

DEATH OF A LANDMARK

by Orest J. Humennyj

Strathcona Hall, the original Young Mens' Christian Association of McGill University, dates back to 1904-05 (see Archives photograph on last page). Designed by Montreal architects Finley and Spence and funded by Lord Strathcona, the Governor and principal benefactor of McGill University, Strathcona Hall was a landmark for eight decades. Its carefully detailed Sherbrooke Street facade, in a cream coloured sandstone, contrasted sharply with its finely crafted beige-brick side elevations. It was perhaps the finest example of that Montreal architecture tradition which has exasperated many a sophisticated observer.

Strathcona Hall is gone now, demolished in late June of this year despite assurances that it would be preserved and integrated into the new Devencore complex designed by architects David, Boulva, Cleve. Despite the fact that structural problems in the old building were apparent years ago, evident even to the most untrained eye (particularly with respect to its McGill College Avenue elevation), insurmountable structural difficulties (rotten wooden piles and leaning steel structure) are cited as the reasons for the demolition of this venerable edifice.

Yes, the stone facade was carefully dismantled, numbered, and will be re-erected: a queer sort of contextualism with respect to the token preservation of several grey-stone facades next door. In fact, it's pointedly simpler to architecturally deal with the integration of a mere facade rather than of a whole building into any new complex. It all leads to a rather surrealistic vision of the Developer, the Contractor and the Architect sitting around on a Sunday afternoon and having tea, and upon "suddenly" learning of the "newly discovered" structural difficulties, shouting in unison with a cumulative glee: "Waste it!"

(Orest J. Humennyj is a former Editor of THE FIFTH COLUMN).

Upcoming Issues:
Rational Architecture.
Politics in Architecture.

INTERNATIONAL STYLE AT HARVARD

by Paul Falconer

A major architectural event took place this spring when the Harvard Graduate School of Design sponsored an exhibition and a two-day conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art's "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition" mounted by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in 1932. The exhibition which accompanied the lecture series highlighted the 1932 show at MoMA, which subsequently travelled to major galleries throughout the United States. The 1982 exhibition was divided into three parts, with the first focusing on the work of nine architects, including Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, J.J.P. Oud, and Mies van der Rohe, all of whom were featured in the 1932 show. The second part documented the reception the show received as it travelled across the country, while the final part explored the dispersion of the International Style around the world.

The Conference and Exhibition brought together an interesting array of noted architects, historians and critics. The Panel discussions which followed the paper presentations included the likes of Richard Meier, Bruno Zevi, Peter Eisenman, Paul Rudolph, Philip Johnson and Lewis Mumford, all of whom gathered in an attempt to examine the circumstances surrounding the 1932 exhibition and to assess how the complex issues then raised have been played out in the architecture of the last fifty years.

With their book and exhibition, Hitchcock and Johnson intended not only to indicate what the new style was, but to show that it was being adopted throughout the world. Despite this emphasis on the international nature of the work, they managed to assemble a collection of buildings which were diverse in their principles, each one being designed by an individual architect who obviously had his own preoccupations and understanding of architecture, and thus national and even local characteristics came through quite clearly. Hitchcock and Johnson were in fact discussing only one part of a broader phenomenon, and their catalogue and exhibition were less than ideal surveys of modern architecture in 1932. Other contemporary accounts of the movement were much more comprehensive, and they demonstrated that modern architecture was more diverse and was being adopted in places that Hitchcock and Johnson had failed to notice or neglected to mention.

Although Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson may not have defined it, it is difficult to deny that at one level or another an "International Style" did exist. The popularity and persistence of the term indicates a general understanding that an important crystallization of thought did take place in the 1920's and early 1930's.

Les articles pour publication peuvent être remis aux rédacteurs régionaux ou adressés à:
Articles and further suggestions for themes should be submitted to the Regional Editors, or can be sent to:
THE FIFTH COLUMN
Canadian Student Journal of Architecture
Revue Étudiante Canadienne d'Architecture
3480 University, Suite 13
Montréal, Québec H3A 2A7
tel: (514) 392-5407

THE FIFTH COLUMN as a national journal is calling for increased participation throughout the country and beyond. Whether from student, professional or otherwise, material is hoped for and needed to raise the level of quality and broaden the appeal of the magazine. Articles can be thematic or of general interest. It is now our policy to publish potential future themes well in advance in order to better solicit submissions. Some of these proposed themes are: Rational Architecture, Politics in Architecture, Utopianism, Anthropomorphism, Ornamentation, Geometry, Suburbia, and Architects in Canada.

