

DIFFICULT HARMONIES

AN AMBITIOUS WINNIPEG LANDMARK, THE CANADIAN MUSEUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS OFFERS A CHOREOGRAPHED ARCHITECTURAL JOURNEY THROUGH THE COMPLEX TOPIC OF HUMAN RIGHTS.

PROJECT Canadian Museum for Human Rights, Winnipeg, Manitoba
ARCHITECTS Design Architect—Antoine Predock; Executive Architect—Architecture49 Inc. (formerly Smith Carter Architects & Engineers Inc)
TEXT Lisa Landrum
PHOTOS Tom Arban

Justice has long been sought at the site of a gnarly rock. With its jagged mountain of Tyndall limestone rising formidably from the banks of Winnipeg's Red and Assiniboine Rivers, the newly opened Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) resembles an ancient geological formation on par with the Areopagus, mythic first court of the Greeks, while simultaneously launching a phantasmagorical tower more Tatlin than Babel. A bold addition to Winnipeg's cityscape, it appears as an ominous Mont Saint-Michel from the northeast, and an anachronistic homage to *glasarchitektur* from the southwest. Whatever else this Museum may evoke, its appearance—however hyperbolic and controversial—tells only part of its story.

Conceived in 2000 by the late philanthropist and media magnate Israel Asper, the Museum was jointly developed by Friends of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the Government of Canada, the Province of Manitoba, the City of Winnipeg, and the Forks North Portage Partnership. The latter owns and manages the former rail yard and river junction known as The Forks, a site serving as a peaceful meeting ground for Indigenous peoples for six millennia. Branded as an “ideas museum” dedi-



cated to enhancing public understanding of Canadian and worldwide human rights, the CMHR is among the most significant cultural institutions in Canada. As a national museum, it joins ranks with the Canadian War Museum (Moriyama & Teshima, 2005), the Canadian Museum of History (Douglas Cardinal, 1989), and the National Gallery of Canada (Moshe Safdie, 1988), but stands apart from these by its unique mission and unlikely location. On the international stage, the CMHR connects with a distinguished set of museums commemorating atrocity-related events, including the Jewish Museum in Berlin (Daniel Libeskind, 1999) and the newly opened 9-11 Memorial and Museum in New York City (Michael Arad, Peter Walker, Snøhetta and Davis Brody Bond). Yet, whereas the Jewish Museum primarily gives representation to anguish and the 9-11 Memorial to absence, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights strives to manifest hope.

The designer of this hopeful institution is Albuquerque-based architect Antoine Predock, Hon. FRAIC. The jury selected Predock's proposal from among 62 submissions to an international design competition as “a



ABOVE The glass tower and façade of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights give the building a glowing presence in the Winnipeg cityscape. The institution occupies a prominent site on the banks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, a historical meeting place for the region's First Nations.

symbolic statement of both the rootedness and the upward struggle for human rights.” Predock, along with local architects Architecture49 (formerly Smith Carter Architects & Engineers), have provided more than a monumental symbol. They have choreographed an architectural experience meant to tangibly contribute to understanding the complexity and imaginative tenacity imperative to human rights pursuits. Though Predock insists the Museum is an open work for visitors to “take on” as they choose, movement through it follows a heavily promoted narrative: a journey “from darkness to light.”

The journey begins with a descent into the earth. Intended as a psychological departure from city, street and car, the approach veers off a historic east-west trail, drawing pedestrians northward between two of the Museum's four so-called Roots. Covered with tall Prairie grasses (save for one terraced for outdoor seating), these massive volumes grow

