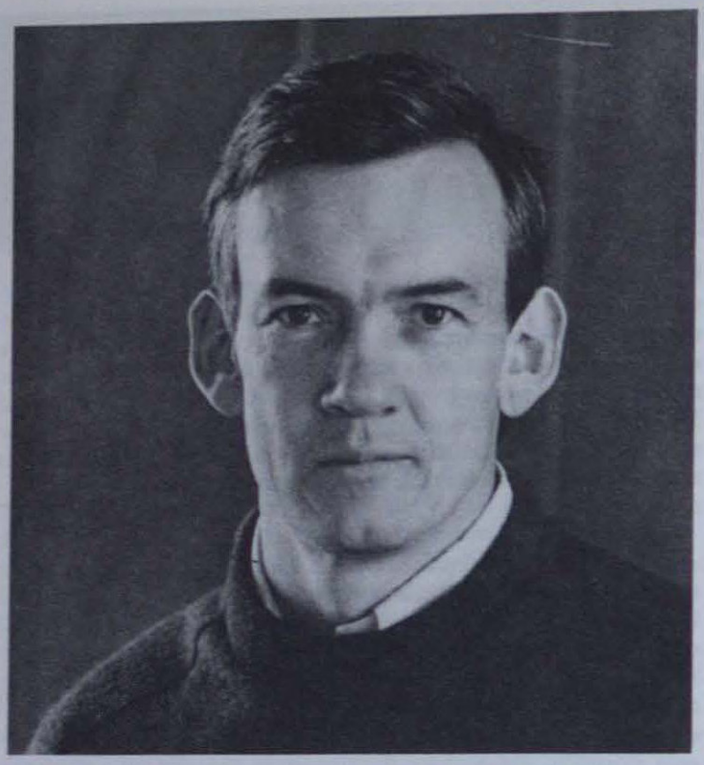

Michael McMordie is currently Professor of Architecture at the Faculty of Environmental Design of the University of Calgary. He is a graduate of the University of Toronto's School of Architecture, and studied the history of modern architectural theory at the University of Edinburgh, where he earned his Ph.D. He has worked in architectural practises in Toronto, Vancouver and Edinburgh, and has taught at the University of Edinburgh as well as Calgary. As well, he has been active in architectural and urban conservation, and acts as a private consultant in these fields. His research and writing are mainly on the history, theory and criticism of architecture, particularly Canadian architecture. He was one of the instigators of the Canadian Architectural Archives at the University of Calgary.

Michael McMordie was interviewed recently in Calgary by Brian R. Sinclair for THE FIFTH COLUMN.

An Interview with Michael McMordie

Brian R. Sinclair is currently in his third year of the Environmental Design (Architecture) Program at the University of Calgary. Previous to his enrollment in this Program he completed a Master of Science degree in Psychology and Environmental Psychology and is registered as a Certified Psychologist in the Province of Alberta. He is THE FIFTH COLUMN Regional Editor and Past CSA/RAIC Representative for the University of Calgary. Currently he is involved in the production of a book on Calgary Boom Years Architecture as a partner in the Uptown Avenue Design Group Ltd.

TFC: The main issue to be discussed in this interview is whether there is, or ever has been, a truly Canadian architecture. What would be your initial response to this question?

McMordie: The problem with the question is that there is a hidden premise which must be explored. When you speak of a Canadian architecture, it implies that there are a number of different architectures around the world which can be identified with nations — I wonder in what sense how true that is. When we speak of American architecture, what do we mean by that? There is pre-industrial American architecture of the East Coast or of the Southwest which is distinctive, which represents an evolution from a received style. East Coast American architecture, largely British Renaissance, in some cases, pre-Renaissance traditions modified by local craftsmen and designers to suit local conditions. Same thing in the Southwest United States; same thing in Canada in Quebec, where, for instance, the Quebec parish churches represent an evolved form which is different from, but derived from Metropolitan French forms.

