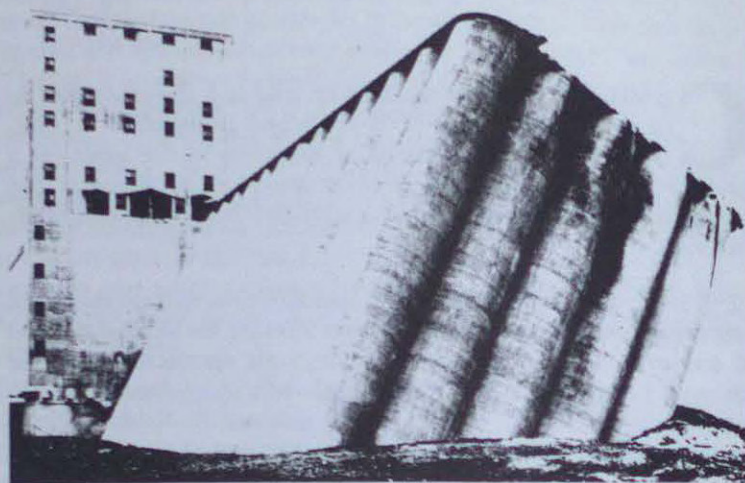


There are two definitions of culture. One has to do with an elite class of artists and connoisseurs with objective standards, universal ideals, absolute truth. The other is concerned with ordinary men and women, living together, evolving their own institutions, producing their own artifacts, creating their own myths.

Since the Renaissance, architects have generally associated themselves with the first definition of culture although the Modern Movement tried to combine the two. The quest for absolute truth has taken various forms: the traditional ideal of beauty, organic functionalism, more recently the return to rationalism and its offshoot, structuralism. If one of these were right, then the discussion as to whether there could ever be a Canadian architecture would be at an end. All we could do would be try to understand what nature or reason — or architecture itself — has set down for us to follow, and then we too might learn how to produce design of transcendental quality just like our colleagues from other parts of the world.

The dream of a single, objective, definitive standard, based on discoverable laws and principles, has fascinated architects over the centuries. It provides the psychological boost needed to have faith in what one does, it gives us the basis on which to condemn those whose work we dislike, and it allows architects, critics and teachers to set themselves up as authorities. The fact that no rules have ever



A CANADIAN A

been proved to be necessary or sufficient, that most rules are mutually exclusive and therefore suspect in their own validity, or that the history of architecture itself is sufficient evidence that both theory and design are conditioned by time and place, has done nothing to dampen the enthusiasm with which architects hold to their belief in the existence of some ultimate and external authority.

In itself, this act of so-called reification whereby human beings conjure up an abstract existence for their otherwise inexplicable beliefs is normal. Unfortunately, it can have pernicious side effects. Any fundamentalist dogma breeds narrow-mindedness, intolerance, the hatred of opposing view, and the rejection and ridiculing of beliefs other than one's own. Amongst architects it has encouraged and helped minority cliques to impose their tastes worldwide in the name of some objective reality. But most damaging of all, it undermines the role we play in shaping our own destiny.

Given a world traditionally conceived as operating through divine or natural law, the realization that social institutions were man-made only surfaced in the 18th century. In architecture the catalyst was the rediscovery of Gothic. Faced with different but equal sets of forms and compositional rules, the notion of style was developed. The idea answered many problems. It explained why architecture appeared in many forms. It allowed for different modes of architecture within the evolution of western civilization — Classicism, Gothic — and outside it — Arabic, Indian, Chinese. It demonstrated how each and every style could be considered within itself. It showed why judgements changed as standards varied. And more problematically, it related architecture to other facets of the society that produced it.

From this standpoint, architecture was not the realization of an abstract ideal, but an expression of social values. Together with other social institutions — government, religion, language, law,

art — it was part of the culture of any group that had its own unique identity. In this sense, culture was not something imposed from above, but the natural outcome of social life, to be found equally in a 'primitive' Indian tribe as in 'civilized' western nations. Productive as it has been — and it is at the heart of anthropology, archaeology and art history — the twin concepts of style and culture as a unified theory lent itself to a number of potential fallacies. It assumed that one aspect of society predominated over all others or, in another version, that its metaphysical totality infused and conditioned all its constituent parts. It assumed that all manifestations of social activity were somehow interconnected. It assumed that western civilization constituted a single culture. And it came to assume that there was a cause and effect relationship between the quality of a society and that of the art it produced.

