Working Title: Public Spirit

Terence Gower

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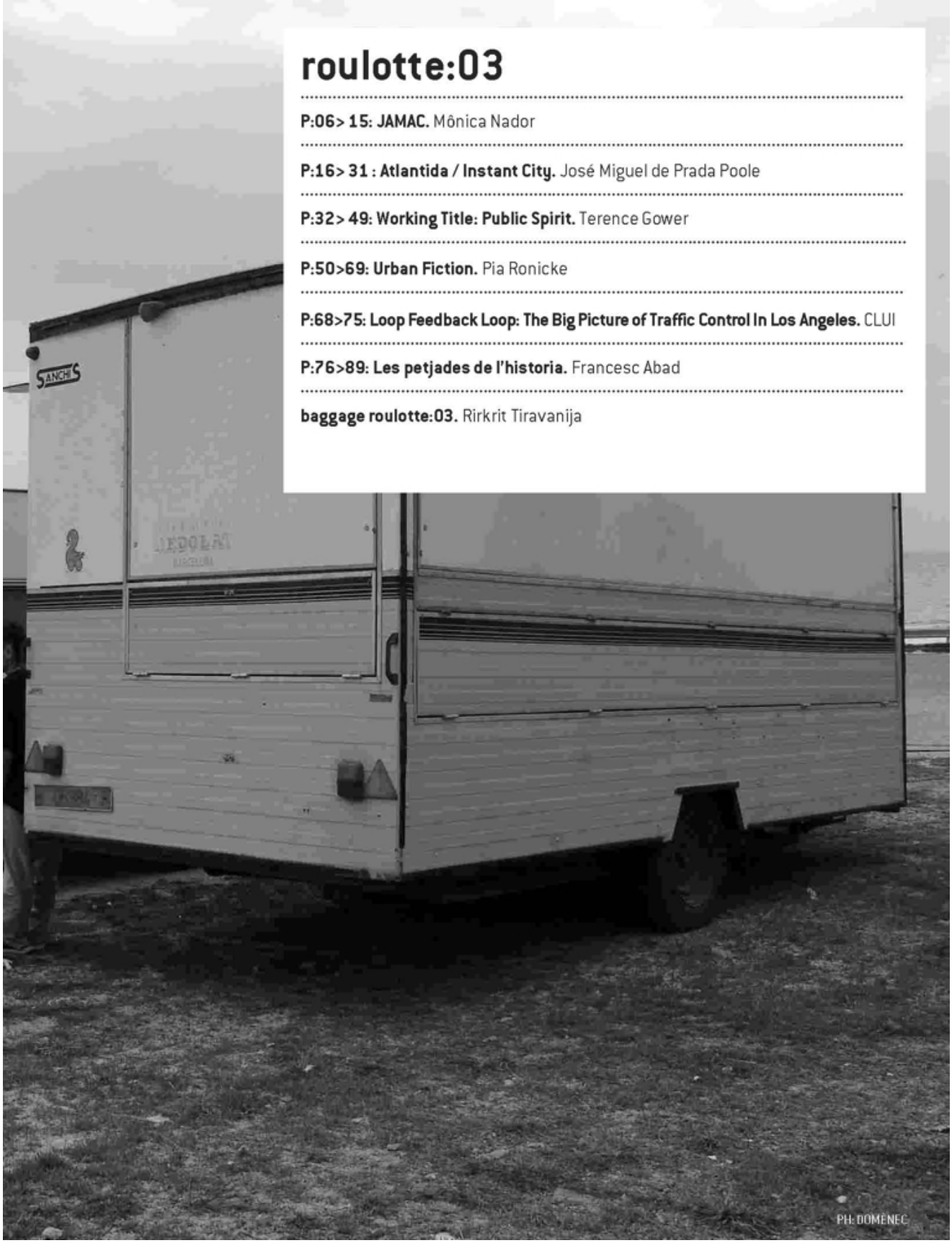

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Working Title: Public Spirit

Terence Gower

The Smithsonian Artists Research Fellowship is a new program started by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC (USA). The program was set up to support artists during a period of research in the vast Smithsonian archives. When invited for this fellowship, I decided to pursue research on the architecture of the Hirshhorn Museum of Art. The museum was designed by Gordon Bunshaft and opened to the public on Washington's National Mall in 1974.

