

# WHEN KINDRED SPIRITS MEET

GOTTSCHALK + ASH GATHERS THOSE WHO BELIEVE THE BEST DESIGN IS FUNCTIONAL AS WELL AS BEAUTIFUL

BY SHONA MCKAY

CONTRAST TO THE ORDERED calm of the Swiss streets outside, the atmosphere inside the Zürich office of Gottschalk + Ash International is very, well, un-Swiss. Gathered on the second floor of a brownstone in the city's centre, the seven G+A principals—Fritz Gottschalk, Stuart Ash, Peter Adam, Peter Steiner, Hélène L'Heureux, Walter Ballmer and Glauco Felici—hold their annual meeting amid a tangle of portfolio cases sporting airline tags, slide projectors and samples of their respective offices' recent work. And conversation among these design consultants, who trace their corporate roots to Canada, is a medley of French, German, Italian and English.

THE ANNUAL MEETING HAS become an important focal point for the Montréal, Toronto, Milano and Zürich offices of G+A. Through most of the year, they work independently for a roster of big-name clients that includes both the Swiss and Canadian governments. The meeting—held alternately in Europe and North America—provides an opportunity for the separate parts to work as a whole, to discuss projects, set business goals and exchange informa-

tion. But whether apart or together, the partners are always united in the shared belief that the best design is functional as well as beautiful. As Stuart Ash, senior partner at the Toronto office, maintains: "Good design has the power to involve, inform, motivate, increase awareness and sell. Clients deserve something more than that which looks pretty."

THIS INTERCONTINENTAL commitment to practical design has its origin in the meeting of two kindred spirits in 1965. That year, Fritz Gottschalk, 28, a Swiss trained at the Basle School of Design, immigrated to Canada to join Ottawa design firm Paul Arthur + Associates. Ash, 23, was hired shortly after by Paul Arthur to oversee the implementation of the Centennial symbol that he and Anthony Mann had designed for Canada's 100th birthday while working at Cooper & Beatty. The young Swiss soon found he had much in common with Ash, who had pored over many books of European design while a student at the Ontario College of Art. Recalls Gottschalk: "The kind of design I was interested in—the Swiss or International Style as it came to be called—was very new

in Canada at the time. Very few people were doing it. But I knew from looking at Stuart's work and talking to him that he was interested in the same things."

THEY DID NOT ACTUALLY form a partnership until the following year. Gottschalk had left Paul Arthur to open his own firm in Montreal, and Ash was about to fly to Ulm, Germany to study design. But his travel plans changed after visiting his friend. Gottschalk had more work than he could handle with a large assignment for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. So he asked Ash to join forces with him. The two have been together ever since.

THEY HAVE ALSO CONTINUED to attract those dedicated to high-quality International design. For example, there is Walter Ballmer, one of the Swiss founders of the style, who agreed to head G+A's office in Milan, Italy a few years ago. Or there is Peter Steiner, an ex-Swiss who also studied at the Basle School of Design. He joined G+A Montréal in 1969 and became its senior partner seven years later, when Gottschalk left to open a new office in Zürich. (Ash had already gone to open an office in