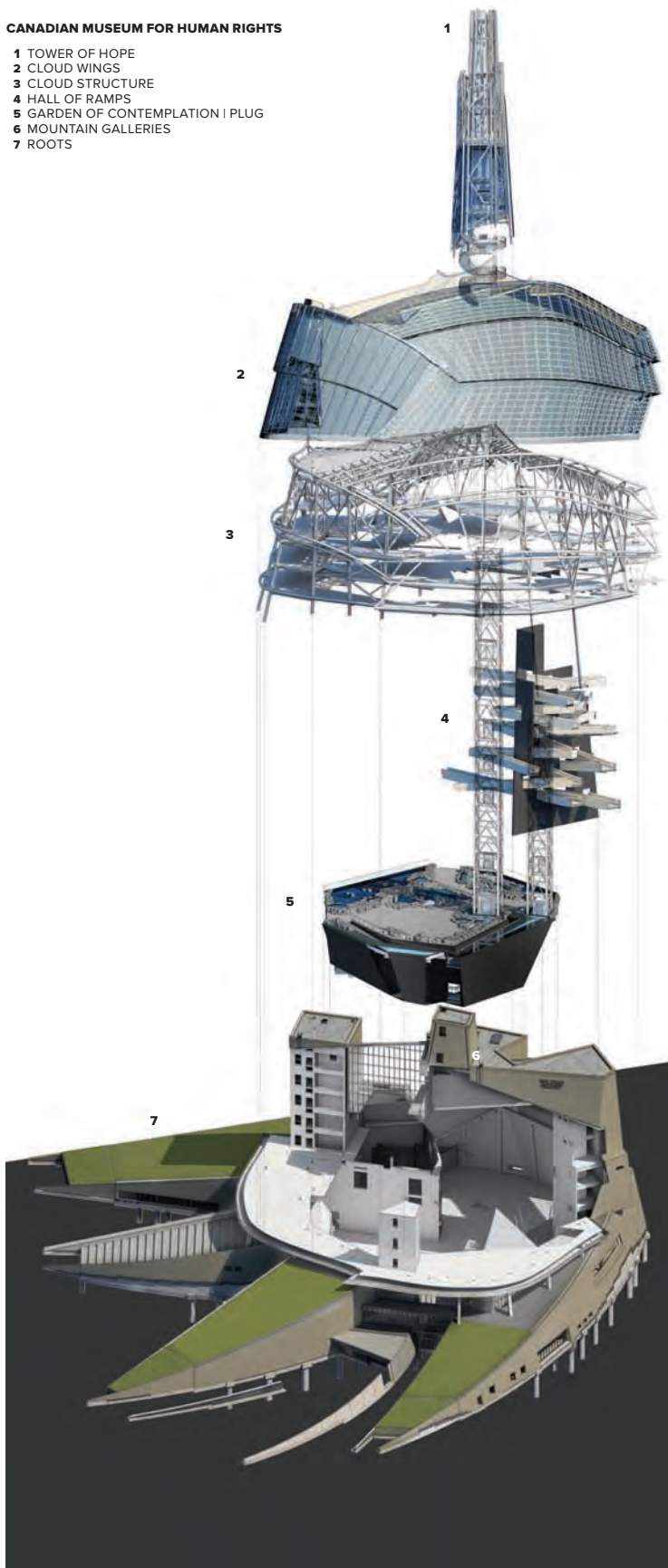
in height as the path descends, humbling visitors while prefiguring powerful encounters to come.

Straight ahead upon entering is the Great Hall, a dark and somber space of assembly. It is a calming chamber for digging into heated topics. Beneath the Hall's distressed concrete floor is an archaeological trove, which during excavations yielded some 400,000 Indigenous artifacts. Regrettably, only a casting of a single 750-year-old footprint is displayed. Looking up from the Hall's margins, visitors catch what Predock calls “furtive glimpses” of the light-filled atrium and Garden of Contemplation, hovering above on a thick plinth of basalt.

To reach the exhibitions, visitors penetrate a battered Root wall stretching into the museum, then wind up and around the Hall on a ramp lined with translucent backlit panels. The 11 themed galleries, arrayed on six levels within angular masses of Tyndall stone, feature few artifacts but