But as soon as you get into the industrial era, the picture changes. There are some regional architectures, but mostly one talks, for instance, about American Architecture. One starts to identify major architects. You talk about Richardson or Sullivan. You talk about

some of the great names — Gropius, Mies van de Rohe, who, of course, were not originally American architects but who developed their buildings, their developed styles, their careers in the United States. Their architecture, however, becomes an international architecture.

Now to get back to the question, is there a Canadian architecture? There certainly is a pre-industrial architecture of Canada, parts of Canada — which is distinctive — notably the architecture of New France, of Quebec. That developed a tradition, a body of work, which included craftsmen and designers which extended certainly on into the nineteenth century and produced some very notable figures; for instance, Charles Baillairgé, as a figure of eminence in architecture. There was work through that period which is distinctive but as you move into the twentieth century as international architects in the industrial era takes hold, that uniqueness even in that area tends to dissolve, as I think it does in the parts of the United States that had had distinctive architecture. Canadian architecture from the twentieth century tends to look much more like architecture from everywhere else.

Is there a Canadian architecture? I think there are elements of a Canadian architecture and there are oustanding Canadian architects of the present era — as there are oustanding American architects or outstanding British architects of the present era. I think there are elements in their work that are perhaps Canadian, in terms of response to climate and materials. I think that we have craft traditions and, of course, they had a very tenuous and a very local and specific footing in this country. This country is very much a country of the industrial era — as a nation that extends right across the continent. As we move into that era, we move into a period which really is too close to us, historically, to identify clearly distinctive elements. I have my suspicions of what those distinctive elements are. They may be obvious things like, response to climate — the evolution of an architecture which emphasizes the enclosed spaces — the enclosed communal spaces — enclosed spaces for communication between parts of the city as well as buildings. That's an obvious thing that lots of people talked about. That's one of Ray Afflecks' favourite themes.

One of the things that is distinctive has to do with the process of development of financing and construction. This links back into the nature of this country, a country which is very strongly centralized in a number of ways, as opposed to the United States which is decentralized, particularly in financing — which has become so important. The Canadian banking system has been immensely important for the Canadian development industry, and has made possible a scale and kind of development that is distinctive. It's difficult in some ways to link that to architectural form, but I think that link may be there and that as we gain a longer perspective, we will see elements of a distinctive architecture and urban design in this country that relate to those factors — to geographical factors, to factors of financing, and development and indeed broader political factors that reflect some fo the distinctive things about this country in terms of its history and evolution and present government.

TFC: You mention various factors influencing the architecture. Diverse regionalism and climatic response seem to be the two most evident characteristics defining a specifically Canadian architecture. Do you see any new trends in architecture that respond to these conditions or do you see any other specifically Canadian factors in the architecture?

McMordie: It's interesting; as you know Trevor Boddy has just finished his Masters Degree Project looking at Prairie Architecture. Trevor came to the conclusion that there wasn't a distinctive prairie architecture but there were elements in this historical architecture of the Prairies that might contribute to the development of a regional architecture. That's a rather tentative conclusion but that's the kind of conclusion that seems to be the best we can come to when we look at this sort of question.

TFC: Do you know what elements of the prairie architecture he was looking at — that he has identified?

McMordie: I prefer not to go into that in great detail; I think Trevor has and will be explaining his point of view himself.

I think that more important than the traditional sources of regional architecture — that is local material, local craft traditions — are probably any distinctive elements in the way that people live in different parts of the country. That's difficult to pin down because we have an immensely mobile population. As you know, this is unlike Britain. When you travel around Britain or the United States, you find people who have lived in the same area for generations. This continues to be true in parts of the Eastern part of this country — in rural Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces. I suspect that that affects the architecture there. I am hesitant because I don't know those areas as much as I would like to. I'm heistant to specify.

When you look at it from the West, the only part of the West that seems to have a distinctive quality is the Pacific Coast. Vancouver is both a highly mobile city, in flux — a rapidly developing city — with a very strong national-international aspect. It is also a city which offers a kind of life, a fairly soft climate, immediate access to the sea and mountains, and so on. A former head of the UBC School of Architecture used to describe it as 'Lotus Land'. I am sure that's a pretty fitting description.

