

# AN ACADEMIC EVENT

## THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF THE ALCAN LECTURE SERIES

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*Can a high-profile, event-oriented, star-studded lecture series be of academic value?*

**T**HE PAST seven winters have seen a weekly ritual - a Pilgrimage of hundreds of loyalists, skeptics and curiosity-seekers. These masses are not seeking their salvation, but perhaps merely a glimpse of fresher knowledge or a new word of explanation; maybe not the absolute truth, but at least a clear viewpoint. They seek ideas, fantasy, stimulation. The destination of the pilgrims is infinitely distant from a holy land or Mecca in itself. The event is the Alcan Lecture Series which, with weekly standing-room attendances of five-hundred and more has come to merit some investigation as a phenomenon beyond the scope which typical series of academic discourses would embrace.

The success of the Alcan Lecture Series can be attributed to several roots, not the least of which is the quality of the lectures' attractions themselves. However, one must view the content of these lectures relative to the nature of the formal educational processes encountered by those working into and through the fields of Architecture. Such a comparison reveals a weakness in the Schools' (particularly in the local circumstances) approach. An intellectual and experiential void - a product of an institution's excessive instructional self-reliance - invariably widens with time, leaving new, broadening fields of study primarily to the initiative of the individual (student or faculty) through independent research. Alcan offers a neatly packaged, clear-cut 'capsule' which partially fulfils many of the lacking

requirements for a broader-minded Architecture. To a starving crowd of idea-hungry professionals and, mainly, students (the ideal professional would always consider himself a student), the Alcan Lecture dangles a most tantalizing Architecture 'vitamin pill'. The danger, many counter - and the question of the series' value at hand - is the colourful 'candy coating' which renders this addictive pill far too easy to swallow.

The fields of attraction of Alcan are multi-plex. An aura has developed over the past seven years which has turned the series into **The** architectural social event of Montreal and beyond - removed from the academic experience. Amongst students at McGill (lectures are currently held at the University's largest lecture hall, the H. Noel Fieldhouse Auditorium of the Stephen Leacock Building), to miss any lecture without good reason is taboo. Selectivity in attendance is not generally acceptable.

The attraction potential of any single lecture can be attributed to several factors of varying merit from an educational standpoint. These innumerable classifications can be grouped (with overlaps) into three fundamental realms: celebrity; fashion; academics.

The lecture based solely on the work and personality of the lecturer himself tends to raise the most serious objections to the series from those concerned with educational influence. One might easily see the 'celebrity star-attraction' as necessary to the

series' reputation and continuation as a high-profile event (this is vital due to the unescapable and understandable ego of the series' corporate sponsor). Unfortunately, the practising architect speaking '...On his own work' - the familiar title of the celebrity lecture - often turns out to be a hollow, sometimes narrow-minded exercise in showmanship, more reminiscent of a best-selling author's appearances at department stores and on talk shows to improve both his sales and his public image. 'Hot' personalities can omit any substance from their discussions allowing their reputations, and often boistrous personalities, to carry their lectures - undeniably to occasionally highly entertaining levels. Not unaware of their oral virtuosity, the practising demi-gods of the lectern (Robert Stern and Michael Graves come immediately to mind) are often permitted incredible flippancy and arrogance by their highly enthused, star-struck audience, turning their discussions into an academic farce.

Although much less dubious than the lecture focusing on celebrity, the aspect of 'fashion' is a major target of criticism by those who oppose (fear?) the scope of the lecture series. Annual comments, hardly kept private, condemn the imposition of too many ideas - of superficial trends - on the easily influenced. One professor of design was heard to wish out loud for the complete demise of the lectures on these very grounds. The nature of 'trendiness' is consistently passed off as mere faddism - a passing phase perpetuated by an immature, capricious generation of popularizers of the field.