CANADIAN MUSEUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

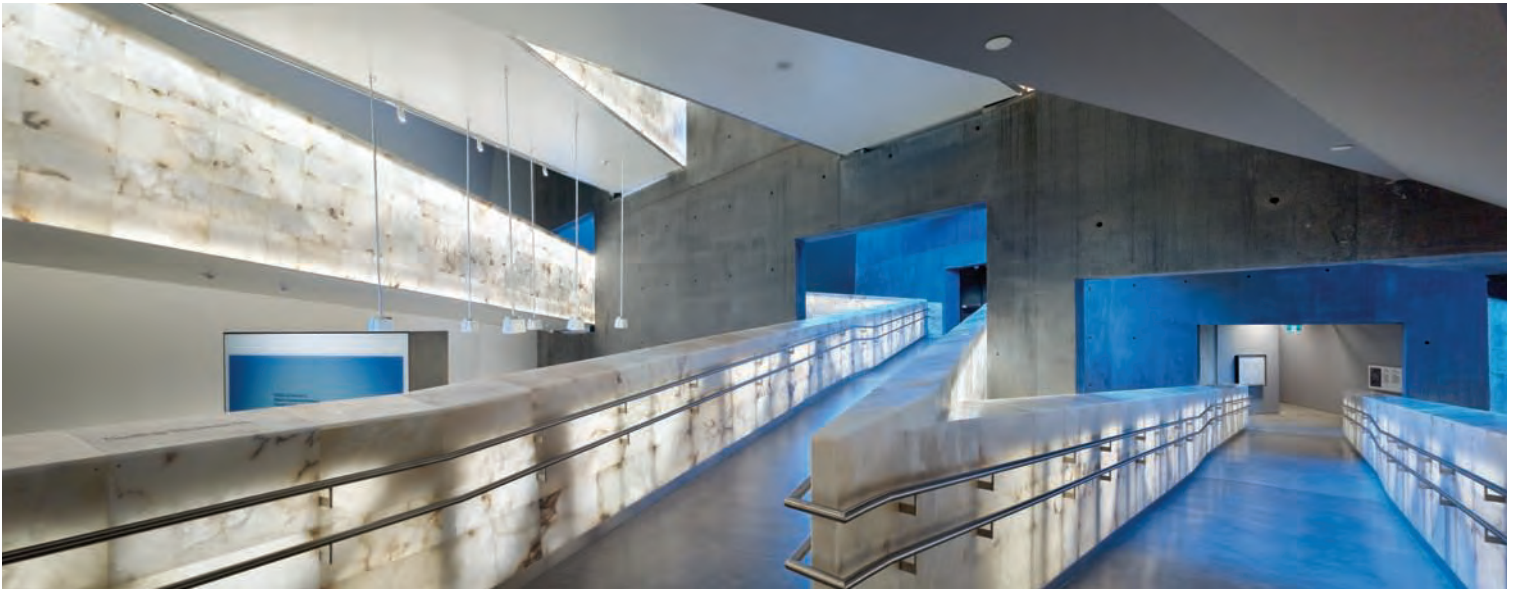
- 1 TOWER OF HOPE
- 2 CLOUD WINGS
- 3 CLOUD STRUCTURE
- 4 HALL OF RAMPS
- 5 GARDEN OF CONTEMPLATION | PLUG
- 6 MOUNTAIN GALLERIES
- 7 ROOTS



