

# The Spectre of A Canadian Architecture

by Mark Poddubiuk

*The house pitched  
the plot staked  
in the middle of nowhere.*

*At night in the mind  
inside, in the middle  
of nowhere.*

*The idea of an animal  
patters across the roof.*

*In the darkness the fields  
defend themselves with fences  
in vain:*

*everything  
is getting in.*

Margaret Atwood,  
*Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer*

**W**e began this issue of THE FIFTH COLUMN with a very different idea in mind. It was originally entitled 'New Directions in Canadian Architecture'. Once we began researching the theme and soliciting articles, it became obvious that there was a much greater project at hand. Like Northrop Frye's overquoted rhetorical question, "Where is here?", where we are going is inconsequential until we know where we are.

Secretly, I hoped somebody would arrive at a model for A Canadian Architecture. I have been disappointed. Apparently, such a venture is not an enviable one in a country split geographically, historically, socially and culturally. Canada is a ridiculous anomaly. Twenty-five million separate realities seemingly held together by the very conflict that threatens to tear them apart. Nationhood, and a tentative nationhood at that, is our only defence against complete anonymity.

I think there must be themes that run consistently through Canadian architecture. Margaret Atwood's thematic analysis of Canadian literature, *Survival*, draws some fascinating conclusions from a seemingly incongruous body of literature. Many of these themes can be extended to embrace other fields of the Canadian psyche. In architecture, they are made conspicuous by their absence. Various foreign periodicals have recently done special issues devoted to architecture in Canada (*Progressive Architecture*, *JAE*, *The Architectural Review*). In every case there is the same note of incoherency. Canadian architecture has never made a clear statement.

Fifty years ago, John Lyle expressed his misgivings about the practice of architecture in Canada. He developed a critical stance in respect to the lingering historicism of Victorian architecture which had dominated most Canadian architecture since Confederation and the oncoming wave of modernism already entrenched in Europe.

It was a critical moment in Canadian architectural history, all the more remarkable in its similarity to our present situation. Lyle sought a distinctively Canadian architecture based on modern ideals, mediating classical precedents and regionally sensitive forms and ornament. Apart from the few of his late projects that were realized, and perhaps those of his contemporary, Ernest Cormier, modern architecture in Canada has largely ignored Lyle's ideals. Instead, we have spent the past fifty years developing an anonymous collection of buildings that reflects no grander ideal than the pluralist society in which we are mired.

A few of the finer works of Arthur Erickson, Ray Affleck and others have succeeded in establishing specifically Canadian solutions to architectural problems. It is interesting to note that these figures are almost completely absent from the pages that follow. Though it was never intentional, it does indicate that they are no longer representative of an emerging generation of Canadian architecture. There is a difference between a solution to an architectural problem, such as the Canadian winter, and an architectural expression that is a particular reflection of a culture. An inward-looking building or an underground city provide possible solutions to the problem of the Canadian winter, but, hopefully, those solutions do not express cultural or social aspirations. That is why Erickson's houses are more importantly Canadian than any of his public buildings.

The modern project, as so emphatically stated by Kenneth Frampton, is not over. It has suffered an unfair sentence. The spectre that we call A Canadian Architecture cannot be found in a nostalgic reverence for a past that we, as a nation, never really had. We have not much advanced since John Lyle addressed the RAIC in the late Twenties and early Thirties. Instead, a new generation, fully versed in the tenets of modernism, increasingly respectful of the variety of traditions in Canada and fully aware of important ideas from abroad arrives at another critical moment in Canadian architectural history. Ultimately, A Canadian Architecture will be a synthesis.

The spectre still eludes us. We did not expect to bring it out into the open. When asked to name the ten most significant buildings in Canada, our readers consistently singled out the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. They embody some element of the spectre that extends well beyond the Victorian Gothic cloak. What is A Canadian Architecture? Don't answer — the question only needs to be asked.

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## Sour Grapes in the Garden

On a recent visit to Montreal I stood in front of the house Cormier built for himself. Above the doorway he had positioned a statue of a woman holding a replica of his University of Montreal. It was clear that Cormier was proud of his architecture, that he created with joy and unabashed enthusiasm.

We walked through a public garden and Cormier's home revealed its bulk grandly, joyfully. Today, with many of our schools in hopeful transition, major competitions becoming built realities, an archives being realized by our finest working with real dedication and spiritedness, new architectural publications full of vitality coming forward, new writers opening their opinions to a broad forum, it is at this time that we should hold on to the joy that one can see in Cormier. I am particularly aware, as I work on this issue, that many teachers are forgetting why they began teaching, many architects forgetting what we choose to devote years over drafting tables to: Canadian architecture is a garden, rich with tradition and exploration and possibilities — it's good to see the joy of those who don't settle for a few grapes.

— Kathy Dolgy

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