PETER STEINER  
PETER ADAM  
WALTER BALLMER



FRITZ GOTTSCHALK,  
HÉLÈNE L'HEUREUX,  
STUART ASH

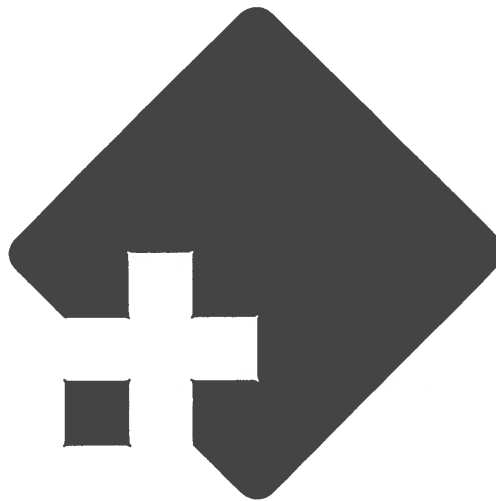
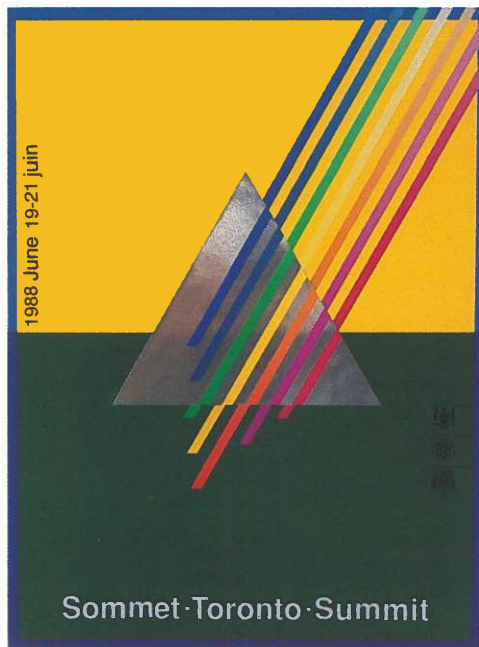
SIX OF THE G+A PARTNERS

Toronto in 1971.) Says Steiner, "Like Fritz and Stuart, I want to be the best, to produce at the highest level."

LAST YEAR, G + A BEGAN to foster design excellence at the student level by introducing its intern program. For 12 months, the firm sponsors a graduate design student while he gets valuable on-the-job experience. Says Rhonda Page, a 25-year-old OCA graduate currently interning at the Toronto office, "From the beginning, I've been thrown into whatever is going on. It's all very hands-on and I am learning so much. I don't think any other firm in Canada would give me the same experience or scope."

DESPITE THE SHARED SENSIBILITIES, the four G+A offices remain autonomous. Each has its own set of books, hires its own employees and works on its own projects, except in a few cases where large contracts are shared. Furthermore, the European and Canadian offices are characterized by their own styles of operation and design.

IN SWITZERLAND, GOTTSCHALK'S group has often demonstrated an ability to create exciting solutions to mundane design problems. Their innovative work ranges from a redesign of the Swiss passport to annual reports that seamlessly merge style with content. When contracted to design signage for a multilevel car park belonging to Contraves AG, a Zürich electronics firm, Gottschalk automatically rejected the traditional but boring P1, P2, P3 system. Instead, he created a series of elegant visual aid panels that used important figures from the history of electricity to make their impact. Thus, "D" section is not just designated by the letter, but also by a high-contrast rendering of Christopher Doppler, the Austrian physicist after whom the Doppler effect is named. Similarly, "L" stands for Louis Lumière, a 19th Century French inventor and pioneer manufacturer of photographic equipment; and "F" for Michael Faraday, an English scientist who formulated a law of induction.



**Top, (TORONTO office)** this poster won the competition to become the official logo of the economic summit held in Toronto last June.