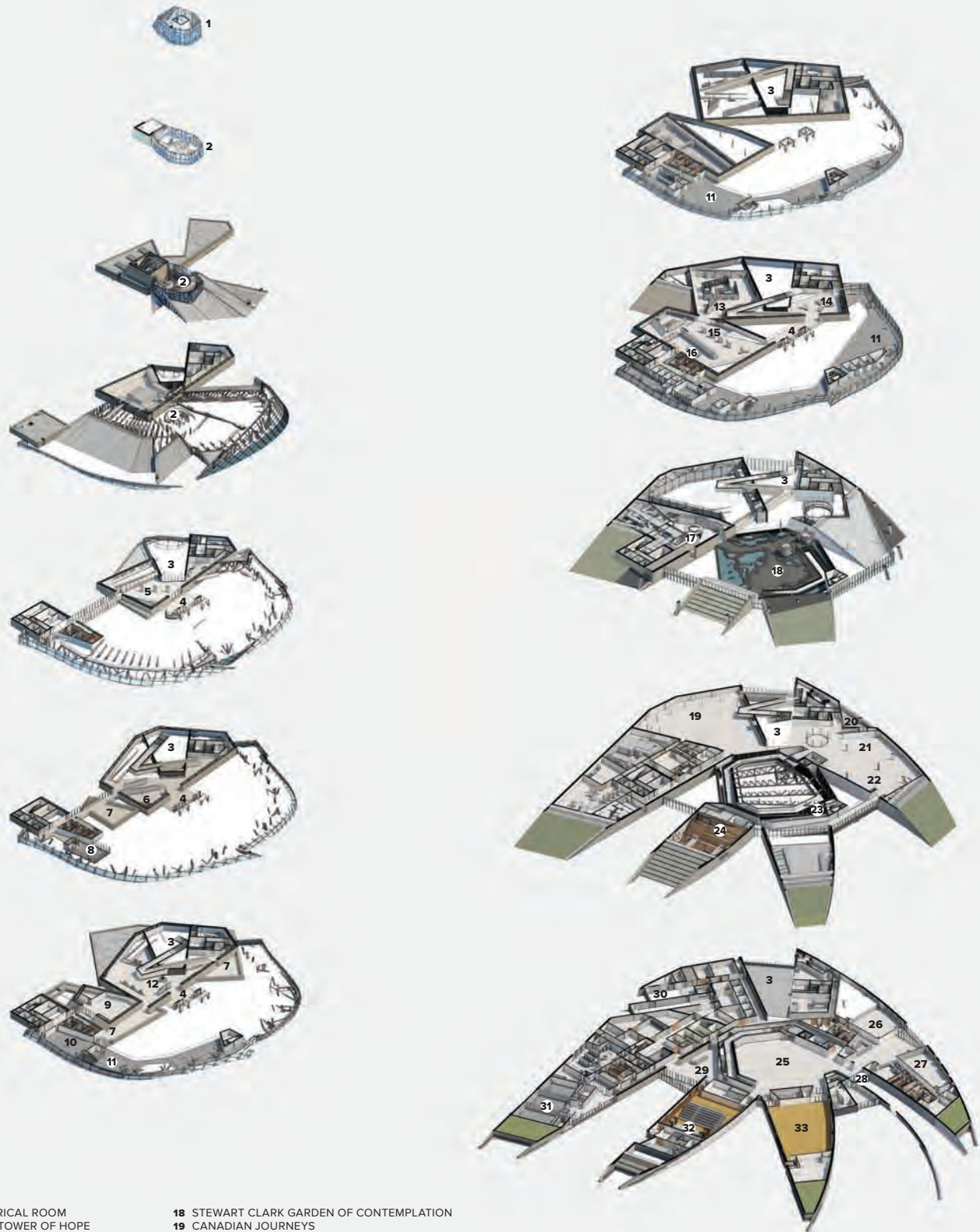
numerous interactive displays designed by Ralph Appelbaum Associates. Unlike many museums, here, Appelbaum says, “the precious object is the visitor, whose participation becomes the catalyst,” bringing human rights stories to life.

Moving from gallery to gallery and floor to floor involves traversing one of the Museum’s most successful interventions: a stunning array of raming bridges wrapped with backlit alabaster, spanning a 50-metre chasm between black-tinted concrete walls. For Predock, these luminous bridges crisscrossing the dark void act as “experiential palate-cleansers,” enabling a reflective pause between the heavy content of each gallery. They also continue the “thread of light” begun at the Museum’s entry ramp, and offer reorienting views out to the street and up to the Tower of Hope, thus drawing the city and its aspirations into the peripatetic situation. By facilitating access to each gallery, then doubling back at higher levels, the path literally provides multiple perspectives onto exhibitions attempting the same. With its spatial complexity, material contrasts, and recursive play of dark and light, this labyrinthian passage embodies an architectural reconciliation of opposites, inviting appreciation of difficult harmonies.