Implicit in the belief that architecture 'reflects' its time and place is the hidden inference that some pre-architectural content exists for it to reflect. In its most popular form, this 'essence' has been conceived as the 'spirit of the age'. Given an objective material basis by Marx who argued that the character of art was determined by the economic system from which it results, the vision of a 'Machine Age' was fostered by architects such as Le Corbusier. At the same time, both men, who shared a liking for Greek art, attempted to reconcile their contention that architecture was indicative of its time, with the conflicting notion that it also followed its own immutable laws. It is from this symbolic union of the Parthenon with a Bugatti engine that Modern architecture derived.

This move to combine social culture and aesthetic culture did nothing to help the cause of nationalism. The only effect was to limit and qualify the 'absolute' rules of an aesthetic creed by the 'universal' conditions in which they were applied. Once again the reality of living in Canada or Timbuktu had nothing to do with architectural design. The only change was that instead of designing Neoclassical buildings in Nazi Germany, Communist Russia or New Deal U.S.A., architects now designed Modern buildings for

countries as diverse as Japan, Saudi Arabia and Brazil. Being commonly regarded as the expression of western civilization, it was taken for granted by its citizenry that western architecture was both the norm and the best. The consequence was that while, in theory, it could be accepted that differences might be allowed, in practice, other areas were considered ripe for western 'improvements' (so that even the U.S.S.R. exported its own brand of Neoclassicism to China) or in line for being 'updated' due to the historical necessity of events.

This Eurocentric point of view permeated and confused the theory and history of architecture. By chronicling a single line of development regardless of geographic borders, it explained all internal differences as regional variations and reduced all external imitations to a colonial or provincial status. In this situation, content could be achieved by substituting wheatsheaves for acanthus leaves. But even mother countries were not immune to such cultural imperialism. In the cultural life of the western world, no one nation has an architectural history it can entirely call its own, and some have always had their styles imported or imposed.

The flaw in the reasoning was to oversimplify the complex nature of culture as it applied to a set of separately identifiable groups or nations, and to equate it with a small class of architects and their patrons whose interests and aims were supranational. Thus catchphrase notions like the 'Age of Reason' — during which the fall of Quebec established Canada with two founding nations whose

had dissolved into a pathwork of separate societies, each with its own special character. The stage was set for architecture to take its place alongside other social manifestations — language, government, laws, traditions — as a symbolic component of each culture of which it formed part.

This did not happen. Certainly the English Gothic Revival sequence which led to the Queen Anne schools of the London School Board, and the no-nonsense houses much admired by Hermann Muthesius, found its motivation — if not all its sources — in the English physical and social climate. But any such incipient nationalistic tendencies were easily brushed aside by the subsequent success of the Modern Movement. Global in scope and meaning, the International Style once again took the world as its domain and completely ignored ethnic boundaries. The question must then be asked that, if architecture is an expression of each specific culture, how did this so readily come to pass? Or conversely, given the intrinsic nature of architecture and the manner in which it occurs, does it have the capacity to be representative of any specific culture?

As we have seen, it has been generally assumed either that architecture is an autonomous art form based on universal laws — aesthetic, behavioural, and natural — or that it reflects universal conditions — actual or idealized. While these have also been wrapped up in metaphysical terms, they have obviously contributed to the international direction that architecture has persistently taken.

ARCHITECTURE:

cultural differences we all know only too well — failed to recognize the importance of other more general cultural traits. The transmittance of styles was brought about as a result of a minority aesthetic taste rather than through any popular expression, as with the introduction of the Italian Renaissance into France by Philibert Delorme and into England by Inigo Jones. It could easily be argued that, far from representing the triumph of a superior or later phase of European aesthetic culture over one that was inferior or less advanced, this sort of intrusion was a defeat for the indigenous social culture that was being exploited and undermined.