THE FIFTH COLUMN dans sa rôle de revue d'envergure nationale encourage la participation à travers le pays au-delà soit étudiant, professionnel, ou autre. Les soumissions sont nécessaire pour augmenter le niveau de la qualité du magazine. Les articles soumis peuvent être thématique ou d'intérêt général. Désormais nous publierons les thèmes proposées bien en avance pour que les écrivains au large peuvent être tenu au courant et, nous espérons, être inspiré. Les thèmes proposées en ce moment sont: l'Architecture Rationnelle, La Politique et l'Architecture, l'Utopianisme, l'Anthropomorphisme, l'Ornementation, la Géométrie, les Banlieues, et les Architectes du Canada.

RAIC STUDENTS OF ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION

The winners of the first annual RAIC Students of Architecture Design Competition were recently announced at the RAIC Assembly in Winnipeg. Stating that none of the entries met its level of expectation, the jury decided that there should be no first prize and instead awarded three prizes of \$500.00 and two merit awards of \$250.00 each.

The three prize winners were Eugene Daniels of the Technical University of Nova Scotia, Tim G. Walsh of the Regina RAIC Syllabus program, and James Lee, also of T.U.N.S. The two merit awards went to Jean Maltais of Université Laval and to the team of Philip Fenech and John Fraser of Waterloo University.

The jury consisted of Helga Plumb (M.Arch), Toronto architect and Adjunct Associate Professor at Waterloo; Etienne J. Gaboury (B.Arch), Winnipeg architect; Jerry F. Weselake, Assistant Professor, University of Manitoba Dept. of Interior Design; and Stephen

Cohlmeier (B.Arch), architect. In its general comments it stated that: "the three prize winning submissions were all done in a professional manner although they did not seem to rise into the more creative aspects of architecture.... It was thought that school was the time to test out the limits of creativity, yet the students in the competition did not go beyond solving the more functional problems of the project. Regretably those that did show the creative spark did not also demonstrate an architectural rigor."

Although only 22 entries were eventually received by the jury, over 150 students initially registered in the competition, sponsored by Alcan and the RAIC College of Fellows, and whose program was to redesign two rail cars into a travelling design studio. Encouraged by the obvious interest in a national contest, the RAIC Students of Architecture plan to hold another competition in Fall 1982, and will structure the program and the deadlines in order to improve both the quality and the quantity of submissions.

COHOS EVAMY TRAVELLING SCHOLARSHIP (NATIONAL)

The winner of the first annual Cohos Evamy & Partners Travelling Scholarship is François Brillant of Laval University with Caleton's Wynus Bielaska a close runner-up. The single prize of \$8000.00 awarded to Brillant, is intended to fund a graduating student in a Canadian School of Architecture to a 12 week period of study and observation in the sponsor's office, followed by an unrestricted period of travel.

Each of the ten Schools was asked to select two candidates, whose portfolios were then evaluated by a jury consisting of David Russell (B. Arch), Alberta Minister of Health, Dale Taylor (B. Arch), Professor at the University of Calgary and Martin Cohos (B. Arch), partner in the sponsoring firm. Following are excerpts from the jury's general comments:

"The maturity and excellence of the submissions reinforces our faith in today's educational system . . . Both poets and builders became evident; this is good for our profession. Once we had narrowed down the entries to the final two top contenders, our job became very difficult. Trying to read behind the widely differing styles of presentation folios . . . was a real challenge." (Russell)

"... the dominating social questions of a few years ago are giving to a more narrow Post-modernism and 'academic

historicism' (usually in inverse proportion to the air fare from Princeton to the school in question) . . . Students seem to value drawing again (thank goodness)". (Taylor)

"Excellent overall level of work; gives one great confidence for the future of architecture and urban design; the schools to be congratulated; the students applauded. The final choice between the two top entries was particularly difficult." (Cohos)

François Brillant will be starting his 12 week internship in Calgary on July 2, after which he plans to travel to Switzerland to study the neo-rationalist architects of Tessin (La Tendenza, Mario Botta, and others) and hopes to work with them. If his funds hold out, he will also visit the works of Carlo Scarpa in Italy and meet his architect son, Tobia Scarpa. Upon his return in March 1983, Brillant will produce a report on his experiences for publication.

