

Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery; Waterloo, Ontario; Patkau Architects

Recently exhibited in London, Boston, Edinburgh and New York, the work of John and Patricia Patkau has come to stand for progressive Canadian architecture. The Patkaus, unlike some influential polemicists of recent years, have proposed no urbanistic models, but are best known for their interpretations of non-urban sites. And, in contrast to the careerist stream of American avant-garde academic discourse, which fosters the project as an illustration of theory from other disciplines, the Patkaus have claimed no philosophical or scientific godfathers. Yet their work has been seen as maintaining the critical edge essential to an ethical practice (a practice that pursues socially responsible values established independently of the market). With an *oeuvre* that is of remarkably consistent quality, yet fresh and inventive even as it develops recurring themes, the Patkaus have set an example in a time when the profession has seen both giddy heights and calamitous depths. Now that their work has been chosen to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale, it is crucial to undertake a more considered historical contextualization than has been done to date, and an appraisal of the broader theoretical implications of the projects through the lens of one of their most accomplished buildings.

The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery has had its share of tribulations. Awarded by a competition in 1986, the commission was then delayed for three years. By 1989, rising construction costs necessitated a one-third reduction of the project's area. Lost were the lecture theatre and glass-blowing studio, the latter essential to the original scheme's guiding ideas; a substantial redesign was inevitable.

The 1986 scheme had disposed two simple rectangular "shell buildings" at an angle to each other, and respectively parallel to an adjacent street and disused railway line. The irregular indoor space that resulted between them was to have been the site of a "metaphor of transformation": as clay and glass, the base materials, were worked into cultural artifacts, so their value was also transformed as determined by curatorial validation. Several "totemic elements," ambiguously both objects and rooms, violated the shell

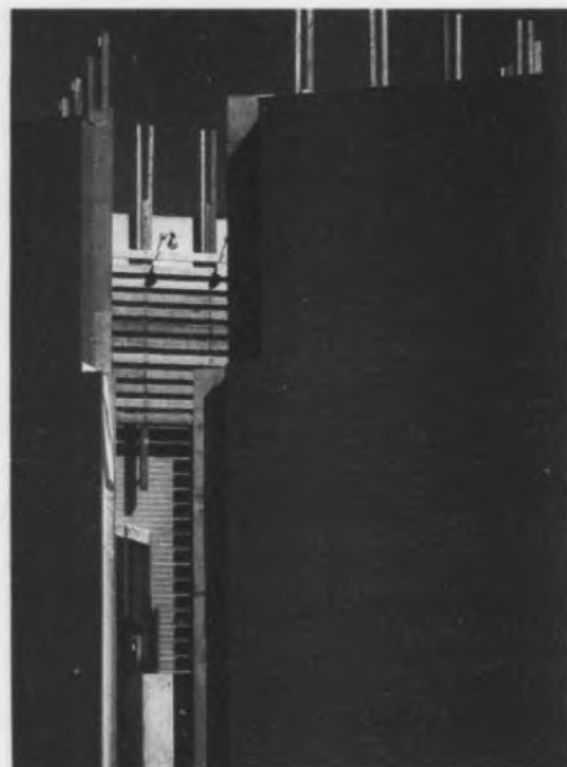
Gas-fired light columns demarcate the entry. These concrete totems are a literal allusion to the clay-firing and glass-blowing process.

Critique: **Tectonic Craftsmanship**

By Graham Owen

Faced with a world of increasing generality and homogeneity, the Patkaus celebrate differentiation in their design for a small gallery in Ontario. But do they go too far?





Top: detail, west elevation. Middle: the elaborate concrete, tile and wood surface of the tiny square sculpture courtyard. Above: steel canopy poised above the entry.

buildings and interstitial space.

The revised scheme, in effect, swung the two shell buildings parallel, compressing the interstitial space into a circulation band; its didactic intent was to be taken over by the gallery spaces themselves.