The museum building drew me in with its audacity. Although it fits logically into the oeuvre of Bunshaft—at that time he was exploring the new forms made possible by advances in building technology (especially pre-stressed concrete spans and cantilevers)—the building's floating concrete cylinder rises quite dramatically out of its context. When the building was planned in the late 1960s, the prevailing style of architecture in the US Capital was the international government standard of classicist symbolism common to soviet, fascist and capitalist governments alike. The "concrete donut" of the Hirshhorn made an extravagant break with this standard.

I wanted to know if this break might be an indicator of some kind of ideological shift in US government. This is a preoccupation running through most of my work of the last five years: an interest in the possibility of form acting as a signifier of ideology. An example: An ongoing museum installation of mine (The Red Wall) samples the architectural polychromy of the early avant-gardes (de Stijl, Constructivism, Bauhaus) through the installation of a single red wall. My observation has been that this juxtaposition of distinctly coloured planes also conjures some of the shared ideological terrain of those movements, especially a clean break with the past and a belief in a well-ordered future (a sentiment promoted in certain condominium show-suites through the use of the same formal device: the single colored wall.)

Following is a summary of my research at the Smithsonian. This research forms the narrative of a documentary video now beginning production in New York.

The planning of the Hirshhorn Museum falls within the legacy of public building initiated by F.D. Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal. Originally viewed as "make work" projects during the depression, publicly-funded construction programs for schools, hospitals, housing and cultural institutions were soon recognized for their social and economic benefits. Set in motion by the New Deal, the atmosphere of public support for public works continued through President L.B. Johnson's Great Society of the mid-1960s. This public spiritedness began to give way after the 1960s until we were left with the mindset we live with in the US today, where local governments can't get enough public funding to bring public education much above Third World standards.

Thus, in very reduced terms, the 1930s through 1960s represented a lengthy hiatus in a US government tradition of economic conservatism. The intersection of this period with a similar lapse in government aesthetic conservatism is what made the Hirshhorn Museum possible. The museum project started with a gentleman's agreement—an exchange of letters between President Johnson and the donor of the museum's collection, Joseph Hirshhorn. The president, under the aesthetic stewardship of his wife, set in motion a very rapid chain of events. A Congressional Act was passed, funds requisitioned, an architect found, a building designed and construction started. But by 1970—with the museum half-finished— a new political climate made itself heard with calls to cancel the project on both economic

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and aesthetic grounds. After a standard, fruitless right-wing Congressional witch-hunt, the building, nearly starved for completion funds, was miraculously finished. Bunshaft's building, a relic from an earlier, perhaps more open-minded era, had prevailed, and Joseph Hirshhorn, the self-described "Little Hebe from Brooklyn" found his place on the National Mall, next to Abraham Lincoln (cue Conservative gasps of horror).

Joseph Hirshhorn's place in this story is a peculiarly American one. The Hirshhorn gift (over 6,000 works of art) came with the collector's name on the museum and the collection's curator, Abraham Lerner, being named the museum's director. This intermingling of public and private interests was common in the US capital—James Smithson's Smithsonian Institution, Charles Lang Freer's Freer Gallery, Andrew Mellon's National Gallery of Art—and this collaborative model provided an efficient and elegant home for Hirshhorn's collection. The collector's original plans for his collection, however, were much more grandiose.

After migrating to the United States from Latvia as a child, Joseph Hirshhorn made his way from the slums of Brooklyn to New York City's Curbside Stock Exchange. He had made his first million dollars by age twenty-eight but managed to cash out of the exchange just weeks before the crash of 1929. Hirshhorn next moved his interests to mineral mining in the wilderness of Canada. His mining stocks funded the prospecting and processing of gold and copper across the country. Then, in 1953 Hirshhorn struck it rich in western Ontario with one of the largest uranium finds in North America. He became known as the Uranium King.

The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki announced the commencement of the Cold War. Hirshhorn's timely uranium discovery was essential to US competition in the Cold War arms race, uranium providing the essential ingredient for nuclear fission. For security control and profit reasons, the government of Canada immediately set itself up as the sole client of Hirshhorn's operation, acting as broker and clearing house to the Pentagon. Hirshhorn made over 150 million dollars.

In 1955, Hirshhorn decided to give something back to the region that had made him so wealthy. He devised a utopian city of culture. Hirshhorn, Ontario would house thousands of new mining personnel. It would also house Hirshhorn's growing art collection in a museum and sculpture park to be placed in the centre of the community along with a theatre, concert hall and library. Other public and commercial facilities were to be similarly clustered in a town centre dominated by a tower devoted to the offices of the mining administration: A symbol of private enterprise behind this impressive display of public sprit.