You find, of course, in Vancouver, buildings that cater to that and most evident is residential architecture. It has traditionally had a much greater interest in variety. The housing has tended to be open to the climate, the view, the sites and I think that that is continuing with the move from an emphasis on detached houses on their own sites to much denser urban housing. You can see it most obviously of course, in the development around False Creek and now with BC Place coming. But up the slopes to the south of False Creek, a lot of various private developments, not part of that coordinated scheme, again are developing a kind of dense urban housing which takes advantage of the view, gives a lot of individuality to the inhabitants and seems to foster a kind of distinctive style of urban life. I think that sort of thing is distinctive in BC.

TFC: When you talk of Vancouver as perhaps a regional type of architecture — how would you compare it to West Coast architecture in the United States?

McMordie: Well, I think it shares a lot with it. And for awhile there was a tendency to lump the Pacific Northwest together as a region. This crossed the international border, the boundary between two countries, but which had a lot in common. I can remember Ron Thom years ago telling me of the importance to him of a Seattle architect, John Yeon, who's work you will find published in one of the first numbers of *House and Home* when it started out as a magazine with an interest in very high quality architectural design.

You can't isolate architecture, you can't arbitrarily isolate local architecture from national and international tendencies. You want to use the best building science and technology you can grasp. You want to understand the economics of buildings; you need to know how people live, particularly for mobile populations; you need to be aware of things happening outside your region. I think we (educators) are trying to do this and bring the two together, but I'm not here to answer the question. You are in a better place than I am to judge whether we are managing to do some of this.

That of course, introduces another one of the problems — if you start to look for regional characteristics — the regions don't necessarily respect national boundaries. I think there are things common with areas to the south — the Bay Area and the Vancouver area seem to have architectural characteristics in common. But, I would look for an interweaving of those common regional characteristics with the distinctive Canadian political, economic things and see if they together begin to produce some sort of distinctive characteristics.

TFC: I'm wondering how you consider Canadian architecture as it relates to the larger framework of North American or of Western architecture?

McMordie: I think so far it has developed very largely within that framework. Many architects in Canada either were born and trained abroad, or went from Canada to receive their architectural training outside the country, or to pursue a Masters Degree outside the country after initial architectural training here.

Much of the investment in major building in this country has been by companies who are parts of multinational or transnational organizations, and this is all in the recent era — the last century of development. And this has contributed to the very strong international characteristic of Canadian architecture — and where there is a deviation from this, it tends, as I have said, not so much to reflect uniquely Canadian characteristics of style and design but much more questions of scale development — the way the planning framework operates in this country, code regulation of building, and such.

There isn't a clear separation between Canadian architecture and United States architecture — at least the northern United States where the climate and characteristics are similar.

Where there are much more distinctive patterns of training and development, I think you see greater distinctions — between, say, English architecture and Canadian architecture than between Canadian and American architecture. The English tendency has been to place more emphasis upon smaller scale of development and design, and the approaches to detailing are different, though some of these have been brought into Canadian architecture by English or British trained architects. There tends to be between Canadian and American architecture a tendency — looking at architecture very broadly, not looking at the work of individual distinctive architects whose work stands out — for a very high level of general competence in design and construction and a lack of interest in specific close-up details. So there is a sort of blandness or sameness — the buildings tend to be inarticulate; when you approach them closely you get the same sort of entrance details over and over again without much attention to any particular characteristics of the building or any attempt to respond to the individual using that building. Consequently, the entrance lobbies of commerical buildings tend to have a terrifying sameness — the colours may change, the marble may be different, but the thinking is the same in each case. That's both an international characteristic and one of the great deficiencies of Canadian architecture, particularly commercial architecture. But it is also seen in institutional buildings.

Look around this university for instance — that's very true of most of the buildings on the campus. That's a deficiency both in training and in outlook of the architects, and in the quality of the clients — because good architecture ultimately depends upon good clients who are aware of what can be done and very clear of the direction of the architect. It's an uphill job for a good architect to persuade a client with no particular interest in architecture that he ought to be responding to these things. The best architecture comes from the junction of a good architect and a good client. I can sight some exampes of that sort of building that exists. They stand out from the mass of buildings in the country.