The consciousness that Classicism represented not only an aesthetic ideal but also an ethnic bias came with Goethe's eulogy on Strasbourg cathedral. In it he decried the recently published theories of the Abbé Laugier that sought universal rules for architecture in the primordial buildings of antiquity. Although both English and German writers were to claim Gothic as their national style, the rift that emerged was essentially between two European factions, between the Greco-Roman and Nordic traditions, between the light and reason of the south and the dark brooding mysticism of the north. Thus Gothic and Renaissance were portrayed as not just two consecutive styles but as the natural expression of two distinctive groups who at consecutive times had been the dominant force on the European continent. In this reinterpretation, the Renaissance of Brunelleschi heralded a return to the Italian mainstream after a period of national decline, while the rediscovery of Gothic was vindicated by a reassertion of northern values.

At the same time, the rise of nationalism in the wake of the American and French revolutions and Napoleon's armies, established the political structure in which nationalistic movements could flourish. Instead of the broad north-south division of European culture, there were now independent states of every shape and size. The universal realm of the Roman Empire and the Christian church, well serviced by the Classic and Gothic,



DELUSION OR

Industrialization, urbanization; the need for housing, offices, schools, hospitals; the means and methods of design; professional and business practices and requirements; consumer habits. All are relatively standard in a large part of the world. What then could be left to justify the pursuit of an indigenous architecture that would be any more than a regional variation — responsive perhaps to the local climate — of an international theme?

Two arguments must be made. The first is that it has proved difficult to generate an international style, especially one based on form, that can accommodate local modifications without impairing its symbolic integrity — witness the brick Gothic of northern Germany or the pitch-roofed Modern of California — a predicament which helps to explain why subsequent regional, colonial or provincial versions of a given style are generally, at best, second-rate. Secondly, what constitutes a culture in the anthropological sense is not how human beings behave in any general way, but what they make of their lives together in a particular way.

Notwithstanding the structuralist contention that cultural differences only represent transformations of a natural order, the fact remains that architecture is self-evidently a concrete manifestation of a particular time and place and not purely the physical embodiment of some eternal, absolute, universal system. In other words, regardless of whether any metaphysical essence underlies architectural design, history and commonsense tell us that the forms it takes are conceived through the experience of human existence. Rather than being the expression of technology — obviously a tool — or any other factor, architectural design clearly evinces the manner in which such agents are viewed. Thus architecture tells us as much about the people who design as it does concerning the issues to be faced and resolved.

It is this special quality of a people that lends itself to characterization as 'American' or 'Canadian' or even 'Quebécois'; and, in architectural terms, results in residential environments as unique as those of the Dogon, or Hyderabad, or Amsterdam, or Halifax. If these anonymous buildings can serve so well the culture of a group, and, assuming that architects represent the society in which they live, why it is that the work which they so painstakingly and self-consciously produce fails to similarly portray or satisfy the same conditions?

The answer lies in the architect's role as spokesperson for society. When patrons and architects favoured the same taste and the majority of society — being illiterate and oppressed — could be ignored, architects were readily able to convince themselves that what they did reflected both an aesthetic ideal and the social reality. The Industrial Revolution shattered this simple relationship with the emergence of two other potent groups. A middle class which proceeded to take over the function of client that the upper class had once enjoyed and a working class which, by its numbers and increasing militancy, came to represent the main part of society. Against these opposing forces, architects developed two strategies. Bourgeois taste was ridiculed and condemned. With the working class majority, they were more circumspect and equivocal. On the one hand they denounced the factory system and division of labour which had cut off the workers from their crafts and, as a result, corrupted their natural sense of design and turned them into passive consumers of shoddy merchandise. At the same time, they accepted the fact that people had become passive consumers and set themselves up as arbiters of good design who, by intervening between vulgar manufacturers and their innocent customers, would raise the general level of taste by giving people what they

ought to like.

Following from these changed circumstances, architects could no longer seek the justification of their work in its acceptance by the power elite, but had to impose it on an unresponsive public to prove their contention that it was socially apposite. In this advocacy of a particular style, they were encouraged by their training to find motivation in the professional interests of an international faction rather than in their own situation. If the aesthetic model had been developed from some indigenous base, architecture would have realized its potential as the sublimation of ordinary building into art, as — ironically — it did in Victorian England and in Italy where a common bond existed between the local building tradition and its Classical, Modern, Fascist and Rationalist idealizations. As it was, the indiscriminating rejection of popular taste cut off architects from their social group, while their presumption that their



own taste was the standard of perfection, set them above and outside the public domain.