Wynus Bielaska intends to work for an architect with similar sensitivities, sensibilities and joy for the design for architecture. Although his school experiences were very inspirational, he now wants to learn the conventions of office practice. Employed by the Thom Partnership in past summers, Bielaska is now temporarily working for his architect father in Toronto.

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

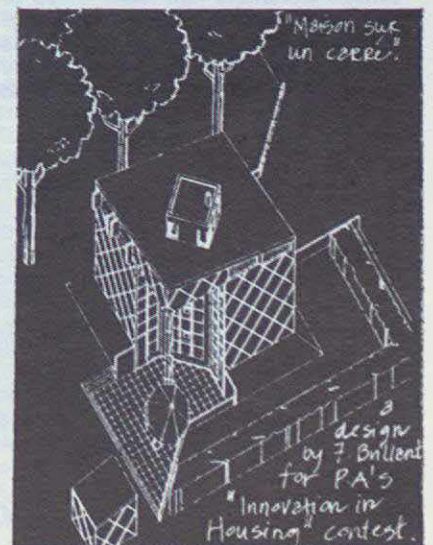
En français, s'il Vous Plait!

J'ai pris contact avec votre revue en juillet dernière à Montréal où je m'étais rendu en vacances. A cette occasion je me suis abonné à votre excellente revue. Depuis je suis rentré en France et j'ai fait abonner mon école, celle de Clermont Ferrand. En ce qui concerne votre revue je n'avais qu'un souhait à formuler: c'est de pouvoir lire plus souvent des articles en français. Vous n'ignorez pas que l'enseignement des langues est très déficient en France et donc qu'il nous est difficile d'aborder des articles rédigés entièrement en anglais, avec le vocabulaire et les tournures des phrases complexes qui caractérisent le milieu architectural. Précédent cette lettre j'ai envoyé un mandat correspondant à mon réabonnement pour un an.

Amicalement votre,
Alain Jouanisson,
Romagnat, France.

Cher lecteur,
Cela a été la politique de THE FIFTH COLUMN de publier des articles soit en anglais ou en français, les deux langues officiels du Canada. Il y a eu dans la passé au moins un article français dans chaque numéro et ça continuera aussi longtemps que possible. Par contre les articles en français ont été limité en nombre parce que les soumissions en français ont été limité. Peut-être, Alain, comme notre correspondant en France, tu vas encourager des articles français provenant de ton côté de l'Atlantique. Néanmoins, nous invitons nos lecteurs francophones de notre côté de l'océan des s'impliquer encore plus dans la débat architecturale.

Comité de Redaction.



TWO REVIEWS: THE PERCY E. NOBBS EXHIBITION

by John Bland

The exhibition, **Percy Erskine Nobbs: Architect, Artist, Craftsman**, at Montreal's McCord Museum until July and prepared by Susan Wagg from drawings, photographs, and papers held in the Canadian Architecture Collection and by the members of his family, is a great account of a key figure in earlier 20th-Century architecture of Canada.

While the exhibition sets memorable standards in the presentation of the work of an architect, it will likely be survived by the handsome and informative monograph Mrs. Wagg has written to accompany it. Both are the result of careful research and a sympathetic appreciation of Nobbs' objectives, and it is in this respect that her work is important for persons puzzled by architectural objectives today.

The drawings in the exhibition deserve close examination because Nobbs was an outstanding draughtsman. The photographs of his works need to be studied too, to appreciate how Nobbs used good materials and neat construction, and always related his buildings to their surroundings. Items of furniture, decorative plaster, as well as plaster models for stone cutters, metal work, stained glass and delightful sketches show that Nobbs was an 'arts and crafts architect' of skill and commitment. But to understand his background, his objectives, the basis of his creative imagination, his humanity and the meaning of his being called an 'inspired traditionalist' one must read Mrs. Wagg's text where these matters have been explored.