The architect of the scheme, Philip Johnson, came into Hirshhorn's life through his wife, painter Lilian Harmon. In 1952 Johnson offered his design services gratis to Harmon's synagogue. But there was suspicion that Johnson's proposal was an attempt to buy back the confidence of Jews after his very public pro-Nazi period in the 1930s. Eventually Johnson was granted the synagogue project, which led through Harmon to four commissions (just one completed) given him by Hirshhorn, himself a Jew alert to anti-Semitism.

In the 1950s Philip Johnson was still closely mimicking the architecture of his "Master" Mies van der Rohe. I would argue that Johnson's interest in Mies was largely formal, disconnected from the work's underlying architectural philosophy. Throughout his career, Johnson designed according to a series of styles, starting with the International Style (his own term), moving on to Historicism and ending with "Deconstruction". In his Hirshhorn, Ontario plan, Johnson references Mies' IIT campus

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scheme, then nearing completion in Chicago. The somewhat bland town plan was livened up by the architect and clients' conception of the "Tower in Nature"—the mining company's office tower rising out of the wilderness.

Mining communities have traditionally had an ephemeral, transient quality, due to the finite nature of natural resources. Miners typically prefer to live with their families in trailers so they can quickly pull up stakes and move on to the next claim. Hirshhorn and his associates believed the volume of uranium ore in Northern Ontario was extensive enough to merit a true settlement with proper infrastructure. The first practical response to this need was the creation of Elliot Lake, Ontario, a modest planned town which has gradually broadened its industry to forestry and tourism as the mining boom slowed.

The town of Hirshhorn was to be different. It was a town devoted to beauty, culture and education. It was one man's idea of an infrastructure for social progress, imposed upon the landscape, and inhabited by real townspeople. The project found close relatives in the experiments of company-funded collective living such as the Godin Familistères in 19th Century France. But Hirshhorn's emphasis on culture made it unique.

Joseph Hirshhorn compulsively collected the art of living artists. His style was nicely described by Lilian Harmon: "Hirshhorn bought art like he was at the roulette wheel." Yet Hirshhorn never purchased art for profit. According to the collector, he bought for love and he bought for posterity, with the notion that the works would be left for the enjoyment of the public.

The same sense of public spirit lay at the heart of the Hirshhorn town project. It was a vision of public life fortified by art and culture, masterminded by a private individual. But at Hirshhorn, Ontario the expansive public spirit of the mining millionaire was overwhelmed by the protectionist fears of neighbouring communities and the town was never built. The project may not have had huge architectural merit, but it had value as a socio-cultural experiment, and for the peculiarity of its anchoring concept: the Hirshhorn Museum in the wilderness of Canada.

