TOWER ON BIAS

Canadian architecture, remarkably producing quality building after quality building at a tremendous rate, has turned out a small, speculative ($19/sq ft) office building that puts all the by-the-yard glass-and-metal stuff still proliferating in the U.S. to shame.

Situated on a nondescript one-way street in Toronto, the building, by Fairfield & DuBois, consists of a two-story, four-square base facing the street supporting a six-story tower turned at a 45° angle to the lower floors. This arrangement not only lets light and air flow around all sides of the building, it also creates eight corner offices in the tower, compared to the usual four in the common variety of speculative building. The architects had taken care to try and create a distinct building that at the same time respects the street and conforms to Toronto’s zoning regulations, which allow just three times lot size for the permitted above-grade floor space (excluding balconies). They made a model of the street and experimented with several zoning envelope models, eventually deciding on one, for which they designed two plans. The owner-developer, Standard Life-Taylor Woodrow, happily chose the less conservative version in order “to strengthen the idea of a strong statement on the street.”

The horizontal of the two-story base emphasizes the continuity of the street, while the angled tower furnishes a strong accent that, as noted, also opens the street façade to light and air. The architects state: “Some planning device must be found to encourage this idea in the streetscape, for it is just as nonsensical
to continue to build isolated blocks of urban offices as it is to do so with urban housing, and light and sun must be allowed to penetrate [to] the street."

An added, and pleasing, conceit, was the extension of balconies across the angles of the tower on every other floor. These, though not extensively used, carry the landscape from grade, past the terrace created by the roof of the second floor, and up the building. They are reportedly "remarkably pleasant covered with snow."

Structure is reinforced concrete, and concrete is exposed both inside the building and on the exterior. Windows are heat-absorbing gray glass with an integral venetian blind framed with natural-color aluminum sash.

Fairfield & DuBois were evidently pleased with what they wrought at 45 Charles Street East, because they now have their offices there (see third floor plan). The four-increment nature of the tower plan makes the space easily divisible for smaller tenants, a requirement of the client.

New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, take heed: This small rental office building on a Toronto side street has a lot to teach you about designing quality speculative buildings if you and your developer-clients will only look and listen.