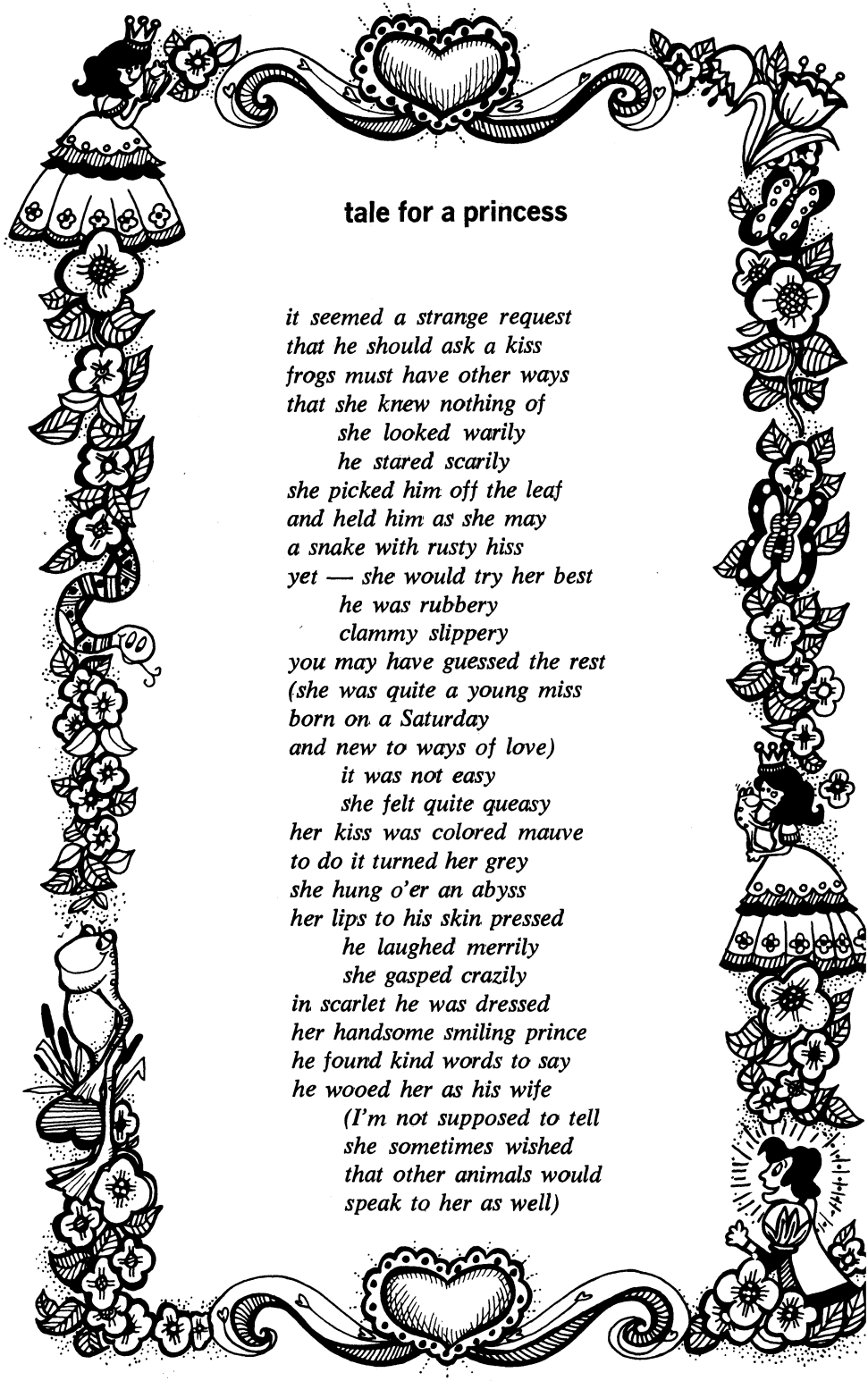


tale for a princess

it seemed a strange request
that he should ask a kiss
frogs must have other ways
that she knew nothing of
she looked warily
he stared scarily
she picked him off the leaf
and held him as she may
a snake with rusty hiss
yet — she would try her best
he was rubbery
clammy slippery
you may have guessed the rest
(she was quite a young miss
born on a Saturday
and new to ways of love)
it was not easy
she felt quite queasy
her kiss was colored mauve
to do it turned her grey
she hung o'er an abyss
her lips to his skin pressed
he laughed merrily
she gasped crazily
in scarlet he was dressed
her handsome smiling prince
he found kind words to say
he wooed her as his wife
(I'm not supposed to tell
she sometimes wished
that other animals would
speak to her as well)