Post-script

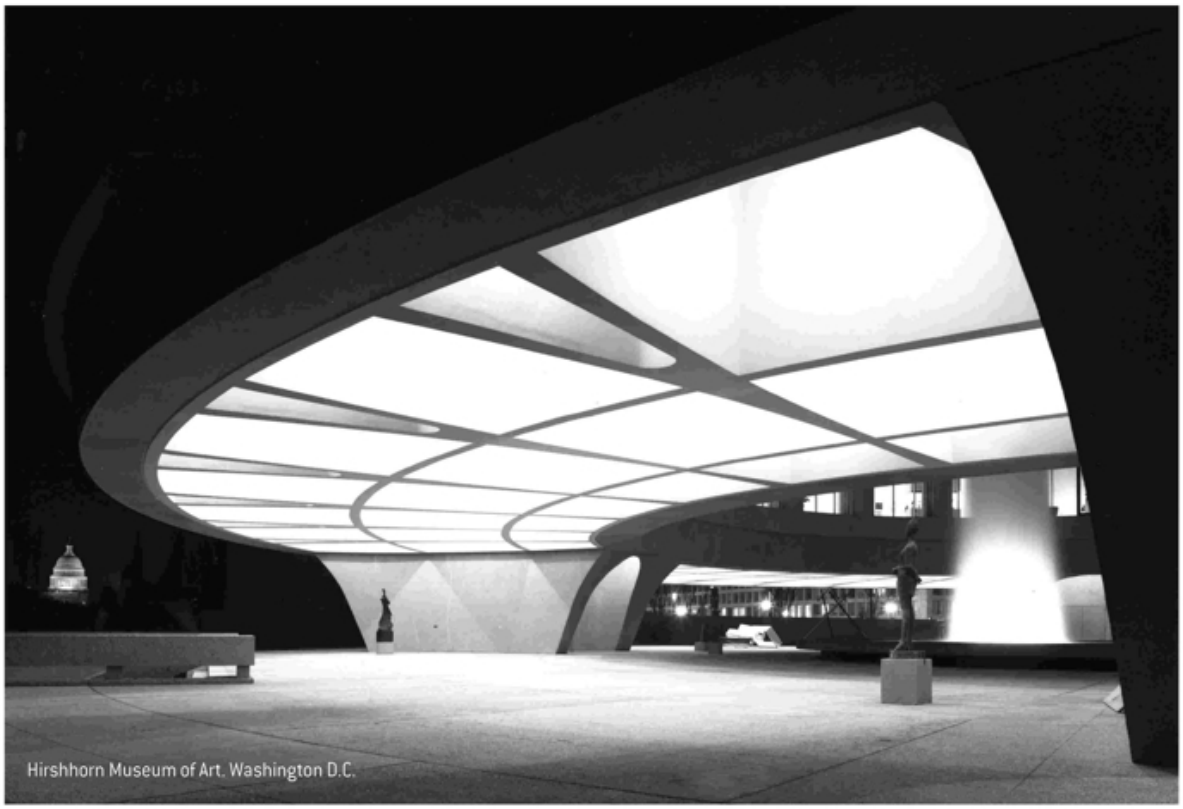
Joseph Hirshhorn left three traces bearing his stamp: two at the site of Hirshhorn, Ontario and one on the National Mall in Washington, DC.

First, the Hirshhorn Guesthouse, designed by Philip Johnson as a glass-walled flat-roofed Miesian rectangle, surrounded by forest and overlooking Lake Huron. The house was based on a speculative model designed for another Johnson client in 1954. The architect sold a copy to Hirshhorn, which was hastily built near the future townsite in the spring