Nobbs belonged to a generation of British architects spiritually allied to William Morris, the poet and social reformer, who believed that factories and factory attitudes had not only disrupted society, but had destroyed

the minor arts. Morris devoted himself, with others, to the revival of craftsmanship. Beginning with the arts and crafts of building, he explored nearly all the decorative arts including printing and book-making, in which he was specially influential. He was believed when he pointed out that the creative imagination and sound judgement of craftsmen, based upon their knowledge of material, the tools they used, and their joy in work, was what the factory system had destroyed. He regarded the anonymous factory worker, hired to use equipment he could never own, to follow instructions he need not understand, likely to produce only a part of something, as being without dignity or satisfaction. While the story is complex, to be brief it can be said that in late 19th-Century England, where many things were made skillfully, there was a difficulty in making things beautiful that had offered no problem in the 18th-Century. The exception to the rule occurred where traditional craftsmanship had been revived, especially in the construction and furnishing of decorative buildings, which was work that in all cases could be traced back to William Morris. An architecture of great promise had come to be based on an appreciation of material and the appropriate techniques, on regional considerations, effects of weathering and the feelings such matters convey - concerns given scanty considerations by designers whose compositions depended mainly upon routine historical revival, reason or geometry. This involvement with craftsmanship led to a special appreciation of the splendid examples surviving from the past, whether Surrey farm houses or magnificent works in London. British arts and crafts architects could not escape being traditionalists, whereas their American counterparts working without such examples at hand, could be and were more experimental. For the same reason the creative imagination of British trained architects tended to images drawn from national experience. So it was with Nobbs; when he was required to imagine the conversion of an austere anatomy laboratory into a special library to receive William Osler's extraordinary bequest to McGill University - his books, papers and his ashes - material that almost daily would be visited by scholars from universities around the world, images of splendid British university libraries came to his mind, and he designed a room that could be an adjunct of any of them. It would never have occurred to him to make it art-deco or to make any such arbitrary choice.

Nobbs never hesitated to use precedents in his work. That is not to say that he copied, as is so greatly feared by persons intent upon being creative. But he saw a good deal of architecture as performance, and believed it was his duty to know what had been done before in the area of solving a particular problem, in order to find a solution that would be as nice as possible in the circumstances. For Nobbs, design was a continual search for form, starting with an understanding of what was required and a tentative proposal related to local circumstances to be modified by a consideration of materials and how they would be assembled for durability and expression, and finally what ornament might be added to make the work a joy.

Nobbs loved nature and saw it as a system of forces to which plants and animals responded and architects ignored at their peril. This awareness of nature limited choices and helped to remove the curse of arbitrariness in design. There were lessons for architects in the way a cat stretches out in the sun and curls up in the cold. He enjoyed the way native people shaped their canoes and showshoes in response to the materials used and the circumstances of their employment. He enjoyed the way ships were built to perform their tasks, and how farmers arranged their buildings in relation to sun and wind, and the needs of their animals.

Drawing for Nobbs was the architect's means of thinking; experimenting on paper with possible arrangements; and finally conveying to a client what would be seen in the scale of the view chosen, which required great discrimination in the choice of lines and in the indication of ornament.

The Depression interrupted Nobbs' practice and teaching. The arts and crafts movement did not evolve into a vernacular architecture. Craftsmen, as other artists, depend upon the expenditure of surplus wealth and their existence is precarious in the best of times. In the Great Depression, architecture ceased altogether and when architecture began again, economy was the cry. It was naive to have expected more. Arts and crafts architecture had produced a number of exquisite works in which we can take pleasure but like other architectural movements it was a response to particular conditions which have now vanished.

The disruption of industrial society persisted and attention turned to other



Watercolour - Colby house on Pine Ave. - MH 1905



McCord museum - orig. student union bldg 1904

remedial philosophies. In the area of architecture, Walter Gropius emerged as spokesman for a common sense approach to the acceptance of industry and its power for good as opposed to Morris' fears. Improvement of life's equipment, from teacups to highways, through simplification and efficiency and the rejection of decorative furbelows was a compelling argument. The new architecture offered ideals of optimism and apparent effectiveness. Rational design could be the answer to industrialization of production. Factories could have an ideal environment. Trade unions would assure harmony and fairness in work.