Mark Yanchus

A School for the Future

Talk about educational change nowadays seems commonplace. Criticism is constantly levelled at today's schools. The latest trends in educational thinking even seem to suggest that the best place to learn is anywhere but in a school. Thus, ideas for the future range from "schools" in which education takes place in the offices and workshops of the community (where the real-life application of what the student is learning can be seen and where the teaching is done by a community member actively involved in the subject), to scenarios of students sitting at home and learning by plugging-in to a central computer through an advanced communication system. In these dreams, the school as a building becomes obsolete.

Perhaps in the distant future these "schools" will indeed be the norm but, in the meantime, there are still many people who see the need (or desire) for schools as buildings where a large number of students learn a wide variety of academic and non-academic subjects.

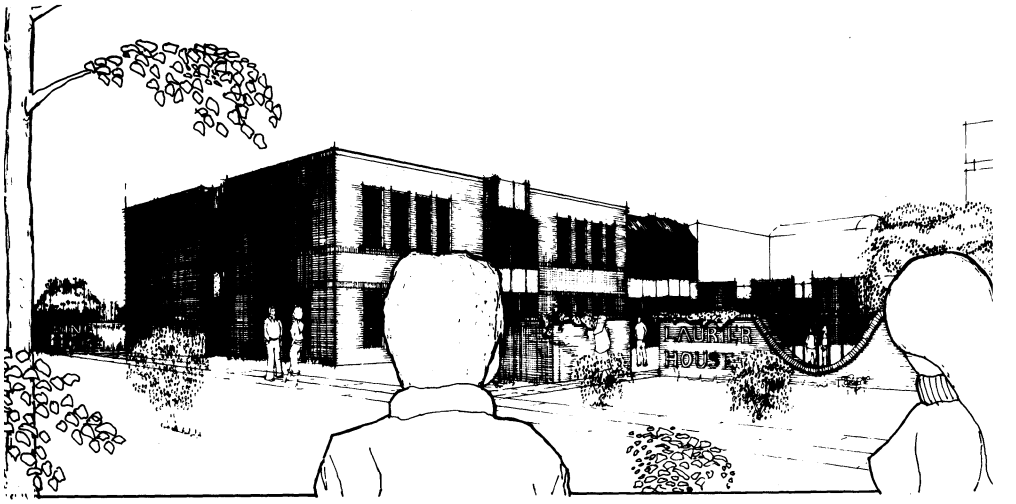
What follows here is a design for a high-school of approximately 2000 students. The project, done as a final year assignment in the McGill School of Architecture, was based on the requirements for a typical high school program as we now know it. While the design is not revolutionary in nature, it incorporates some ideas on how to avoid the "factory" syndrome, and how to take account of the social, psychological and scholastic needs of the next generation.

Although the majority of criticisms of today's educational system deals with curriculum and teaching methods, some critics attack the building itself — "It is too inflexible in adapting to changes in teaching methods" or "It is too large and impersonal." It is the size which causes students to feel lost in the organization, anonymous to teachers, principals and peers. One educational solution to the problem of size is a decentralized system of administration: the house system,

