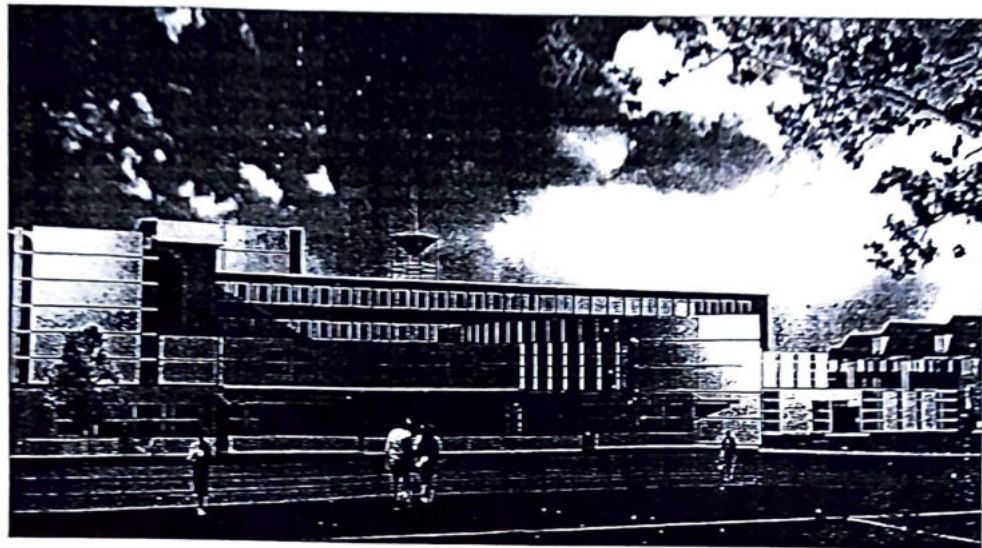


# The quality of light

Architect Rocco Maragna designs the city's newest school



by Mark Curtis

Toronto architect Rocco Maragna makes a pilgrimage to the Pantheon in Rome at least once a year. "When I walk in there I get goosebumps," says Maragna. "It's like falling in love and never falling out of love."

The 53-year-old architect says his own design palette emphasizes space, light, and colour. His latest project, a collaboration with Global Architects, is a renovation/addition to Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School, the city's first new high school in several years.

The Italian-born architect won the Catholic School Board contract in September 1998 and the official opening is slated for this September. Situated on the former grounds of the Toronto Hunt Club and an army cadet college at Avenue Road and Roselawn Avenue, McLuhan will total 140,000 square feet when complete, twice the size of the old army school. A seniors' condo is also part of the development but a construction date has not been set.

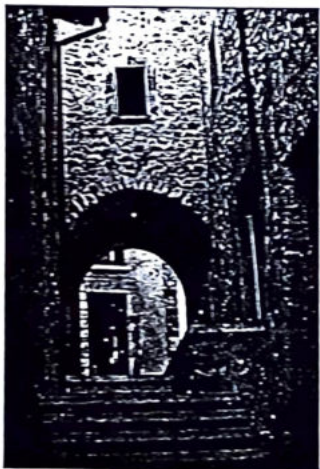
Grade 9 and 10 students are already studying in a completed section of the school. The board plans to have 1,000 students, grades 9 through 12, on site by fall 2001. As befitting a school named after the Canadian media guru, Marshall McLuhan students will be carrying laptops, not textbooks. Welcome to the future.

Maragna's redesign removed a portion of the former college to create a landscaped amphitheatre-like entrance on Avenue Road. The centerpiece of McLuhan will be a two-storey atrium surrounded by a chapel, gymnasium, cafeteria/auditorium, and school offices. The new glass and metal-panelled building is Maragna's vision of the famous McLuhan global village.

After graduating from the University of Toronto's school of architecture in 1971, Maragna continued his studies the following year in Venice. He says he found most Italian architecture of that time to be complacent. He did, however, find inspiration in the work of American architect Louis Kahn, which reinforced his ideas on the use of light.

"It's not just the quantity of light that's important," says Maragna. "It's the quality."

Standing in an unnaturally quiet school



Above: Maragna with mother and daughter, Medieval town restoration, McLuhan School.

corridor on March break, the architect uses an analogy to illustrate. "If you were standing in a room full of naked bodies, but one body was partially clad, he or she would be the one who would catch your eye."

Maragna emigrated with his family from Vittorio, Abruzzo in 1958 and he's proud of his roots but he admits an ambivalence towards Italian design. He says Italians are great at industrial design but tend to be smug about their architecture. Given their rich tradition, perhaps justifiably so, he says.

In the summer of 1964, Maragna was hired as an office boy by architect Ron Thom, whom he calls his "first mentor." He says Thom was an extremely intuitive man who was very attuned to Italian design thinking even though he had never been to Italy.

Professionally, at least, Maragna feels foremost a Canadian. "Canada gave the people of my generation the opportunity to see things through very open eyes," he says. He maintains an office in Rome and says Canadian architects enjoy an excellent reputation in Italy. Early in his career, he helped with the reconstruction of housing in the Udine region, after the 1976 earthquake.

He has also served as a consultant on the restoration of a medieval walled town in his birthplace of Abruzzo. More recently, Maragna contributed ideas for the new Canadian embassy in Cairo, which is still under construction.

Italy can be insular, says Maragna, but Italians should look to their own history for a lesson on how to thrive in the new global economy. Hadrian's villa is a great example of ideas taken from other cultures and transformed into a thoroughly Italian style, he says.

Maragna is still in awe of the legendary individual style of Italians. "They have a comportment and grace which seems to be a natural trait," he explains.

Asked if he considers himself a modernist, Maragna gently replies that labels are best left to the critics. "We are all contemporary to our time. We learn from the past and project into the future by using the present as a vehicle." ♦

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