Modern architecture was to have been an attitude rather than a set of forms. Its objective was sensible buildings to obtain better living for people everywhere. Perhaps because architects are hearily ever called upon to make schemes for such ideals but are in fact required to make specific plans for particular needs for clients who want to express their importance, it was inevitable that certain forms would arise to distinguish examples of the new architecture, forming a basis of comparison and competition. In time, these forms would become more important than the original ideals. This appears to have happened and begs the reconsideration of objectives. This can well be given focus and desirable realism by reviewing work here in the first third of this century, in which Nobbs' objectives played an important role, with that of the second in which they were superceded by others of equal seriousness.

(John Bland is Professor Emeritus at the School of Architecture at McGill University).

by Peter Scriver

Architecture is coming of age in the North American consciousness if the rising voice of heritage societies and the chic 'consumability' of the architectural drawing, are any indication. A more convincing example of the popular significance of such a movement, however, was the encouraging public interest generated by the recent exhibition of the life and works of Percy Erskine Nobbs at the McCord Museum in Montreal. The mounting of a complete show on a Canadian architect, let alone the topic of architecture itself, is somewhat of a milestone in this country. Its initial success has been secured in part, I believe, by its presentation in a museum of Cultural heritage with an emphasis upon the architect as artisan and humanist, rather than the portrayal of the architect as artist that one would have expected from a gallery exhibition.

The McCord showing was nicely enhanced for Montrealers by their familiarity with Nobbs' numerous institutional and residential commissions in the city, virtually all of which have gracefully survived the ravages of urban renewal in the past few decades. The McCord Museum itself occupies the former McGill Student Union Building, the first of several distinguished grey-stones that Nobbs, one-time Director of McGill's School of Architecture, designed for the university over the years. However, the exhibition is quite complete in itself, with photographs beautifully mounted like all the exhibits, to supplement what can be seen in the streets of Montreal. Care has been taken to categorize, and group esthetically a graphically rich feast of exhibits from crisp ink presentation drawings to vibrant watercolour renderings, to knarled plaster maquettes for ornamental stone work; from a radiant back-lit stained-glass panel to a dark, hard-wood chair gripped in a schizoid tension between baronial comfort and botanical contorsions. The inclusion of the some fiery angling 'fly's' of Nobbs' creation along with the crossed foils of his allied passion for fencing fill out this visually enchanting show which speaks as much of a fascinating man as it does of his work. As was also well exploited by the recent landmark exhibition of Sir Edwin Lutyens at London's Hayward Gallery the character and humanity of the designer as expressed in his work is ultimately the force which communicates to the public and wins their deeper appreciation and involvement in the architecture.



Nobbs was not a great artist nor did he appear to suffer any such delusions. Rather his work reveals a highly skilled and spirited artisan: innovative, quirky, and even (dare we say) 'mannered' but tempered always by the reassurance of traditional forms and materials. The Scott House in Dorval, Quebec, is a marvelous example of these qualities. In his best work, generally the smaller residential designs and the larger but intimately contextual McGill buildings, Nobbs triumphs in the architectural molding of form to both the natural and the built landscape, exhibiting in all an uncanny penchant for what appeals and surprises instinctively rather than what shocks and challenges esthetically. Such grace and confidence of design seems somehow lacking in his more monumental designs such as the University Alberta buildings and his war memorial projects which sit ponderous and uncomfortable in their naked, formal isolation.

Nobbs' work began as that of a Scotsman, distinct from the American influences which so powerfully characterized architecture in early 20th-Century Canada. But as a Canadian of choice and obvious passion, and as an architect committed to a highly responsive approach to environment and context, Nobbs' work clearly came to speak what should confidently be called a 'Canadian' architecture. Well beyond the now indiscriminately popular nostalgia for Canada's surviving 19th-Century 'Gas-Towns' and colonial 'vieux quartiers', the popularity of the Nobbs exhibition makes a rich and convincing testament to the maturity, dignity, and permanence of at least some 'Architecture' of this country, and of this century, notwithstanding! This first by the McCord will hopefully spawn similarly delightful discoveries in future, both of Architecture and of architectural characters slumbering in the musty wood-work of our rather proudish heritage. **Percy Erskine Nobbs: Architect, Artist, Craftsman** will travel to the Ring House Gallery of the University of Alberta in October, to the Nickel Art Gallery at the University of Calgary in January, and finally to the Agnes Etherington Arts' Centre at Queen's University in March of next year.

(Peter Scriver is a student at the School of Architecture at McGill University).