Several components did survive, however, from the earlier scheme. The three totemic object/rooms floated through the shell buildings, like walnuts in a cake mix, to assume new positions. An elongated steel canopy, fronted by free-standing gas-fired light columns (part of the original totemic array), still formed the public face of the building, striking a line between Nature (Silver Lake, a short distance to the north) and industrial Artifice (the Seagram complex to the south). From the building as it now stands, three significant and interwoven themes arise: *the pursuit of the real; architecture as an ethical practice; and tectonic authenticity and its implications.*

The real is an elusive thing. In the age of the image, architecture is no more immune to the effects of mediation than any other cultural practice: the photograph, the marketing theme, the television image all stand between us and the artifact. While the possibility of a completely unmediated experience (either in history or today) is debatable, the power of the image at the end of the 20th century is undeniable. Yet the Patkaus believe that the real can be recovered. As they express it, it is a matter of reasserting a balance between the ever-increasing generality of an artifactual world produced by industrial capitalism, and the particularity of a given place, time and program. In other words, architecture is an act of resistance to socio-cultural trends, and as such has a redemptive mission. In this sense, the Patkaus' work takes the form of a critical and ethical practice. They acknowledge the affinity of their ideas with Kenneth Frampton's notion of Critical Regionalism, but assert a greater concern with "international and local" scales than with the regional. Rejecting Frampton's valorization of "marginality," they are obviously architects with an active interest in history and in international work: homages to Kahn, Aalto, Stirling and Scarpa, as well as to recent Finnish, Californian and Japanese work are evident. At the same time, they are interested in intensifying the particular by means of the "given potential" of the project. At the Clay and Glass Gallery, this attitude finds expression in the building's response to its context, to its contents, and to its own compositional orders.

Neither urban nor suburban, the gallery's site is part of an ill-defined no-man's-land generated, in part, by Kitchener-Waterloo's one-way ring road system and the nearby Waterloo Town Square shopping mall. Elongating the main facade along Caroline Street as much as is practicably possible, the Patkaus have

attempted to provide a stabilizer for this amorphous condition. Symbolically, programmatically and urbanistically, the gallery relies upon the presence of the Seagram's distillery complex and museum to define a "new world piazza," a cultural forum that the Patkaus see as balancing the civic square at Waterloo's city hall. Development was anticipated across Caroline Street when the competition began; its indefinite postponement by a stagnant economy was not so significant a loss as the tragic destruction by fire of several Seagram's buildings. With less support from its neighbours than anticipated, the gallery does not have the overall mass to be as assertive as the site requires. Nonetheless, the deliberate ambiguity of the fire-columns (both industrial kilns and Classical colonnade), the dramatically big scale of the entrance canopy, and the continuity of the main facade's red brick wall still give the building a necessary *gravitas*.

Regarding its contents, the Gallery design takes on an equally activist role. No longer able to deploy their metaphor of alchemical transformation, the Patkaus chose instead to use the materiality and character of the exhibit spaces themselves as a means of provoking reflection upon the significance of their changing contents. Deliberately avoiding the discreet white spaces of earlier models, the architects have employed an industrial lexicon of steel, concrete (block and poured) and wood, whose grittiness and large scale is intended to stand in mutually intensifying contrast to the delicacy of the exhibits (ceramics, glass, stained glass and enamels). The assertiveness of this container, the "realism" of its exposed, articulate and legible construction, its reminiscences of places of production, together with the frequent views to the exterior, are intended to ground the works on display, and their assigned value, in a larger world. In this move to more subtle, less representational devices, the project's critical attitude to its contents has become less explicit, and is more susceptible to overshadowing by aesthetic agendas.

A discussion of the cultural status of contemporary craft would constitute an article in itself, but it seems fair to observe that the artifacts on display at the Clay and Glass Gallery occupy an ambiguous middle ground. Neither useful instruments nor fully pedigreed art, they run the risk of succumbing either to their author's whimsy or to the exchange-value of skilled hand-work in and of itself—in both cases, the risk of kitsch, the fate of the high-end knick-knack. The ability to avoid this risk lies partly with a discriminating curatorial sensibility. The Patkaus are subject, however, to a similar responsibility, as the Gallery has the capacity to be seen as a work of craft itself.

