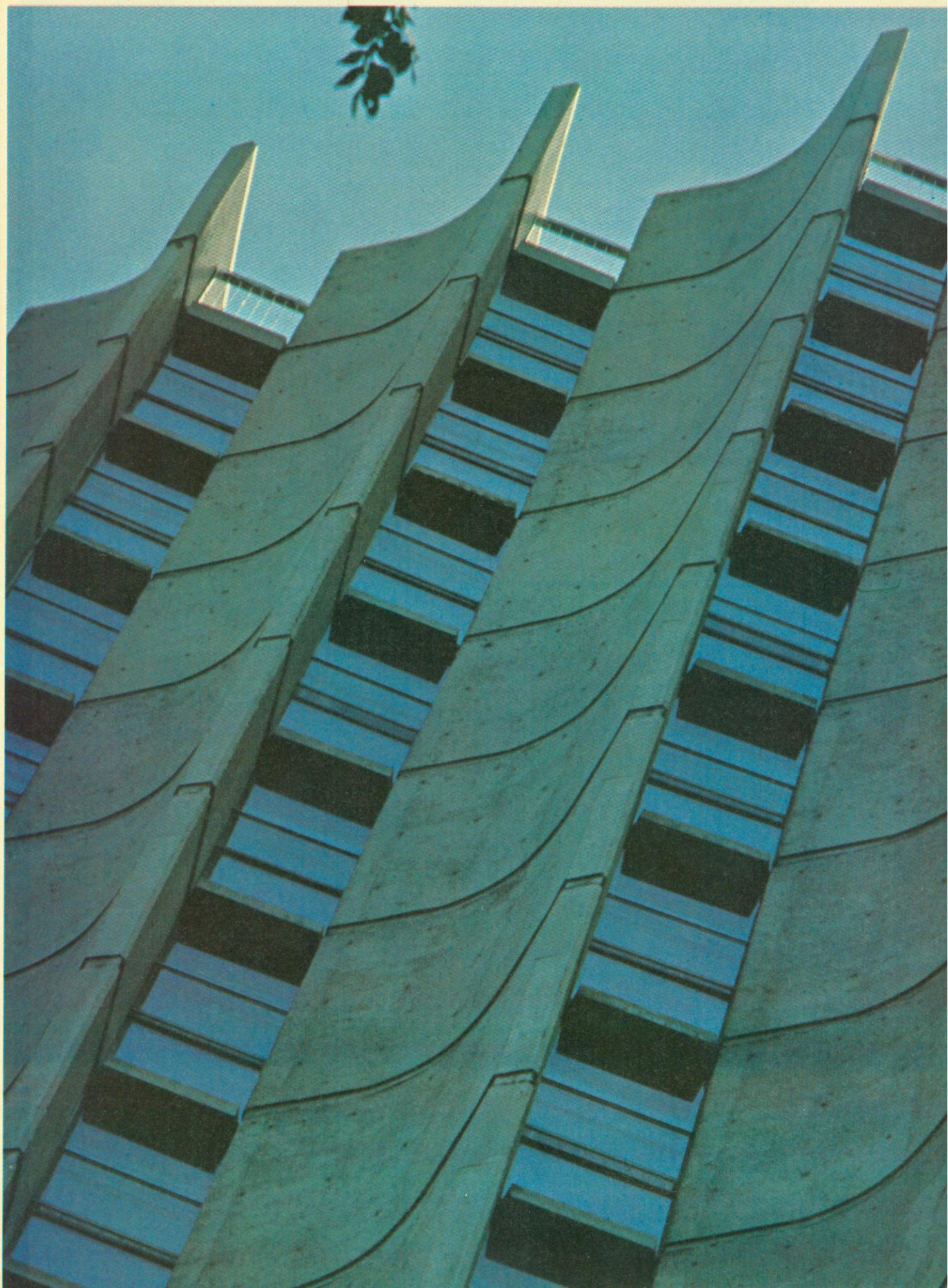
Now indoor swimming pools are usually just *that* — in the sense of shutting out the environment. They're often big boxes sitting on big square pools and, once inside, you could be almost anywhere in the world for all you can tell by looking around. The ambience is almost bureaucratic. But Coronation Swimming Pool in Edmonton (above) is altogether different. The feeling inside is free, no strings attached, like swimming outdoors. Really just there enjoying yourself. This is brought about by the irregular geometric form, the glass walls and the hung cable roof (made of cables that are allowed to droop naturally, giving you the impression of being in a tent). Given the need to make a large span space, it's a very inventive building. The structural possibilities of wood and glass have been exploited fully. *Architect: Peter Hemingway, Edmonton.*