of 1955. The house expresses the same deliberate friction of technological Modernism inserted into an unspoiled natural setting found in Johnson's town plan.

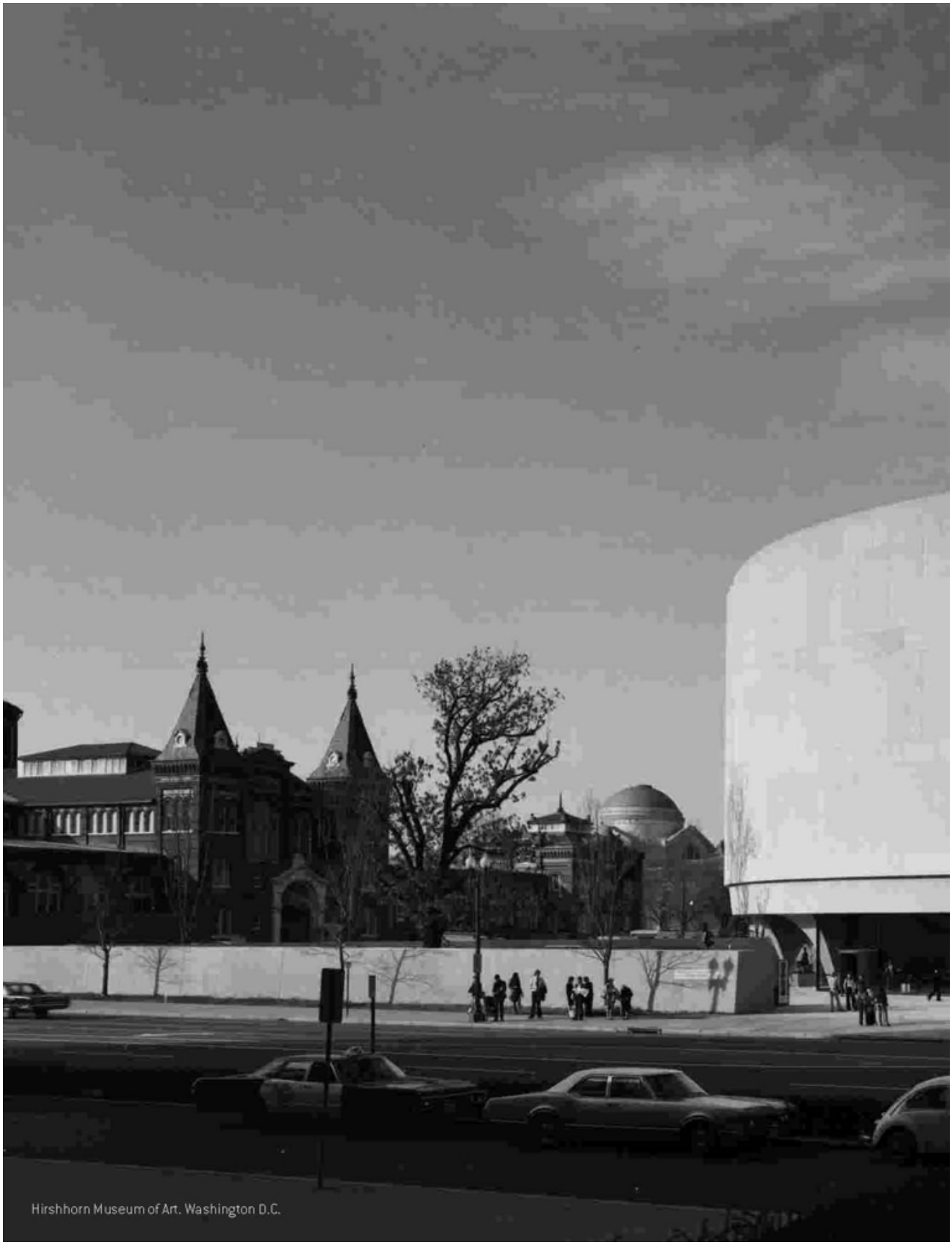
Second, we have the environmental stain left by uranium mining. The mining and processing of uranium ore has left towering deposits of radioactive "tailings" throughout the former wilderness surrounding Hirshhorn's townsite. These moonscapes are the legacy of Cold War industry, the dystopian flipside of Hirshhorn's utopian public schemes.