In their terms, the way to offset the homogeneity of an increasingly generalized world is through heterogeneity, achieved through dif-



A heavy triangular mass known as the Tower Gallery hinges prow-like off the north end of the uniform red brick envelope.

Site: Waterloo, Ontario near Silver Lake at the south edge of Waterloo Park, across from the Seagram Museum.

Project history: winner of a limited national competition in 1986, completed June 1993.

Program: gallery space for temporary and permanent exhibitions of ceramics, glass, stained glass and enamel.

Design: the gallery is organized in two parallel blocks within a red brick shell. The larger back volume (containing the exhibition area), is separated from the smaller one (containing support functions on two floors) by a narrow skylit slot containing stairs and mechanical services. Two platonic volumes float within the shell, one a square courtyard gallery which serves as a light well and divides support facilities from the main gallery; the other a concrete cylinder which contains an intimate small works gallery on the ground floor and a board room above. A third volume, a triangular tower, hinges prow-like off the north edge of the brick shell. Building materials—concrete block walls, steel beams, wood decks, cement floors—are expressed to reveal the layers of construction.

Area: 16,000 s.f.

Cost: \$4.9 million

Prime consultant: Patkau Architects

Design team: John Patkau, Patricia Patkau, Michael Cunningham, Tony Griffin, Peter Suter