**Middle, (MONTRÉAL)** logo designed as part of visual identity program for **HÔPITAL DU SACRÉ-COEUR**.

**Bottom, (TORONTO)** labels created for a special brand of **ANDRES WINES** targeted for the West Coast market.

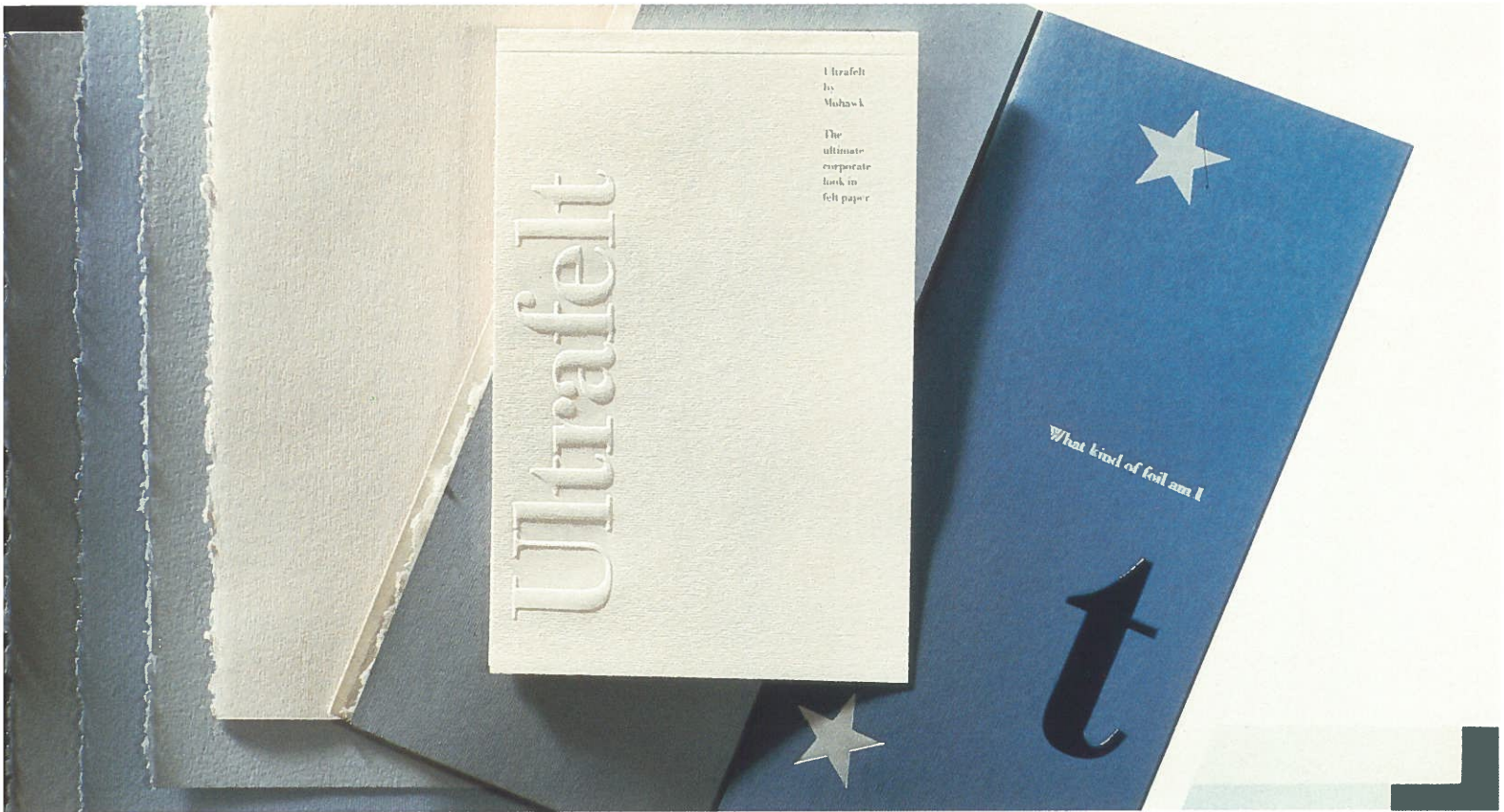


GOTTSCHALK FIRMLY MAINTAINS that he is happy to have left Canada for Europe to work with such prestigious clients as Balzer, a Liechtenstein-based high vacuum and thin film technology firm, Wir & Partner, a PR firm and APG/SG, Switzerland's largest outdoor advertising company. In part, this preference is due to the attitude toward design there. "Europeans take it for granted," he explains. "They look at it as a necessary and an integral part of a product. That means I don't have to spend a lot of time in educating people. Rather, I can get on with trying to create good work."