TFC: You speak about the architects being trained in other countries and bringing that training to Canada. I question, now that Canada has a number of schools of architecture, whether the students are being taught any sort of Canadian architecture or is it just that same architecture from other countries brought in and retrained?

McMordie: That is a particularly penetrating question — given that you and I have been involved in a course in which some of these questions were being raised. If you look back at what I have said so far, you can see what the difficulties are for somebody who is trying to teach architecture in this situation. It becomes difficult to know just how to teach it. I think the thing we are most successful at is asking the questions. We are not particularly successful at finding the answers.

I think that we are trying to push students — one of the problems of architectural education is that there is relatively little time to master something that people haven't mastered in a lifetime of professional activity.

The most you can do is try to establish some fundamental skills and point some direction, partly by asking questions, which you hope people will pursue as they follow their careers after they leave this place or other schools of architecture.

I think that we are now looking much more closely at the region in which we build than we used to. Although, I remember, as a student of architecture at Toronto in late Fifties, early Sixties, we were very interested in the historical building traditions of Toronto. It was a city that had historically been built out of brick and, to some extent, stone — but brick was the prevailing local material. Respected local firms and architects used brick well.

I hope that approach continues; here (Calgary) we certainly spend some time looking at the historical traditions of the area. They are not very long or deep but they do, to some extent, reflect the characteristics of early development here. You can see this in some of the architecture that local architects are building — residential work which attempts to respond to some of those characteristics — traditional Calgary architecture, the very tight thin skin wood-frame, wood sided house of the pre-World War I period. That, I think, is one of the things we try to do. As you know, in the course we were discussing we used Kenneth Frampton's idea about regionalism — critical regionalism — as a theme or a method of exploring some of these ideas. I think his identification of the interaction between international trends and particularly international technology and local traditions and characteristics is very important here.

TFC: In *Trace* magazine you mentioned the conditions of creation in architecture, noting such conditions as political struggles, economic crises, technological innovation, compromises and constraints with clients, public authorities, budget and site. How

might architecture in Canada harness these forces in the building of cities in perhaps a more consistent manner — and would this consistency be a desirable thing in our architecture?

McMordie: To start with the last question first, I think consistency is always desirable in architecture. I think the fact that I take the position expresses something of my background as a Canadian.

I think one of the identified characteristics of the country as compared with the United States is a small 'c' conservative tendency and this has been a necessary element in the country's existence as a nation, historically and politically.

It has required an acceptance of a level of authority and direction which would be unacceptable to man, most American citizens. Certainly the United States historically developed as a nation because it adopted a position which emphasized a kind of revolutionary attitude. Though, that can be over-emphasized. The first Americans, George Washington and so on, were in many ways deeply conservative British but were deeply affected by eighteenth century French thinking, at least the early development of the nation was, which was a radical overthrow of the existing conditions.

Our political and social traditions reflect a much greater value placed upon continuity — politically and socially. I think this expresses itself to some degree in our cities, in the tendencies towards a much stronger planning framework, a much greater emphasis upon bureaucratic involvement in the regulation of city development with all the costs and problems that that involves. None of these things are entirely good or bad. And as much as I criticize the excesses and mistakes of that approach, I still value it. I don't want to throw it out the window — I want to improve it and modify it to be more responsive and sensitive. I look in the architecture of the city following from that for perhaps a greater consistency or greater continuity — a greater emphasis on a kind of background architecture, which seems to me part of a historic tradition which goes back beyond the origins of this country.

And it is a tradition I greatly value. I did post graduate work and spent a fairly larger period of my life in Britain and Edinburgh. The Scots were terrificly important in the development of this country, and I think that kind of convservatism is there in that Scottish tradition. You can see it in a city like Edinburgh — which at first sight tends to strike you as rather bleak and monotonous — but which on acquaintance, reveals a great deal of subtlety and variation within a fairly consistent framework. And that is the kind of city that I think we should be trying to create.