Finally, we have the Hirshorn Museum designed by Gordon Bunshaft in Washington, DC. The museum's hovering cylinder is a testament to the architect's investigation of the limits of form generated by new building technologies.

Terence Gower



Hirshhorn Museum of Art, Washington D.C.



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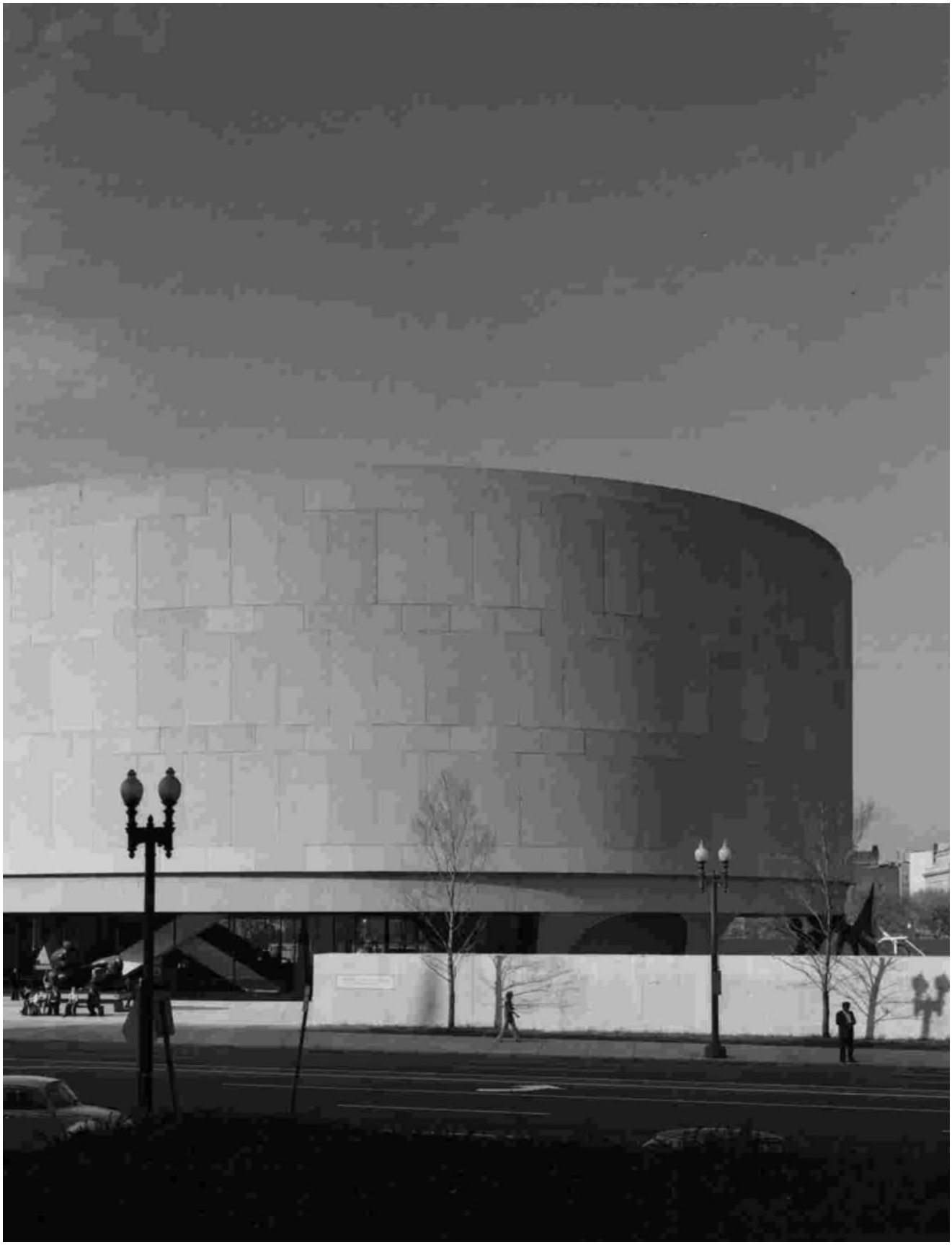

