ERNEST CORMIER

ARCHITECT & ENGINEER

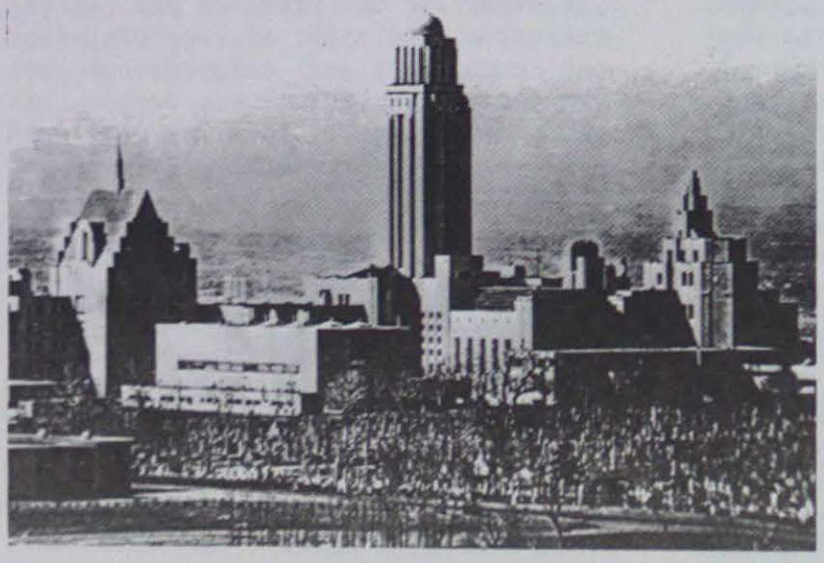
Peter Lanken - Architect

Who was Ernest Cormier, anyway?

Ernest Cormier, Architect and Engineer (as he always styled himself), was the first Canadian modern architect. Of the two or three great architects this country has produced, he may have been the greatest; he was certainly the most honoured.

He was born in Montreal in 1885, the son of a doctor. He studied engineering at L'Ecole Polytechnique, and spent two years working as an engineer at Dominion Bridge. In 1908, he was admitted to L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and studied there for six years. In 1914, he won the RIBA Prix de Rome, and spent the next two years at the British School of Rome. He then returned to Paris to design fortifications and other military installations for France during the last two years of the Great War. He returned to Montreal in 1919, spent a year as Instructor in Architecture at McGill University, and then devoted his energies to the practice of Architecture.

That he succeeded may be judged by the honours accorded him. Cormier was made a Fellow of the RIBA in 1929, and of the RAIC in 1930. He was elected RA in 1932. He received medals from the RAIC, the PQAA, the American Newspaper Guild, L'Association Canadienne -- Française pour l'avancement de Sciences, McGill University and la Société des Archi-



Université de Montréal

Ste. Marguerite-Marie

tectes diplomés par le Gouvernement Français. In 1947, he was selected to be the Canadian representative on the International Board of Design for the United Nations Headquarters in New York. He was made a member of the Order of Canada in 1975.

During his 35 years of practice in Montreal, Cormier designed only about 50 projects. Among them are some of the greatest buildings in Canada: the Supreme Court in Ottawa, l'Université de Montréal, and his magnificent house at 1418 Pine Avenue West. Mr. Cormier died in Montreal on New Year's day, 1980.

Well, if he was such a great architect, why isn't he famous?

When Cormier left Paris in 1919, he abandoned a world of idealism for a pragmatic one. There was hardly any tradition of critical architectural writing in Canada; Europe had a background of 400 years of written theory. There was little important theoretical writing in Canada during the 20's and 30's; those decades in Europe saw the publication of the manifestoes of Gruppo Sette and the polemics of LeCorbusier and Gropius (amongst many others). Neither Cormier or any other Canadian architect really participated in that outburst of rhetoric.

Now, in a culture such as ours, where language is the solvent of thought, an architect who does not write is at a severe disadvantage. If the critic is not given a convenient set of ideas on which to build his criticism, he doesn't criticize. Ernest Cormier thought of himself primarily as a builder; he didn't write anything, and apparently cared little for rhetoric. When the RAIC Journal published photographs of the Pine Avenue house in 1932, their most interesting comment was that the house was "strictly functional in character."