Yet, to deny the student the exposure to new (albeit 'trendy') concepts of aesthetics; to contemporary practitioners whose time-untested work is drawing attention; to architects of past eras who have earned a second look at their contributions through a fresher perspective, is hardly a decent response to the problems associated with fashion-following. The lectures actually contribute somewhat to proper understanding through the powerful tools of first-hand explanation and thoroughly studied and documented interpretation. A 'trend' or 'fashion' once understood is a valuable resource to aid in the designer's ability to articulate, discriminate and express. To add to one's architectural vocabulary through the clarified understanding of others' intentions can only enrich the individual, even if the new lexicon is never consciously applied. As such, the Alcan Lectures should be considered as a preliminary basis to avoid the narrowness and blind following usually associated with fashion, if the lectures' inherent weaknesses (discussed below) are duly recognized.

Intellectualism is probably the one aspect currently most lacking in many design studios. In its ability to provoke thought and discussion among those who habitually slip into a dreary, introverted, isolated routine, Alcan is providing the stimulation necessary to open one's eyes a touch wider, and, optimally, to perceive a touch clearer. Insightful, comprehensible criticism, positive and negative, induces further investigation, experimentation, and, ultimately, the elusive (while limited) understanding of some minute facet of architectural expression.

Lack of intellectualism in Schools of Architecture - the void which the Alcan lecture (or **any** lecture) only **begins** to fill - stands as a symptom of a wide-spread malaise common to contemporary education. The lectures

act as surrogate to the immensely rich literary aspect of architecture which, amongst too many students, has fallen into difficult times. Undoubtedly, returning to an earlier analogy, Alcan represents a pill much easier to swallow (more readily available, requiring little input beyond mere presence and some attentiveness) than the literature which ideally should be providing this necessary function. Surely, as the 'audio-visual' approach to education must begrudgingly be accepted as an inevitable teaching instrument, so the Alcan Lecture serves as the equivalent to the electronic, pre-packaged, **pre-edited** literature and theory of architecture. While one must not laud the further demise of the written word, it must be realized that the event-oriented lecture series is, for many, the only intellectual stimulus they will voluntarily encounter on a regular basis concerning architectural design, and for others, it is the only locally available expose of current global architectural issues (at least in such a dynamic format).

The main weakness inherent in any lecture series as compared with the impact of the written word is in the choice of subject, which, in the former case, is entrusted to the series co-ordinators. Without the desire and enthusiasm to follow-through on any stimulating revelation encountered at an Alcan Lecture by further investigation and research severely narrows the value of **any** lecture or presentation to that individual. In an age of the mass media, the permutations of choice are ultimately reduced from the infinite ("which?") to the finite ("yes or no?"). The lone decision left to the discretion of the consumer is the question of whether or not to attend. The co-ordinators of the Alcan Lecture Series (Montreal architect Peter Rose and up to the conclusion of last season's lectures, Alcan's Terry Kirkman) have obviously found what the consumer wanted - the question of attendance is seldom

pondered by the loyalists; seats are often at a premium in a 600-seat auditorium.

March 17, 1981 - Vincent Scully - **Frank Lloyd Wright, Freud and the American Dream**; this was Scully's fifth appearance in the seven years of the series. Scully's fame as a lecturer, scholar and educator reinforced by his previous dynamic performances for Alcan, as well as the enticing title, drew an unprecedented deluge of students, professionals and faculty to the Fieldhouse Auditorium. For very nearly two hours, some seven-hundred hot, cramped individuals witnessed every enrapturing flamboyant gesture and emotive description. The steps to all exits were completely obstructed as were the aisles, making the unlikely desire to depart prematurely a virtual impossibility. Yet, as Scully reached his crescendo, not a distracting sound was noticed. His conclusion was met by a sustained ovation, followed by a slow, silent exit, as everyone reflected on the experience of the completed lecture. Months later, his comments, observations, analogies and pure emotion are still remembered and recalled - and noted in re-experiencing Architecture through his added perspective.

This is the epitome of what the Alcan Lecture Series **can** be, at its best. For McGill students (told on being informed of the series by their Director to sit near an aisle to facilitate early departures), Alcan is an invaluable complement to the usually sterile studio routine. For inspiration and provocation, the series is unparalleled in its mass affectation. Even the bitterest opponents of the series' intentions still find the time to attend and observe - even if only to defame it the next morning. This universal attraction of proponents and detractors may be the strongest indicator of the Alcan Lecture Series' undeniable educational value ●