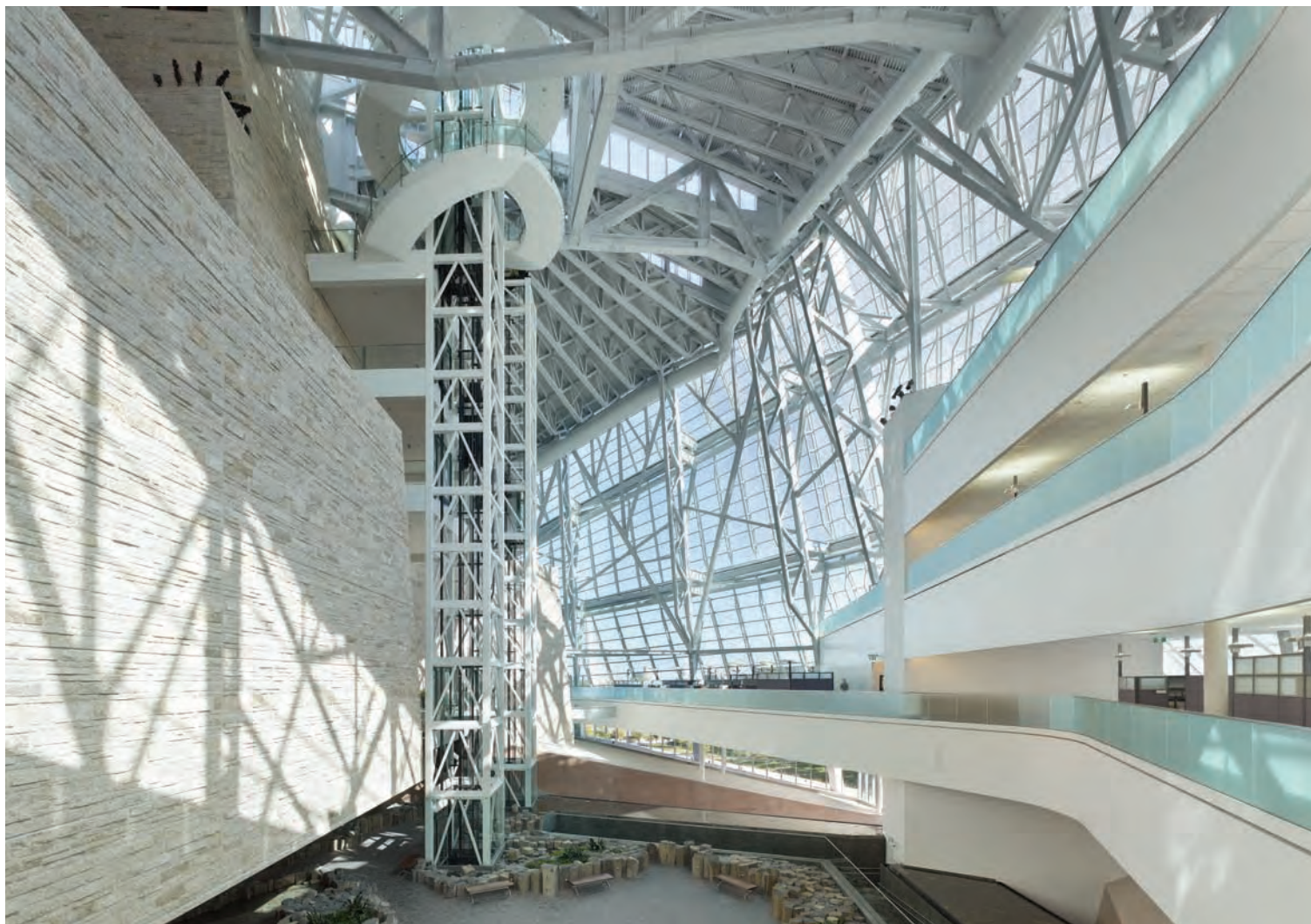
Throughout the exhibition, visitors can step out of the galleries onto cliff-like balconies overlooking the Garden of Contemplation and its enormous atrium. The 30-metre-tall curtain wall, designed to resemble both clouds and the wings of a dove, is composed of 1,335 unique panels of fritted glass, supported by a robust armature of ring beams and raking Vierendeel trusses. Against this expressive structure, three tiers of relatively banal open-office mezzanines hover, putting the prosaic workings of this institution on display.



OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM Visitors are guided to the entrance by Tyndall limestone walls that anchor the building to its site; the simplicity of the curved glass elevation contrasts with the complex volumetric composition of the northeast façade. **ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM** Alabaster-clad walkways bridge between the galleries; these circulation paths are integrated into the galleries; the walkways offer multiple vantage points onto exhibited materials.