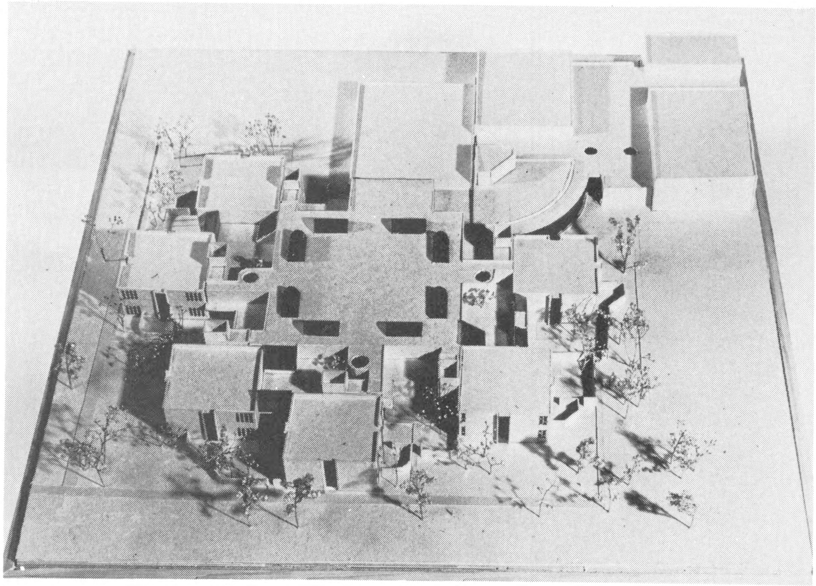
which breaks the school down into smaller groups of students and teachers. Each group is "assigned" to a physical territory within the school building to give each an identity as a unit.

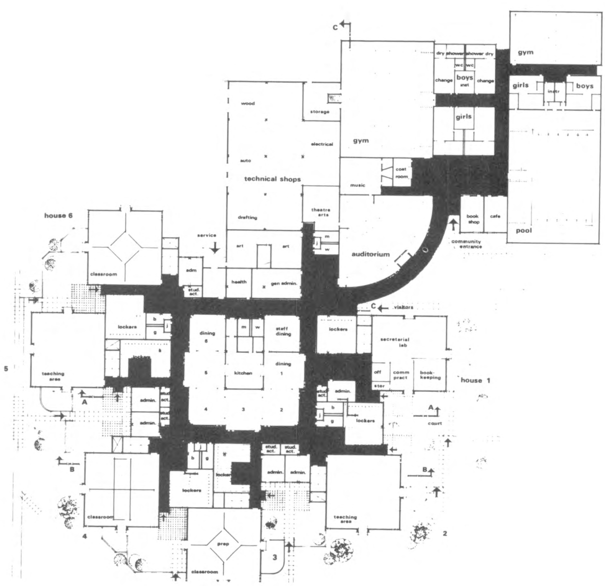
While many schools have been designed to operate on the house system, the usual approach has been to construct one large institutional building but to divide it into house "zones" inside. It is almost impossible to distinguish these schools from "normal" non-house schools. In the interior, the only features identifying the various houses along a corridor are the different colors of their lockers, walls, doors, and/or furniture, although sometimes the houses occupy different floor levels. From the outside, the school is still a large institutional building. Recently, attempts have been made to break down the exterior scale of the school also. This is important for the first impression one gets of a building is obviously from the outside.