Associate architects: Mark, Musselman, McIntyre, Combe Architects

Structural: C.Y. Loh Associates

Mechanical: Coanda Engineering/Keen Engineering

Electrical: R.A. Duff/Coanda Engineering

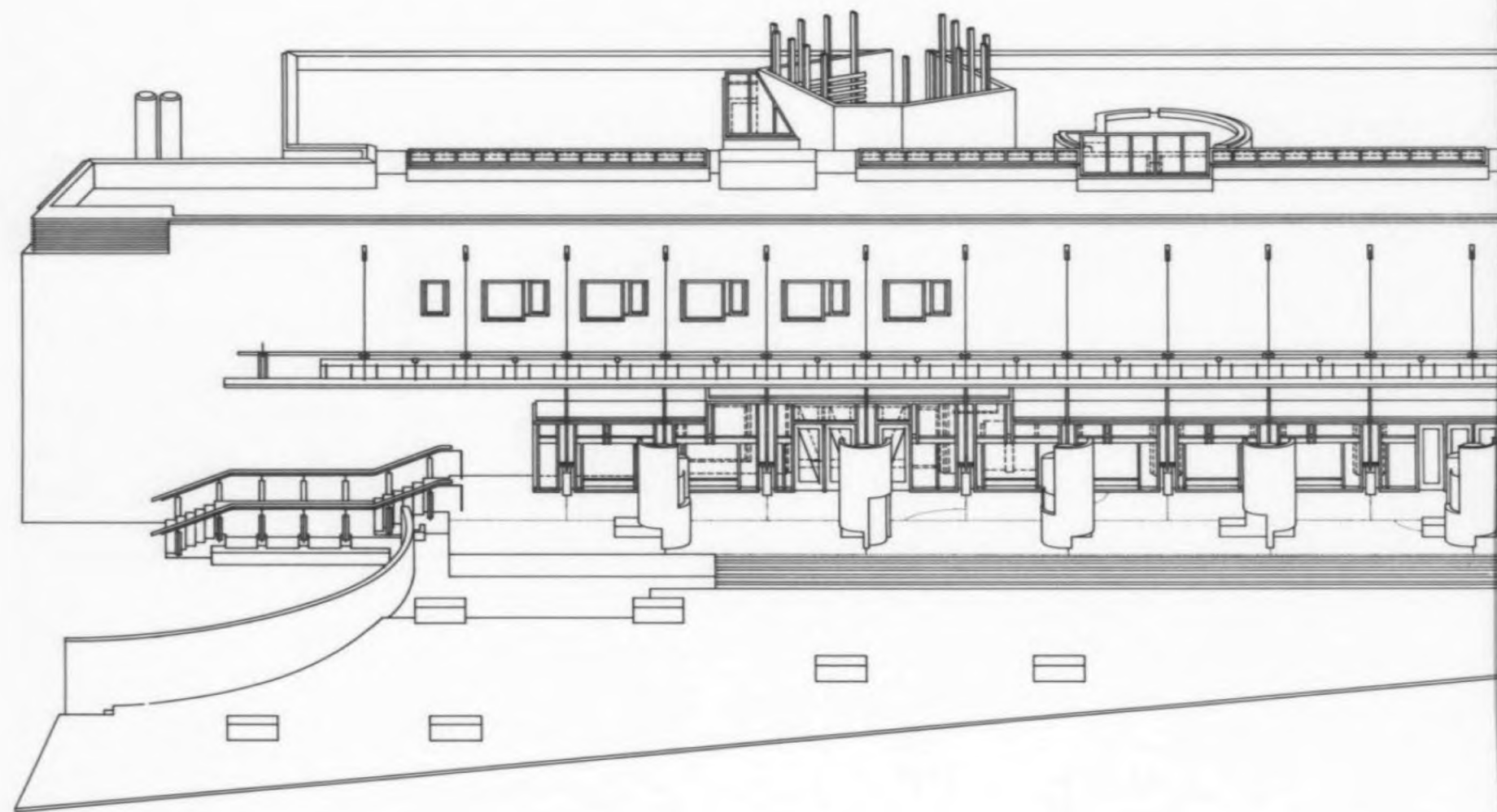
Lighting: Gabriel Design

Landscape: City of Waterloo

Contractor: Ball Brothers

Photography: Steven Evans (pp. 19, 20 bottom, 21), James Dow (pp. 23, 25), Patkau Architects (p. 20 top and middle)

The square, cylindrical and triangular small galleries offset the relative homogeneity of the two bars of "shell" space. Layered construction, and variations in repetitive elements such as the forecourt columns, are also carefully orchestrated to provide differentiation.



ferentiation within the building's programmatic and tectonic orders. At the gallery, this differentiation takes several forms. Most conspicuously, the strong presence and individuality of the totemic elements—the cylindrical Small Works room, the triangular Tower Gallery, and the square Courtyard Gallery (a memorable rendition of the Kahnian "light bottle")—are intended to offset the more repetitive nature of the "shell" spaces. At smaller scales, the hierarchical articulation of the building's layered construction, and the variations within repetitive elements such as the forecourt columns, are directed to the same end.

But how much differentiation is too much? Can there be an excess of conspicuous tectonic craft? For John Patkau, this is a matter of context: the more homogeneous the setting, the greater the onus on the new building

to compensate. Still, this is one place where the Patkaus take risks: the shell spaces, for example, while certainly of more constant section than, say, the linear spaces of Seabird Island School, are hardly reticent. Their contrast with the totemic elements is perhaps less than intended; in a building to whose detailing this much care has been devoted, with this athletic a steel structure, and where a concern for materiality has been deployed throughout, all the parts are speaking.

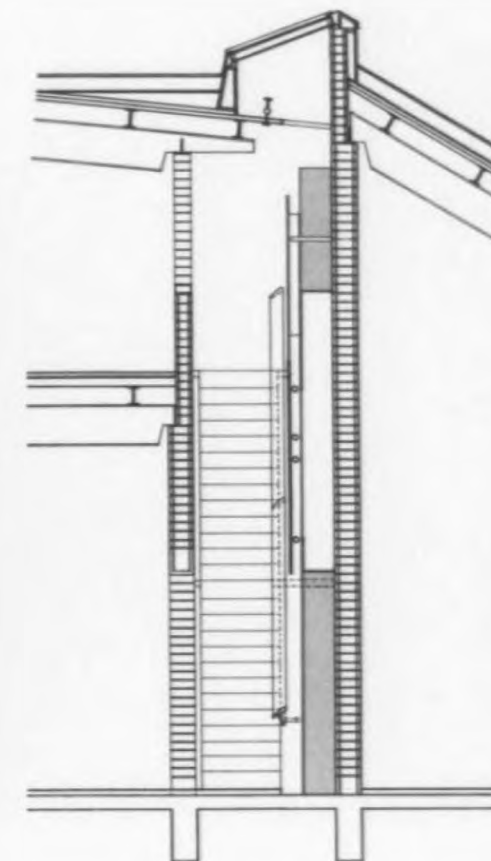
In what context should the project be assessed? We have not seen the Patkaus' response to a highly particularized setting since the minimalist Pyrch residence of 1983. The Clay and Glass Gallery, as a corrective or compensation for the products of commercial practice in the generic North American semi-urban realm, is welcome in its loquacity. Taken