IN MILAN, THE QUIET BUT intense Walter Ballmer takes a hands-on approach to design, rather than delegating the work. His fine touch and versatility are evident in the beautiful posters he designed for Italian office equipment manufacturer Olivetti (where he worked as an in-house designer for almost three decades) and in the body of technical literature he, Gottschalk and Glauco Felici, the other G+A Milan partner, prepared for Enichem, the state-owned plastics and rubber conglomerate. To describe his wide-ranging talents, a 1980 *Graphis* profile states: "Ballmer can interpret and put life into every situation, from the concrete reality of mechanical equipment to the cold precision of electronic systems to the frivolities of fashion."

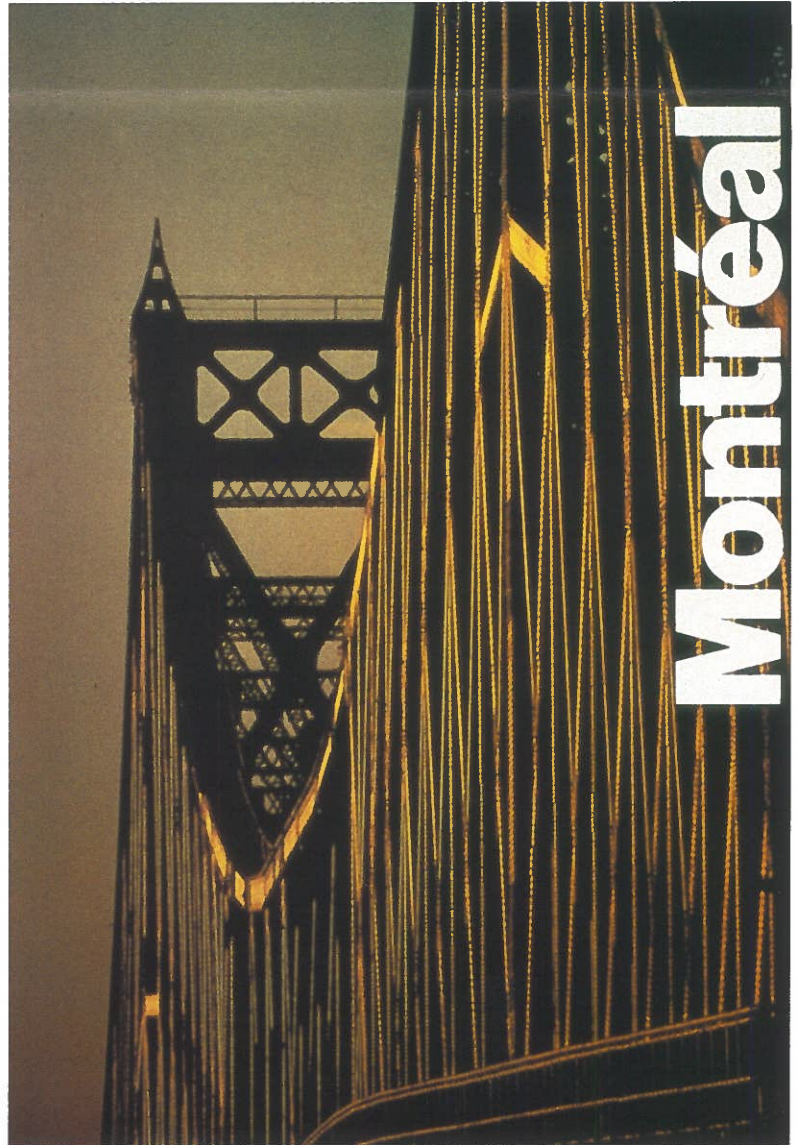
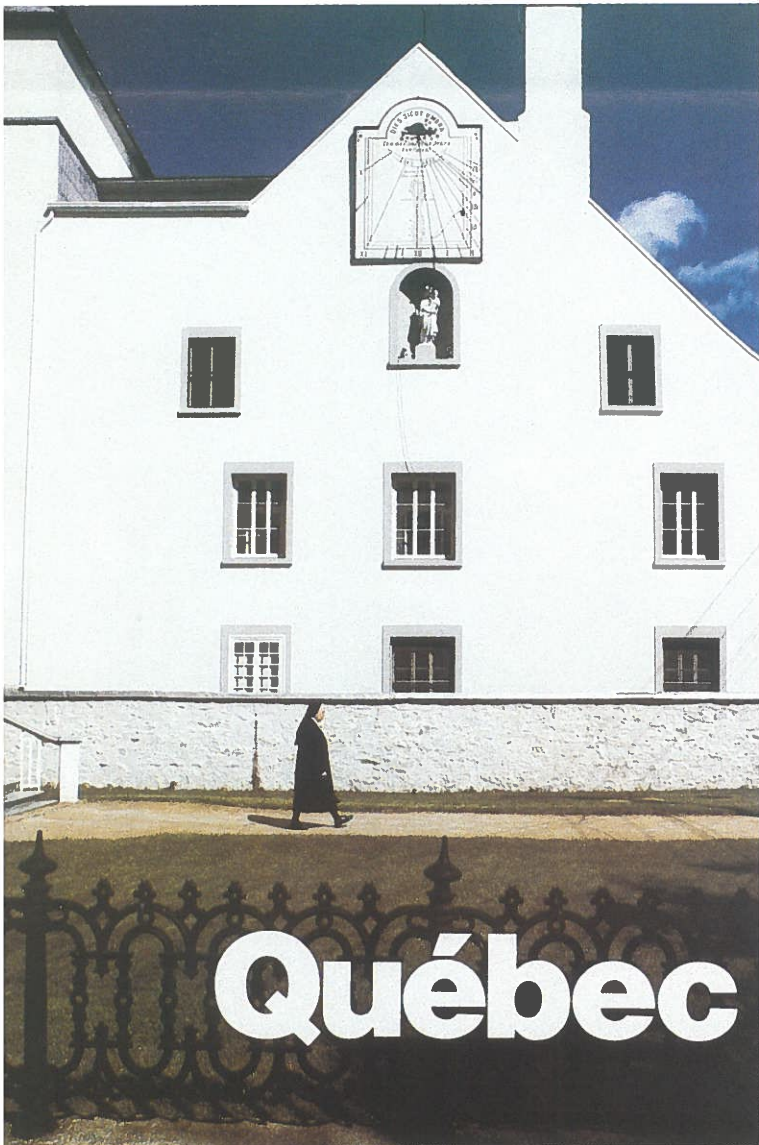
THE TWO CANADIAN G + A offices are best characterized by the unusual mix of projects they have tackled. On one hand, like their European counterparts, they have developed a series of lucrative, long-term relationships with clients. In Montreal, for example, Steiner has been designing Canadian Pacific's annual and quarterly reports since 1980. And Peter Adam—a partner in the Toronto office—has designed labels and packaging for Andres Wines for the same length of time. On the other hand, they have undertaken a lot of large, one-shot projects. The Toronto office is creating logos and visual identity programs for Toronto's new