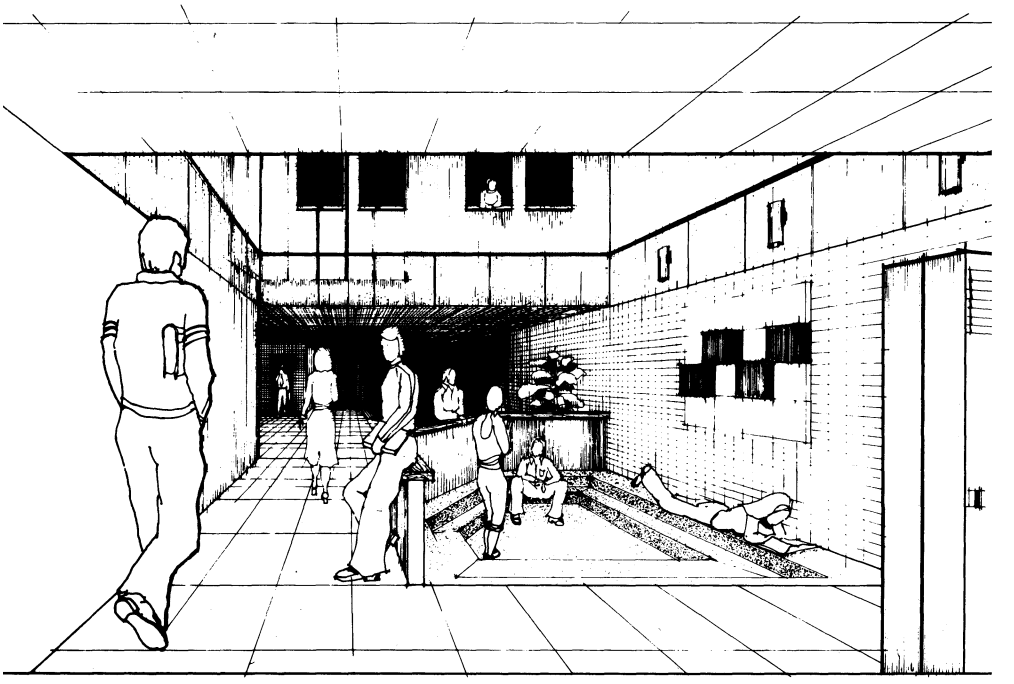
In the project described here, the intention was to make the house breakdown more visible from the exterior of the school in order to reduce the apparent size of the institution. The aim was also to define more clearly the territory of each house so that students could easily identify their particular part of the overall building. To achieve these ends, the plan of the building was arranged so that the school organization was reflected in the physical arrangement. This simplified the layout of what is a very large and complex structure, thereby eliminating one of the features which often makes large buildings oppressive: the incomprehensibility to the user of the overall layout.



Mark Yanchus







There are six houses in this particular scheme, each with a student population of three hundred. Physically, the houses "pinwheel" out as wings from a central core which contains common facilities: the cafeteria on the ground floor and the library on the upper floor. Each "house" comprises a two-level teaching "pod" (with an area equivalent to four classrooms and a teacher workroom per floor) located as far as possible from the main circulation corridor, and a separate house locker area, student activities room, administrative office and guidance room, all situated adjacent to the main corridor at ground level. Each house is separated from adjacent houses by courtyards.

The main corridor surrounds the central core and joins all the houses, serving also as a route to other common facilities not located in the core. These include the gyms, a pool, and an auditorium located in the "community" wing. Shops and special activities rooms are together in the "technical" wing. From the outside this school looks like a group of buildings along a street, not one large, overwhelming institutional mass.

One of the challenges to the architect was to make each house a distinct "territory" to which the student could feel attached.

The house should feel like home and its boundaries should be well defined. In this school, the house territory extends outside the building to include an exterior courtyard which serves as a recreational area, teaching space, and meeting place for the students. It includes bicycle racks and seating. Students enter their houses directly from the courtyard, through a distinct house entrance, not by finding their way along a corridor from a main entrance. Before even entering the school the student can identify his or her particular house. This gives the house a street address which, in turn, gives it an identity.

On the interior, the house territory is marked by an entrance from the main corridor. Circulation between the houses takes place through this main artery. The corridor is treated as an outdoor space similar to the corridor in a large shopping mall. Exterior finishes are used, it is naturally lit by several skylights, and there is room for plants and benches. The corridor is different from the houses, it is a "public" place where students from all houses can meet and talk. There is also a central meeting place in each house. This is intended as a lounge area where the students of one house can meet casually before and after class or during breaks. It is located as part of the house corridor adjacent to the locker bays where it will be well-used, recognizing the social nature of the corridors and locker areas in schools.

This approach to designing the school did require some sacrifices — notably the area of exterior walls was increased. In any "house" school, some additional facilities are required, due to decentralization which inevitably increases the area of administrative offices, student recreation space and the like. However, the decentralization helps to "personalize" the school and its administration. This is a cost that has to be borne in creating a school that is more like a home and less like a factory, a school for today that will still be viable for the future.