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|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 RADIO ELECTRICAL ROOM | 18 STEWART CLARK GARDEN OF CONTEMPLATION |
| 2 ISRAEL ASPER TOWER OF HOPE | 19 CANADIAN JOURNEYS |
| 3 HALL OF HOPE | 20 CEREMONIAL TERRACE |
| 4 ELEVATOR LOBBY | 21 INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES |
| 5 INSPIRING CHANGE | 22 WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS |
| 6 EXPRESSIONS | 23 BUHLER RAMPS |
| 7 TERRACE | 24 THEATRE |
| 8 BOARDROOM | 25 BONNIE & JOHN BUHLER HALL |
| 9 ARCHIVES | 26 ERA BISTRO |
| 10 REFERENCE CENTRE | 27 BOUTIQUE |
| 11 OFFICES | 28 MAIN ENTRANCE |
| 12 RIGHTS TODAY | 29 GROUP ENTRANCE |
| 13 EXAMINING THE HOLOCAUST | 30 LOADING BAY |
| 14 ACTIONS COUNT | 31 CLASSROOMS |
| 15 TURNING POINTS FOR HUMANITY | 32 THEATRE |
| 16 BREAKING THE SILENCE | 33 TEMPORARY GALLERY |
| 17 PROTECTING RIGHTS IN CANADA | |



ABOVE The central atrium includes a basalt-strewn indoor garden, wrapped by a curved glass façade and ringed by the Museum's offices. At centre, a stair and elevator bring visitors up to a lookout that pierces through and above the roofline.

After navigating the galleries, the “thread of light” continues up the 100-metre Tower of Hope. Touted since the Museum's inception, this symbolic centrepiece is meant to dissolve into sky; but in actuality, the athletic ascent brings one face to face with heavy-handed structural machinations devised to hold it up.

Many will marvel at the muscular array of converging roof trusses, and the ingenious turkey tails, wishbones, and other crazy connectors mediating the odd-angled intersections of some 5,400 tonnes of structural steel permitting column-free space below (the Museum earned an Award of Excellence from the Canadian Institute of Steel Construction). But these brute super-nodes seem at odds with a pursuit of hope and more nuanced understanding of rights. As a climactic experience, the close encounter with colossal members gives the uneasy impression that might still makes right—a mixed message, obscuring the metaphor of light.

Descending via elevator, visitors land in the Garden of Contemplation. Though somewhat compromised by the jungle of steel overhead and banal administrative surround, this garden—with its reflective pools, medicinal plants, winged cloud, and landscape of volcanic basalt—aims to balance water, earth, air and fire, while providing a gathering place for discussion. Unfortunately, its jagged rocks and ill-considered seating are not conducive to relaxed dialogue. For a space of this prominence, one would have expected generous basalt benches integrated with the landscape.

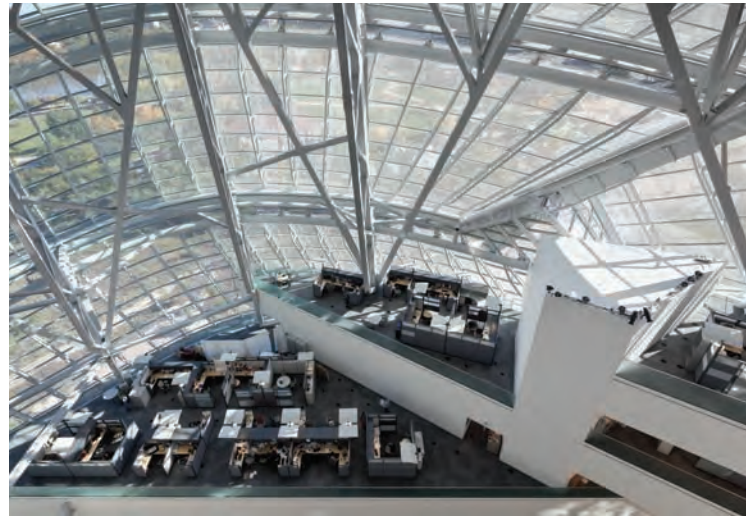
Completing the journey requires descending another lengthy ramp, before returning to the public space of The Forks, where peaceful assem-

bly—one of the four fundamental freedoms under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms—will hopefully continue at a scale proportionate to this international institution.

While delightful in certain material and experiential qualities, the design embodies contradiction. This is not an architecture of fetishized details. Neither is this a model of spatial efficiency. The Canadian War Museum, by comparison, has roughly twice the floor area in half the volume for a third of the price. But perhaps it is appropriate that war recede and rights be more boldly and generously asserted. For some, the CMHR will be too audacious and too indulgent, or too contrived and too confusing. And in spite of the rhetorical simplicity of its “darkness to light” narrative, the Museum is, at times, tortuously complex. Even its fire stair resembles an M. C. Escher drawing.