As a result, anyone attempting to study Cormier today is faced with a very limited list of references compared to the bibliographies of, say, LeCorbusier or Gropius.

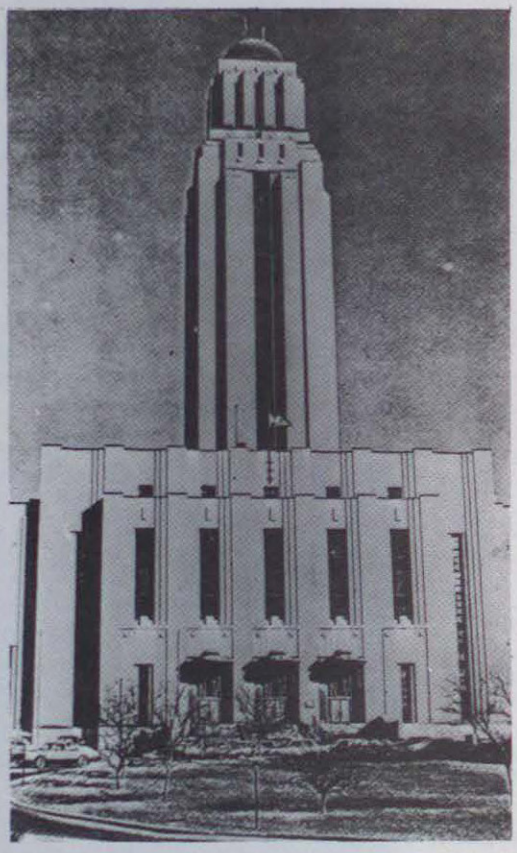
A second reason for Cormier's comparative obscurity is a corollary of the above. It was the writings of the "masters of the modern movement", much more than their buildings, that defined and disseminated the ideas of the modern movement. Architects other than the European masters were building magnificent works (Lutyens, for instance), but their separation from European idealism doomed them to obscurity.

Cormier was one of those architects. He was not simply a local proponent of foreign ideas, but a designer of works appropriate to Montreal's climate and history. His buildings were inevitably left out of the histories because they didn't conform to the European canon of modern architecture.

But...can he be really called a "modern" architect?

There is no question that the six years Cormier spent at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and the two years at Rome, indelibly imprinted the principles of classical architecture on his mind. In all his buildings, symmetry and axiality are fundamental; the orders appear on several. But symmetry is only the best tool for organizing space, and columns have for too long been used as a test for antimodernism.

While in Paris, Cormier had become acquainted with the designers who were later to organize the 1925 Exposition International des Arts Decoratifs. (It was this exhibition which proclaimed to the world the Art Deco style.) He had worked with Pierre Patout on the interiors of an ocean liner as early as 1912. (Patout was later to be designer of the liner Normandie, whose influence extented as far as Eaton's ninth-floor restaurant. (For many, Deco was to symbolize the twentieth century; its motifs are found in most



Clockwise from left: 1418 Pine Ave .W.; Palais de Justice, Montreal; Ecole Anthelme Verreau; Université de Montréal; Saint-Ambroise.

of Cormier's buildings.

He had also studied and practiced engineering, and understood steel and concrete - those basic materials of modern architecture - to an extent that was impossible in the nineteenth century. Structural clarity is usually the beginning of a Cormier design.

Finally, he had experienced, at no very great distance, the Great War itself. It was this convulsion of history, more than anything else, that divided the twentieth century from the rest of time. Cormier understood, as did every-

one else, that a new era had begun, and that architecture, like everything else, had to change.

The clearest demonstration of his modernity is to be found in north Montreal. There, on the same block (between Chambord and de Normandville, just north of Beaubien), Cormier's Ecole Anthelme Verreau (1930) confronts J.D. Marchand's Ecole St-Ambroise (1927). Marchand had studied at Paris some twenty years before Cormier, but the world had changed during the interval. Marchand's school is of dark red brick and sits heavily on the ground. Cormier's is of his favourite yellow brick and seems lighter and brighter because of it. Marchand's building incorporates massive stone arches to support the apparently ponderous weight of the upper floors. Cormier's finely-drawn horizontal and vertical lines reflect the structure behind and show that it's the concrete, and not the brick, that holds this building up. Marchand's building could have been built in the nineteenth century; Cormier's could only have been built in the twentieth.