as a general model for building, however, could it lead to logorrhoea?

There are notable differences between the Clay and Glass Gallery and other Patkau projects. In the 1986 Appleton House—considered by its authors the testing ground for the idea of totemic elements—the giant "tree-column" intended to offset generic drywalled space appears itself to be clad in gypsum board. Here, heterogeneity is achieved by differentiation of form, scale and conceptual function, but limited by continuity of material. Similarly, Andrew Gruft noted in a review of the Seabird Island School (*The Canadian Architect*, January 1992) the unfortunate "muffling" of that building's powerful construction by internal insulation and drywall. In that case, budget limitations also limited material differentiation. The unbuilt Kustin House pro-



Above: detail at top of stair showing careful assemblage of materials: fir plywood panels, fir handrails, and perforated aluminum screens are fixed on painted steel channels. Above right: section through spine showing the skylight slot which brings natural light to the interior of the gallery.



ject of 1987 promised, and the recent Barnes residence may have delivered, a more satisfying orchestration of generic to particular in form and material.

But underlying these concerns are broader historical and theoretical issues. If the Patkaus' selection for the Biennale elevates their work to "official" status, it also acknowledges the affinity of the *oeuvre* with tendencies elsewhere. The recent travelling exhibition "Construction Intention Detail," curated by Harvard graduates Kevin Alter and Mark Gilbert, and with critical commentary by GSD faculty member Wilfried Wang, continues the desire of another faction in the American academy to legitimate a paradigm of tectonic authenticity. This paradigm offers a position of resistance against several other tendencies, both historical and current: the exhausted and

unpopular reductionism of late corporate Modernism; the commodified and superficial image-making of commercial Post-modernism; and the recent inclination of theoretical discourse to seek direct inspiration for architecture in other disciplines (literary theory, philosophy, the physical sciences, etc.).¹

What has not yet been addressed in this pursuit of a new paradigm of tectonics is its re-presentation of themes familiar from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the Patkaus' *oeuvre*, and in similar work in North America and Europe, issues are raised from Art Nouveau, the Arts and Crafts movement and the critical stance of Adolf Loos. In Arts and Crafts work there was an interest in directness in making, in the domestic realm as a primary locus of experimentation, and in establishing explicit affinities with the (non-

urban) site and natural forms. In pursuing these, there was also a desire to resist commercialized popular taste and its allegedly deleterious social effects: "Honest craftsmanship...could lay the basis for an ethically responsible collective life."²

Here lies the connection to Art Nouveau, and to perhaps the greatest risk that this kind of work entails, if extended uncritically. If all parts of a building have been rendered assertive, and if all share in this moral mission, then all parts (furniture, flatware, perhaps even clothing) are subject to the same high purpose; "life as a work of art" could ultimately be the result, a kind of exclusivist design correctness where even the client's slippers must be designed by the architect to suit the room in which they are worn, and their art collections edited to suit the house. It was Loos