Ordinary people: ignorant, inferior, un-'cultured'; in Canada, middle-class, middle-brow, mediocre. Confronting them with disdain and proselytizing fervour, architects, heroically attempted to raise the quality of design. Given this simplistic caricature of a situation, inherited from the nineteenth century, critics have either despaired of ever producing a Canadian architecture of worldwide repute, or pinned their hopes on gradually raising the general level of public taste so as to provide the milieu in which great architecture might flourish. Yet in spite of the widespread assumption that all social institutions interact upon each other, the practice of architecture has largely maintained its own autonomy. The major influence on its evolution has been its own internal history. That this has transpired is because architecture, from its very inception, was attributed the capacity to symbolize some aspect of objective truth. By reversing both positions, a different and more

REALITY?

by Anthony Jackson

desirable cultural relationship can be reached.

While it does not in any axiomatic way follow that architecture should reflect beliefs or values derived from other social institutions — from economic or political or scientific convictions — it is obviously better for a social art like architecture, if the architectural values that it projects are shared by the majority of those it serves in a democratic nation. And, if this proposition is accepted, its attainment is more likely to grow out of our common way of life



than from the esoteric pursuit of some abstract metaphysical illusion. Far from symbolizing any aspect of ultimate truth, architecture has always been addressed to the psychic — intellectual, emotional, perceptual, mnemonic, visual — needs of those who positively responded to the signs that it used. To give meaning and sustenance, a sense of order, tradition, relevance, beauty to the built environment for everyone — not just a favoured few — who must make their life in it, regardless of their occupational class, is surely no mean task. For such a resolution to be effective, it must be readily shared.

Architectural concepts, forms, strategies, motifs, principles do not constitute the *a priori* means and methods of a professional group but are the artificial conventions through which it realizes its architectural intentions. By focussing exclusively on their own private language as if this had an objective existence of its own rather than being a particular aesthetic code — different but not necessarily superior to those familiar to other people — architects

have divorced themselves from public understanding in the same way that they themselves have been put off by the ruling conventions of certain other art forms. The solution to the current disillusionment with the stylistic conventions of Modern architecture is not to impose new sets imported from Amsterdam, Los Angeles or Milan, but to evolve a style or — more usefully — an outlook that can accommodate the sentiments, the attitudes and beliefs, the realities, myths and dreams, that collectively make up the Canadian ethos.

Are there any indications that this is happening? Certainly not in the work of those who continue to ape their mentors from abroad. But elsewhere, the advance towards an architecture responsive to our culture is being made from various approaches. Less affected by undermining trends that are promoted through the international circuit, those architects with an original talent, being Canadian, are predisposed to create images that are eloquent of their own situation. Others look for content in the existing Canadian fabric, finding their stimulus in the historic working out of built forms, or in the everyday arena of contemporary life, or more directly in climate, geography and social patterns of behaviour. Such individual endeavours provide an accumulative source of architectural material on which to base an indigenous architecture. But underlying and reinforcing these isolated results, within the same process that has already evolved its own vernacular traditions, exists that more general interaction of contextual forces and creative responses whose impact is demonstrated by the new spatial order that marks the present-day Canadian architectural scene.

For all people have a culture. Architects can add to it, enrich it, open up new directions for it; or they can distort and inhibit it. In the past, their pretensions to a foreign ideal have done much to perpetuate a colonial frame of mind. Today, the wider demand for myths and symbols — literary, cinematographic, architectural — to sustain and further our own identity, pluralistic in the diversity of our people and the variety of our land, requires us to leave behind our customary subservience to external influences and to seek our own posture in life through the buildings we create. We will then be of some value to the society to which we belong.

Anthony Jackson is a professor at the Technical University of Nova Scotia. He is well-known for his writings on Canadian architecture, such as The Future of Canadian Architecture and Space in Canadian Architecture.