What are the important elements of his architecture?

Appropriateness is initially the most striking aspect of Ernest Cormier's oeuvre. There is never any attempt to force meaning on a building. If the project is a commercial building on Ste-Catherine Street, it stands unremarked until one notices the careful brickwork and geometrically pure industrial windows. If a court house is to be built, polished marble, rare wood and bronze are lavishly used.

Two stylistic themes run through the entire body of work. The first of these is a Byzantine motif, used earlier in Montreal by Marchand (Congregation Notre-Dame, Ste-Catherine Street at Atwater, 1906). This style was apparently derived through the studies of the Beaux-Arts from the French architect Paul Abadie (Sacré-Coeur, Paris, 1875). Cormier uses it exclusively on religious buildings and it recurs throughout his career from St-Ambroise (1923) to the Basilian Seminary in Toronto (1950).

The second theme can only be called *Deco*, and is marked by projecting entrance canopies and columns that are rationalized to pure cylinders. These elements appear primarily during the late twenties, at Université de Montréal (1924-32), the Ecole Anthelme Verreau (1930), and at 1418 Pine Avenue (1930-32) period.

Entrance and procession are always important. The visitor approaches the court houses by majestic stairs and enters imposing halls through monumental doors. In the schools, the grand hall becomes an assembly hall, but the sense of procession is still there. At the Pine Avenue house, the visitor walks down a simple hall, gradually becoming aware of an approaching cross-axis. But nothing prepares him for the stunning effect of that cross-axis: to his left is a curved stair leading down, all marble, glass and stainless steel. To the right are four polished marble columns; beyond them, centred in the gloriously sunlit, twenty-foot high studio is a polished marble fireplace, tall and noble against the veneered walls.

And here, finally, is the key to Cormier's greatness. His profound knowledge of architecture enabled him to create monumental and timeless events out of the most basic elements of architecture: stairs, columns, doors, light. The four columns at the house - simple cylinders of dark marble - make a simple opening into a grand entrance, evoking the most fundamental memories of ancient hypostyle halls and royal processions. The fireplace, in its turn, informs the visitor of the age of Deco, but behind that its hierarchial form and gleeming surface brings back atavistic images temples Egyptian and older, of ceremonies whose words are forgotten but whose meaning is intact...

Finally, what buildings should be visited?

Palais de Justice, 100 Notre-Dame East (1920): Cormier's first major commission in Montreal, with C. J. Saxe and S.A. Amos. A powerful Beaux-Arts composition, but look at the Deco light standards at the main entrance.

Eglise Ste-Marguerite-Marie, Ontario East at Dorion (1923): the first of the Byzantine churches; the façade is embarrassingly similar to the same architect's *St. John Baptist*, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, of the same year.

Eglise St-Ambroise, 1215 Beaubien East (1923): Byzantine again, and the most complete and coherent church/ tower/ presbytery complex by Cormier in Montreal.

Université de Montréal (1924-1932): an amazing invention: the totally-enclosed campus was a completely new building type. The tower is reminiscent of Bertram Goodhue's Nebraska State Capitol of 1924, but is simplified and clarified. Visit the main entry hall with its stepped ceilings and majestic columns and stairs.

Ecole Anthelme Verreau, 6560 Chambord (1929-30): notice the *floating* canopies with their inlaid squares, and the typical yellow terra-cotta infill panels.

Cormier House, 1418 Pine Avenue West (1930): may be the finest work of all. Superb, rationalized Deco, and more. Shortly to be acquired by Prime Minister Trudeau, but still a private residence: no entry to the public.

The Dow Tower, Peel Street at Notre-Dame (1935): just the tower, apparently, is by Cormier. The original flagpoles have recently been removed.

Préchon Building, 1015-1019 Ste-Catherine Street East (1936): the *appropriate* small commercial building.

Supreme Court of Canada, Ottawa (1937): basically the same plan as the Montreal Palais de Justice, but elaborated in detail. Superb, uncoloured leaded-glass windows and luxuriously-panelled court rooms.

National Printing Bureau, Hull (1948): remarkable for its double skin and powerful, industrial-aesthetic heating plant.

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