bove, (TORONTO) promotional booklets demonstrating the qualities of **MOHAWK PAPER MILLS'** new Ultrafelt product line.

low, (MONTRÉAL) two of 13 posters designed for **TOURISM QUÉBEC.**







Top, (MONTRÉAL) two annual reports and a capabilities brochure designed for longtime client **CANADIAN PACIFIC**.

Bottom, (MILANO) the colored stripes on the technical pamphlets produced for **ENICHEM** represent the five companies that make up the conglomerate.





sports facility currently under construction, the SkyDome, and the city's bid for the 1996 Olympic Games.

ESIDES PROVIDING A STEADY income, the long-term associations with clients have afforded the Canadian G+A offices unique design opportunities. Having won a client's trust over the years, the designers are given exceptional creative licence. Explains Adam, "If you understand a client, his product and his problems, you can push a solution further and give him a better product. That's where the real enjoyment lies." Clients, in turn, appreciate having such close attention paid to their needs. Graeme McMurray, CP's director of communications, particularly likes the way Steiner and the Montréal office operate. "Whether we've asked them to establish a new identity—as we did in 1981, when we launched CP Enterprises—or simply to clearly present a massive amount of financial information in a clear manner—as we did for CP Limited's annual report last year—they've understood and presented us with a product in which our message, and not the design itself, carries the day."