TFC: Paul Rudolph has said, "Architects by implication suggest the past as well as the future and make connections between the demands of society and Utopia." I'm wondering how you would interpret this statement as it relates to Canadian architects putting up Canadian architecture?

McMordie: I don't think we have many, if any, Utopian architects. I'm not certain about Utopia as the goal, at one pole. At the other end, I think that many architects have been notoriously insensitive to historic traditions in the past. It's difficult to compare with things elsewhere — we perhaps haven't been any worse than architects elsewhere through the Fifties and Sixties, which is a period of great insensitivity to these things — while other goals were pursued.

I think that we tend to be very pragmatic in our architecture rather than idealistic in that sort of Utopian sense — and I respect that. I place a greater value on sensitivity to and respect for the past than I do upon some notion of a Utopian future. And so, I would diverge from Rudolph.

TFC: Frampton sees regionalism as offering resistance to an onslaught of universal civilization. Regionalism changing in ideology from place to place — is an Ism that cuts across Frampton's Productivism, Rationalism, Structuralism and Populism. Do you see any examples of Frampton's regionalism in Canadian architecture, such as Doug Cardinal's Alberta work and Erickson's West Coast work?

McMordie: I think some West Coast work, including some of Erickson's, is; Cardinal puzzles me a little because his building has less to do with any specific geographical characteristics of this region than it does with some kind of metaphysical notion of Indian culture and its relation to current international culture. I think I'd make a distinction there. There are other architects who I think have contributed in some ways to this kind of regionalism. Many other architects on the West Coast — I think an architect like Barry Downs, some of Ron Thom's work as the West Coast got into that. Thom is interesting because I think some of his work in Ontario has tried to respond to a different region. Massey College is a very interesting building which reflects a very strong client and his predelictions in architecture — but it also shows a very great development change from Ron Thom's West Coast work in a way which responds, it seems to me, very directly to Toronto and Southern Ontario.

I think there are architects in other parts of the country — there are architects in Toronto who reflect that. There are architects whose work I don't know that well in Quebec, who I suspect show that as well. To some extent, some of the work of Gaboury and others in the Winnipeg area. Some of Cliff Wien's work perhaps shows that.

One of the problems is that there are not many, if any architects who have assembled a consistent body of work over a long period of time which reflects or seems to embody or express a continuing and consistent response to these things — so that we tend to sort of jump from building to building and architect to architect.

But it is a good question and I think it can be answered positively in a number of cases. It wants more space and time than I think anyone has yet given it. But I think that is one of the next steps in writing about Canadian architecture. I think there is more attention — a much stronger tradition in Quebec than in other parts of the country, and that is, of course, one of the strengths of a culture that is based upon a linguistic community which separates it from the influence of the northern United States.

One of our problems here and elsewhere is that we tend to look south of the border and do our criticism and research as an international exercise and on international subjects. One of the exciting things that is happening now — I think, over the last ten years — is the steady growth in scholarly work, criticism, history, and theoretical work in Canadian architecture. And that is an essential element, an under-rated element in the development of an architecture. Whether it is a Canadian architecture remains to be seen.

TFC: Roger Scruton, in *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, notes "a distinguishing feature of architecture is its highly localized quality. Works of literature, music and pictorial art can be realized in an infinite number of locations. The same cannot be true of architecture. Buildings constitute important features of their environment, as their environment is an important feature of them; they cannot be reproduced at will without absurd and disastrous consequences." What is your reaction to Scruton's statements, given that Canadian architecture may be simply a collection of borrowed and transplanted work — ranging from, for example, early Scottish mason work to California mission vernacular?

McMordie: I think the absurd and disasterous consequences are evident. They have a lot to do with the worst qualities in our cities. This is what we have been talking about — I think that this recognition of the fact that a building occupies a particular place in space and time is something that every architect ought to understand as the fundamental premise of architectural design. But somehow, when the building gets built, that seems to have disappeared from the process. I think the particular place and time obviously accepts, necessarily involves, a lot of elements that came from elsewhere — the craftsmen came from elsewhere, the building, the design ideas, the materials came from elsewhere.