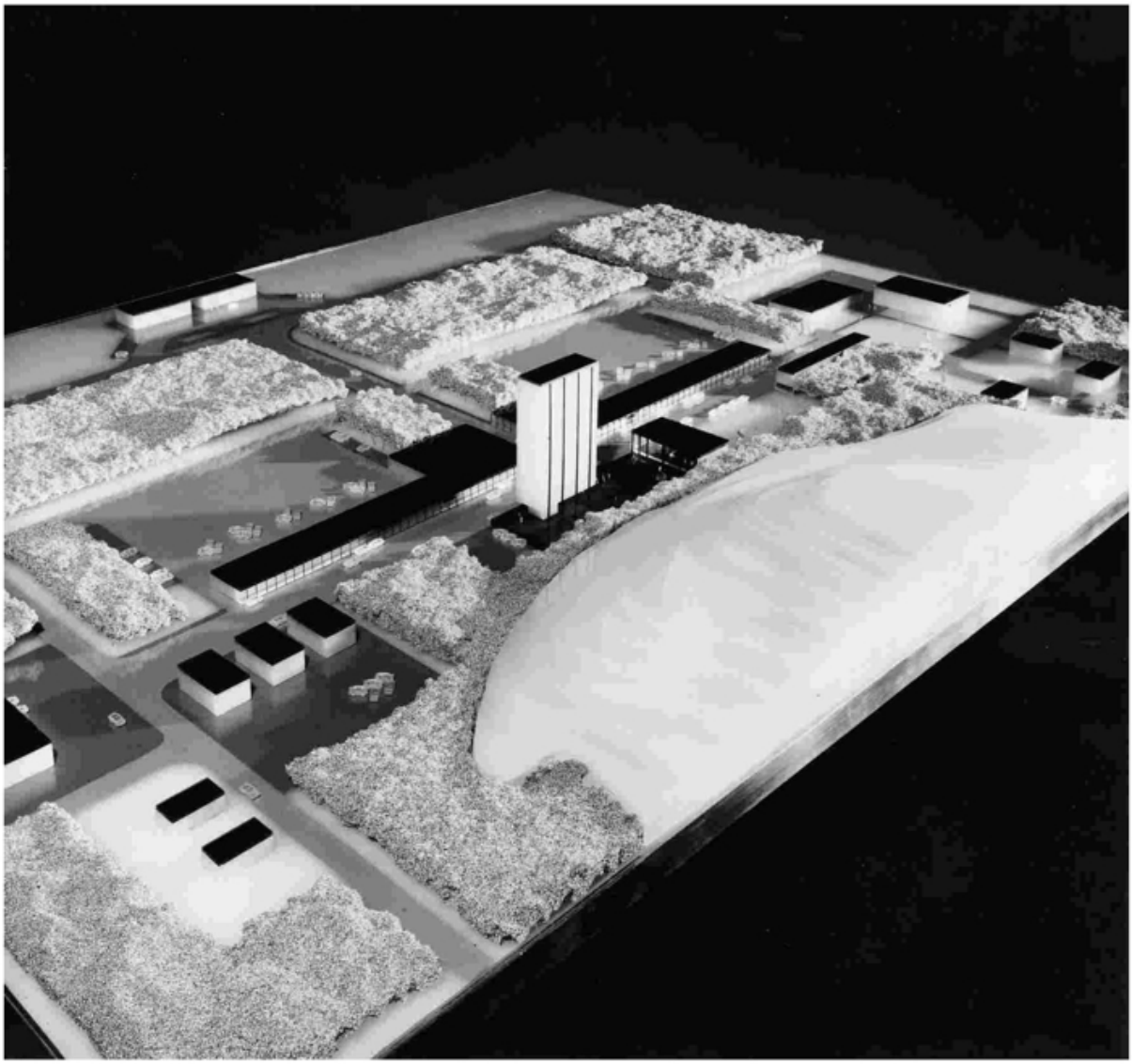

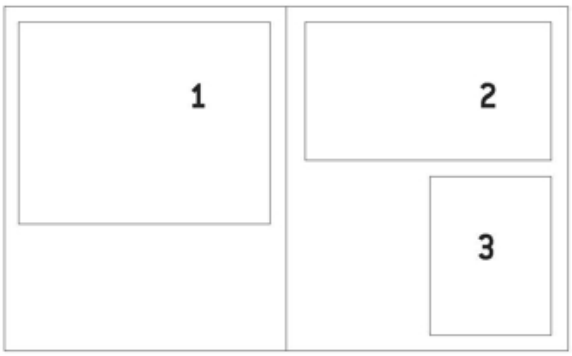

1. Original model of Hirshhorn City, Ontario, Canada
2. Cover of The Financial Post, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. July 30, 1955
3. From The Globe and Mail, Toronto, Ontario, July 30, 1955. Caption reads, "Dean Acheson Ontario Visitor for Blind River Inspection Trip. Former U.S. Secretary of State inspects model with Joseph Hirshhorn"

The Financial Post

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Picasso Finds New Home In Ontario Wilderness

Millionaire Mine-Maker Hirshhorn Plans $35 Million Town and Art Centre

By JON W. KIERAN

Mine-maker and millionaire sub collector Joseph Hirshhorn this week begins to realize his dream of creating "the world's most beautiful small town" in the timber-rich wilderness, near Blind River, Ont.

Plans for his imagination-stirring project—to which he will give his name, his time and many of his prized paintings—are now being finalized. Construction of the $35 million centre-to be Hirshhorn's big who has made millions on Wall and Bay Streets, is scheduled to begin within three months.

The town, likely to be called Hirshhorn, will be built primarily to house miners and service personnel working at Preeby Dominion Mines in the Blind River district of Lake Huron's north channel. It will be nine five miles east of Algoma Mills on a property that was formed, during the numbering lumber boom days, 40 years ago, as "Camp 3".

More recently it was known as Oak Grove Lodge, an unpretentious three-unit tourist camp that nestled in a majestic setting of second growth birch, pine covered hills, and lakes.

"This is the most inspiring and thrilling locality spot I've ever seen," mine-maker Hirshhorn says of an individually excited twice. "It's rough and it's raw — but it's beautiful. It's a jewel that deserves a magnificent setting."

It's the most exciting town planning assignment any architect has received in at least 100 years, says co-planner John C. Parkin. "This good as an opportunity to create a community completely integrated as to planning, architecture and engineering. Few people ever before have been given total control over every single structure within a community with the direction to put emphasis on esthetics."

Not A Company Town

This will be no traditional company town. Any one can live there, anyone can build—providing he's willing to conform to the beauty pattern of the entire community.

Hirshhorn will be housed near a main For relief around the new town there will be protected forest. All of it, meanwhile and surrounding forest is held generally by Hirshhorn.