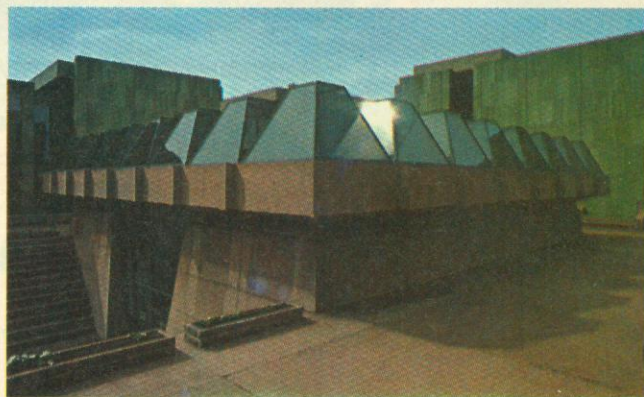
Toronto, as everybody knows and is probably tired of hearing by now, has more building going on in proportion to its population than any other city in the world. And most of it is big, institutional architecture. So perhaps the most important aesthetic requirement is to relate to human scale. Buildings like The Scott Library (above) at York University have to begin by acknowledging that they're there to handle large-scale interior space and enclose large numbers of people. But that doesn't mean they have to make everybody feel about two feet tall. And this big building doesn't. The stepping configuration visually connects the different levels and models the space to human scale. The interior features a skylighted courtyard that relieves the claustrophobic feeling you sometimes get in structures of this size. It opens the building up. *Architects: Shore and Moffat, Toronto.*

At right is another courtyard, but this time on a residential scale and it's perfectly suited to downtown Toronto. In a congested urban setting it's pointless to think in terms of the traditional front yard-backyard. Better to bring both into the middle of the house and thus gain more space and, just as important, more privacy. The aesthetic that architect Barton Myers, who owns the house, has put to work here expresses urban life very well: common industrial materials — exposed duct-work and such services as piping — are used both functionally and decoratively. It's an honest, if chic, aesthetic that comes out of the way you make the thing. Nothing is hidden and, in that respect, it's a building produced by the century. The concept is industrial, like a factory, where it costs too much to cover the walls and hide the services inside them. But in the case of this house, at 19 Berryman Street, it wasn't cheaper, because the services had to be of better material and much better organized. The "painting" on the wall is also part of the aesthetic; it's the hood from a 1968 Pontiac. *Architects: Diamond and Myers, Toronto.*





The University of Montreal Girls' Residence at left has been done almost as sculpture, and the sensibility at work is as Gallic as André Malraux. From a distance the building reads as a wedge, but as you get closer the scalloping of the solid vertical shafts adds an unexpected French flourish, which, in most other parts of the country, would be seen as strictly a frill. In Quebec, *grâce à Dieu*, such emotional considerations are an essential part of the architectural solution. And the scalloping makes for a lovely silhouette against the sky. Architects: Papineau, Gerin-Lajoie, LeBlanc, Montreal.



If the rest of Canada is somewhere between Consciousness II and III in terms of the new architecture, the Maritimes, largely because of slow economic development, have just reached Consciousness I. The two buildings above — Dalhousie University Arts Centre in Halifax and, below it, Confederation Centre in Charlottetown — are both contemporary institutional concrete structures and fine examples of their type. But the aesthetic is unspecific; they could just as well be in Tehran or Los Angeles. The designs are complex in a region where the people are straight-

forward and honest and their houses have no applied style. Though there are some projects in the works which show great promise of an indigenous architecture, the Maritimes still have a long way to go. Architects: C. A. Fowler, G. A. Bauld and Mitchell, Halifax (Dalhousie Arts Centre); Dimitri Demokopolis, Montreal (Confederation Centre).