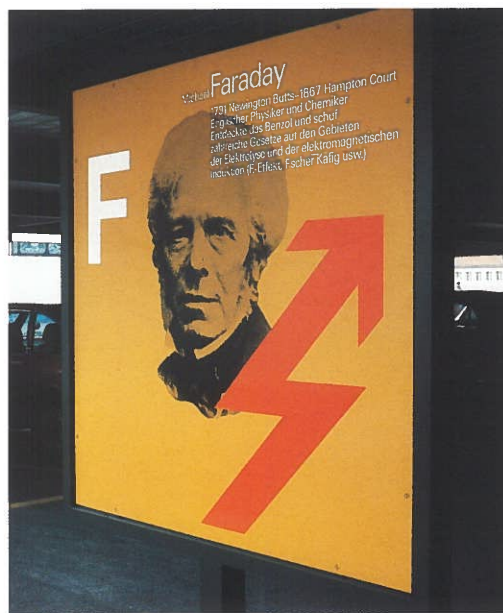
HIS COMPREHENSIVE approach has also convinced some clients to undergo radical design surgery, having come to G+A wanting only a few cosmetic changes. Two years ago, the Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur de Montréal, deciding that it was time for an image change, approached the Montréal office to redesign their logo. Thirty-one-year-old Hélène L'Heureux, the youngest of the G+A partners, recalls, "They thought all they had to do was get a designer to do a nice image. Little by little, I convinced them there was more to it than just a logo." Eventually she redid all the hospital's exterior signage and printed materials. Adds L'Heureux, "Designing a logo is fine, but you have to make sure all the ways it is applied work, too."

UT WHAT REALLY DISTINGUISHES the Canadian offices are their high-profile, make-it-or-break-it assignments. Ash, a large and confident man, explains he started pur-

suing this type of work five years ago to give his designers a creative jolt. "It became clear to me at one of our annual meetings that there was a lack of adrenaline in the work we were doing. I believed that this had much to do with the fact that we were concentrating, for the most part, on designing corporate annual reports. We needed new challenges. So, I started searching out unique projects through which I could break new ground. Now, this is the type of work I find most satisfying."

IT IS ALSO THE WORK AT which he excels. In 1983, his office was confronted with the task of resolving the identity conflicts that plagued the Ontario Lottery Corporation. Explains Helen Forrest, the OLC's product manager, "What we had were five independent games that were all competing separately for space and attention in shops. It was a real mess. We asked G+A to come up with what we thought of as a 'barber pole' for retailers—a form that would identify the games as unique but also as part of an overall unit." The result is the familiar modular system that now decorates the counters, windows and doors of corner stores throughout Ontario. Recalls Ash, "Using three bright colors, a uniform square as a module, a triangle (that has since become the corporate logo) and balls to represent the fun spirit of the product, we achieved a good-looking, simple system that retailers really like." So do the lottery customers, apparently. The redesign has helped the annual OLC sales figures almost double.

DESPITE THE GEOGRAPHICAL distances separating them and the differences in their working styles, the G+A partners know they only have to wait as long as the next yearly gathering to revive old friendships and reconfirm their shared design aspirations. "The annual meeting is what we're really about," says Ash. "Whether we're all together in Montreal, Toronto, Zürich or Milan, that's where we renew our common bond and common commitment. For G+A, that's where home is." ■



**Top and middle, (ZÜRICH)** a signage program for **CONTRAVES AG** uses a series of visual aid panels to designate parking zones.

**Bottom, (ZÜRICH)** a signage program developed for Zürich's main postal sorting centre reflects the high-tech nature of the building.