Hirshhorn's planners are Philip C. Johnson, director of the Department of Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and John E. Parkin & Associates, of Toronto. The engineering and construction supervision will be the responsibility of the Parkin firm.

The heart of Hirshhorn's town will be the art centre, the outstanding feature of an old-world-like town square. Preliminary cost estimate for the centre and its furnishings: $1 million.

Construction will begin as soon as final plans have been presented to and approved by the Ontario Department of Planning & Development. Within three years, Hirshhorn's population is expected to reach 3,000. The investment by that time will probably total $15 millions.

Hirshhorn personally will get things started with a $1 million donation "to move" for such services as basement space, water and sewage facilities, roads and parks. Department and food chain stores will be financing and building their outlets—providing they meet Parkin and Johnson specifications.

Houses Will Have to Conform

Potential homeowners will be able to buy their own lots, but their building plans will have to be approved by Hirshhorn's architects.

That doesn't mean, however, that this won't be a functional town. It will. Its prime purpose is function, to house the mine and other workers who will be excavating uranium ore from the Preeby property one hole away.

It won't be a one-industry town either. Neither Hirshhorn nor his mining companies care to be involved with the details of running a "company town" and the experience gained by other industries who have been forced into that position will be taken into account.

As a mining company town state grants Like self-contained recreation and amenities of the proposed shopping centre, however, the factories will have to conform with the over-all picture.

The shopping centre is a case in point. Hirshhorn is said anxious to introduce competitive merchandising to his town. He thinks prices in the north are too high. He has also been indebted by having been charged $1.10 for breakfast one morning in Blind River. "Why, I don't have to pay that much in New York or Toronto," he mutters.

Time, however, are extra little. It's the art centre that has caught his imagination.

Art Centre Counts Most

"Maybe the miners won't appreciate it," he says, "but their children will." Excitedly he tells how his construction crews will save the other trees on the property "because millions can't make a tree-lately God can do that."

Many of his more than 300 paintings and few sculptures will be presented to the town. There will be a magnificent piece of sculpture by Henry Moore and setting the theme for this wilderness cultural museum will be a specially commissioned outdoor statue by Sir Jacob Epstein, regarded by many as the 20th century's greatest sculptor. Sir Jacob will visit the remote area soon in order to see for one capture the spirit of the country and the town above it.

Recently Hirshhorn took time off from swift financing to tour galleries of Europe for the art he wanted for his township dream. He bought some Etruscan pieces with the sole thought of showing the mine village children some of the early history of art.

When he talks of one $1,000 Etruscan figure "just the size of your hand" he seems to shed at least 20 of his sandy tanned 56 years.

"The kids growing up in this township will get to know and love art like this," he says enthusiastically. "It will help them to learn that a country is respected not for its wealth but for its culture."

His original pushy Canada's economic tows philosophy can move step toward maturity if indeed that culture be given as least a chance equal to the ever-pressing need for construction speed.

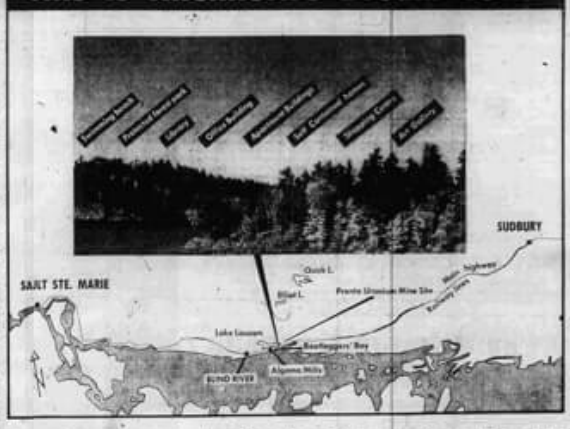
"Across don't fill all the voids," he says. "The professional and management tier can certainly and they are missing something and some cultural facilities will be most welcome."

Things are happening very quickly in the

until population warrants full incorporation. Elections will then be held.

There has been serious talk of also creating a model community out of Blind River, essentially a sawmill town that has seen many boom days and go and consequently regards

This Is Hirshhorn's Dream Town



—Globe and Mail

Dean Acheson Ontario Visitor for Blind River Inspection Trip
Former U.S. Secretary of State (left) inspects model with Joseph Hirshhorn.

the Hirshhorn Guesthouse, designed by Philip Johnson

Uranium Tailings High, Ontario. Photograph by Robert del Tredeci