Challenges in translation between design and delivery may have contributed to the incidental disjointedness. Predock's preliminary design process involved sculpting soft clay with a sharp knife, sticking his head into large mock-ups, and working “old-school,” as he explains, with immersive collages and physical “model after model after model.” Conversely, the construction management team delved into BIM, involving 40 consultants in three countries in a virtual design and construction approach that earned a 2011 RAIC Honourable Mention for Innovation in Architecture and a 2014 Global Best Project Award from *Engineering News Record*.

If as much creative energy had been invested in developing Predock's



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The Tower of Hope offers vistas of the surroundings, as well as close-ups of the roof's complex structural joints; a view of the cloud-like glass façade and open offices; the Museum's galleries include interactive displays and artists' reflections on human rights.

original design intentions as was spent on resolving structural gymnastics, then this institution dedicated to the important task of promoting human rights could have more effectively engaged the real possibilities of its social program. For instance, Predock intended the Museum's Roots to serve as a supportive framework for ceremonial events. But, the Root terrace for outdoor seating is, as of yet, unoccupiable. During the opening ceremonies, these bastion-like volumes served more to exclude protestors than to frame public involvement. Two of the Roots, meant to accommodate an auditorium and special gallery, remain empty shells. Moreover, the Roots are severed at their tops—just where they ought to join the elevated interior Garden to create a continuous topography interconnected with its meaningful site.

Despite these issues, a sense of hope prevails. Predock's original project statement asserts that the Museum makes "visible in the architecture the fundamental commonality of humankind." Ultimately, that "commonality" must be found not simply in the Museum's visual metaphors, but through our engagement with the Museum's difficult content, programming and provocations.

There is great need for venues committed to advancing human rights while enabling appreciation of humanity's differences, interdependencies

and capabilities for change. Whatever the design shortcomings and excesses, Predock and his team have given Winnipeg—and the world—a work of architecture commensurate with the Museum's ambitious mission. It is now up to the administration, the visitors and world citizens to follow through. ▲

Lisa Landrum, MRAIC, is an architect, writer and Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Manitoba.

CLIENT CANADIAN MUSEUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS | **ARCHITECT TEAM** ANTOINE PREDOCK ARCHITECT—ANTOINE PREDOCK, GRAHAM HOGAN, JOSE SANCHEZ, PAUL FELAU, CHRISTOPHER BECCONE, CORY GREENFIELD, SAM STERLING, GEOFFREY BEEBE, KAROLE MAZEIKA. ARCHITECTURE49—GRANT VAN IDERSTINE, JIM WESELAKE, RON MARTIN, COLIN REED, BRAD COVE, KIRK MCLEAN, WENDY TYSON, ROLLY RUTKAUSKAS, PAUL LAVALLEE, NAN ZENG, RAY SMYRSKI, RON PIDWERBESKY, RICHARD CHAN, BRAD BECK, MARCUS COLONNA. | **STRUCTURAL** CH2M HILL (FORMERLY HALCROW YOLLES) WITH CORSIER KILGOUR & PARTNERS | **MECHANICAL** THE MITCHELL PARTNERSHIP WITH SMS ENGINEERING | **ELECTRICAL** MULVEY BANANI INTERNATIONAL WITH MCW AGE POWER CONSULTANTS | **LANDSCAPE** | SCATLIFF+MILLER+MURRAY | **INTERIORS** ANTOINE PREDOCK/ARCHITECTURE49 | **EXHIBIT DESIGN** RALPH APPELBAUM ASSOCIATES | **CONTRACTOR** PCL CONSTRUCTORS | **CODE** LRI ENGINEERING | **LIGHTING** MULVEY AND BANANI (ENGINEER OF RECORD), OVI (BASE BUILDING), TILLOTSON DESIGN ASSOCIATES (EXHIBITS) | **INTERIOR STONE** PICCO ENGINEERING | **CIVIL & MISC METALS** KGS GROUP | **ELEVATOR** AYLING | **UNIVERSAL DESIGN** DESIGN FOR ALL | **LEED** ENERMODAL | **PROJECT MANAGER** GRAHAM BIRD ASSOCIATES | **ACOUSTICS** VALCOUSTICS | **AREA** 24,155 M² | **BUDGET** \$351 M | **COMPLETION** SEPTEMBER 2014