Second floor plan

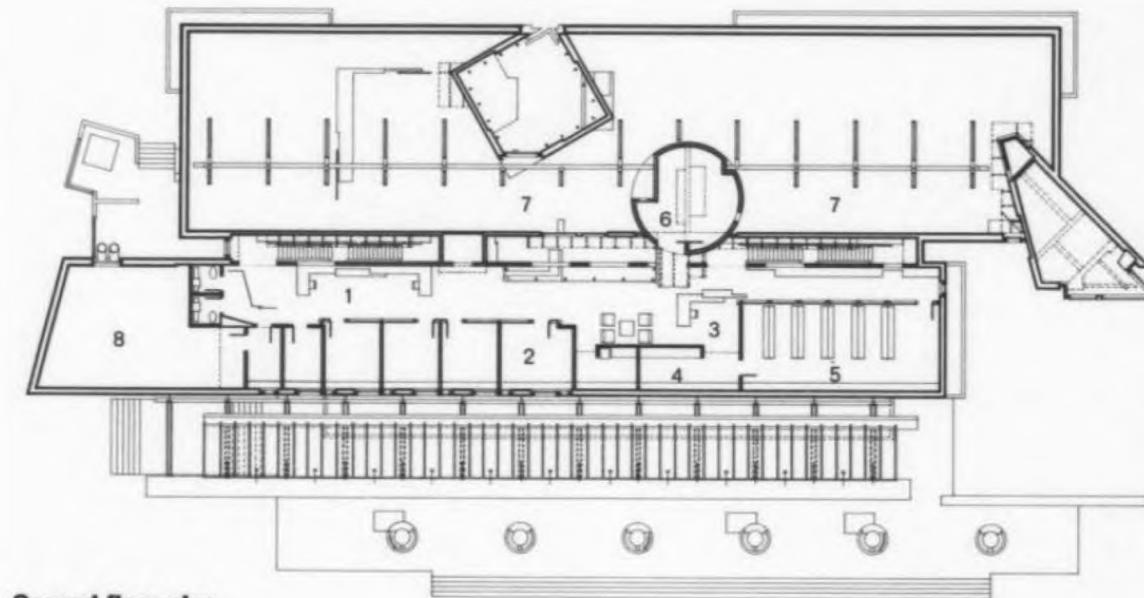
1. reception
2. offices
3. librarian
4. workroom
5. library/archives
6. reading/boardroom
7. open to below
8. mechanical



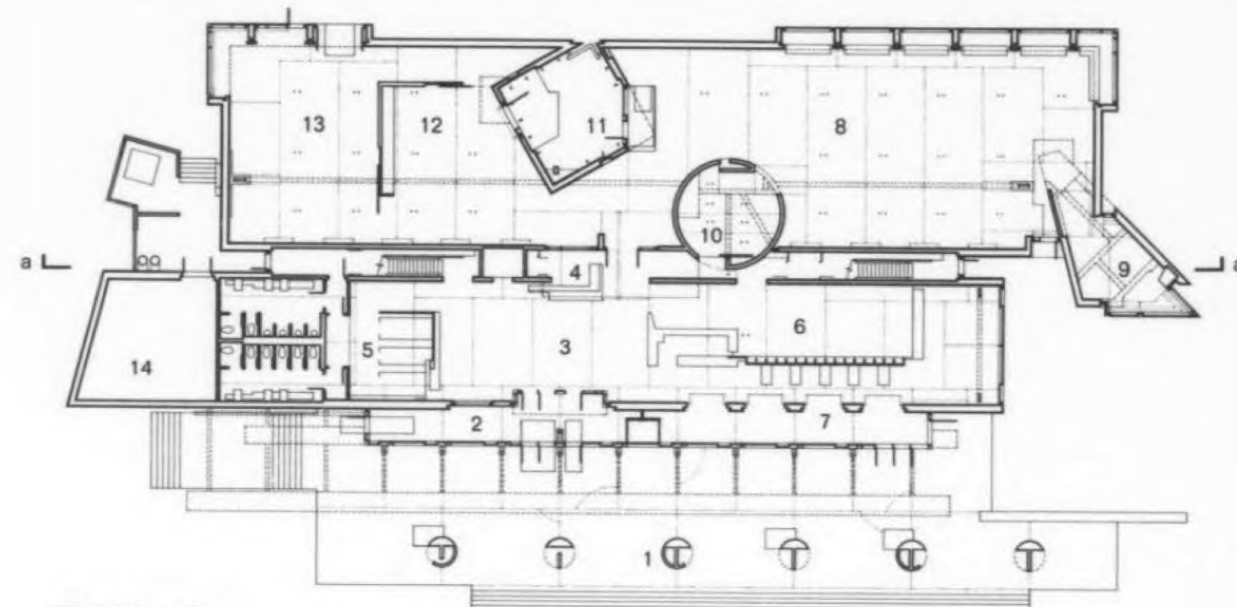
Section a-a

Main floor plan

1. gas-fired light columns
2. entry vestibule
3. lobby
4. information/tickets
5. cloakroom
6. gift shop
7. tea room
8. main gallery
9. tower gallery
10. small works gallery
11. courtyard gallery
12. demonstration/adjudication
13. support facilities
14. mechanical/electrical

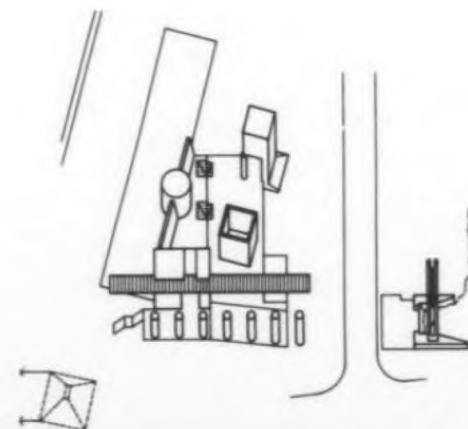


Second floor plan



Main floor plan

0 5m



1986 competition scheme



Site plan



Above left: view from main gallery past the courtyard gallery (at right) toward main entrance. Above right: natural light is admitted to the interior of the building by a linear skylight above the central spine. Left: main exhibition gallery. Above: glazed entrance vestibule.

who satirized this tendency of Art Nouveau in his "Story of a Poor Rich Man" of 1900, and Loos' houses were intended to accommodate a more heterogeneous mixture of objects. Significantly, it was Robert Venturi who took up the banner of inclusivism and accommodation of popular taste in more recent times, and in part it is to Venturi's illegitimate progeny that tectonic authenticity is intended to provide resistance. Venturi's ideas on scale are evident in earlier Patkau work, perhaps transmitted through Patricia Patkau's Yale studies in the late 1970s. But Venturi's critique suggests another risk in recent Patkau projects: that tectonic articulation for its own sake—where "things stand for themselves"—could lead to a fetishization of construction (a fetish, as Freud observed, receives undue attention because of the lack of something else).

But to encounter, in these times, a building where all the parts do have something to say is rare indeed. What the gallery, and the Patkaus' work in general, speak about is the need for architecture. The gallery's director, Suzanne Greening, points out the appropriateness of the building's assertive tactility not only to the Gallery's informal in-house demonstrations, but also to their "touching allowed" policy. Public response to the building has, according to Greening, been warm (apart from some surprise at the late-appearing forecourt columns, still awaiting their animating infill through a public art competition). Some find the galleries, intended to accommodate a range of scales, to lack intimacy for the smallest works; a repertoire of manipulable down-scaling devices is conspicuous by its absence. Still, the conventional—that is, culturally mediated—responses that one might expect to such "unfriendly" materials as steel and concrete (associated with utilitarian spaces) are offset by the material juxtapositions chosen by the Patkaus—wood-to-steel and wood-to-concrete, in particular. One suspects that the true craftsmanship of the gallery (at a material and an intellectual level) does make a significant impression upon the visitor. If so, a broader aspiration of the Patkaus' critical and ethical endeavour becomes apparent. Bringing site, program and tectonics into the foreground of public consciousness, it might even create an informed constituency for architecture again. This enterprise, though still young, has already achieved remarkable, and exemplary, results. ●

1. See Gilbert and Alter, "The Sufficiency of Architecture," *Construction Intention Detail: Five Projects from Five Swiss Architects* (Zurich: Artemis, 1994), pp. 6-7.

2. Neil Harris, "North by Midwest," *Design in America: the Cranbrook Vision 1925-1950* (Detroit: Institute of Arts, 1983), pp. 32-59.

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