Every urban design ought to be designed as part of the design of a better city. Improvements in a city by necessity have to be built upon the best of what is already there. The continuity of the past and the need to understand the history, the place as a particular place in space and time — has to be defined with as much exactitude as you can manage. That means a fairly profound understanding of the space in a sort of geographical, climatic and economic and social sense and time in a historical sense.

TFC: When Hitchcock and Johnson wrote their book *The International Style* it was relatively easy to define an architectural language compared to the situation today. Now, as students in the midst of confusion and arbitrariness of current architectural practice, we look for answers. Too often the solutions are over-reactions to the uniformity and blandness that surrounds us. Canada has produced its share of architects which would fall under the umbrella of the loosely defined Post-Modernism. What is your response to Canada's work in this area; that is, do you see anything unique in Canadian manifestations of Post-Modernism?

McMordie: I don't much like the term Post-Modernism — I suspect it will fade as an architectural category over time.

TFC: Would you rather another term be used — or is a term required?

McMordie: Well, I would rather simply treat things chronologically until you can produce some kind of useful stylistic category. I would talk about recent architecture, which includes a wide variety of different things, some of which attempt more or less literally to use elements from the history of architecture, some of which eschew any literal elements but which have developed as a much freer use of the continuing traditions which were being established when Hitchcock and Johnson wrote.

A lot of the basic themes of modern architecture defined very broadly, especially the influence of technology on architectural style, continue to be major elements in buildings — it seems a little silly to pretend otherwise. The most interesting people are people like Peter Rose in Montreal who are trying to understand and respond very much to the places in which they work, who are in their training and in the skills they yield fully modern architects — and every architect has to be unless you find a very specialized and rather esoteric niche for yourself in the field — and who are trying to bring the two together in some way. It was interesting to me hearing Peter talk about his National Gallery submission for Ottawa — to relate it to the work of Asplund and the Swedes at that point at which Asplund, who was, of course, a classically trained architect, was moving towards the themes that Hitchcock and Johnson were talking about. That is — architecture was in evolution at that stage towards what we loosely call Modern Architecture, or at least one major theme in Modern Architecture.

And that kind of involvement with a critical juncture in the history of architecture within the century is interesting because it seems to me it is re-exploration of some of the starting points from which the dominant architecture of our day has grown — to see if there are any other tracks or roots that could be explored which are more receptive to local characteristics, to regional things which permit or encourage design, which assimilates tradition and the particular character of place more easily. I think that — I don't think Peter agrees with me — some of the things he shows show an over-literal reliance on the things that define a particular place — in this case, Ottawa — and perhaps, at the moment, a not quite free enough use of the historical tradition that he has been exploring. But I think that it is the inevitable consequence of starting this kind of exploration of the past. The way forward is to become easy and free and fully in control of these materials. I think there are architects — Peter Rose is one — that are doing that sort of exploration and depending on their own talent and intelligence — and particularly their stamina in a business that is notoriously variable — they stand to do some very good things.

TFC: It seems that the issue of Canadian architecture is a very debatable one. If we take the position that there is not a uniquely Canadian architecture, do you see any possibiltiy for one in the foreseeable future — and if so — where might its priorities lie?

McMordie: I question whether there is now any national architecture which can be so clearly and uniquely identified, that the citizens of that country can say, "That building is a Canadian building, an English building, a United States building." And I'm not sure that architecture should play that role.

I think the Houses of Parliament in Ottawa have that kind of symbolic significance and in that sense, they are part of a Canadian architecture designed by two Englishmen in the Victorian Gothic style. So you know the notion of national architecture is a very odd notion to me. If you assert one you are going to find yourself throwing into the bag a curious collection of disparite bits and pieces — buildings which may have nothing to do with any particular region or local characteristics but which happen to have become prominent buildings in a particular place, designed in the most international of international styles — by an architect who had never set foot in the city. It is a possibility, but once built in that place, they become part of that place.

Toronto City Hall has some of these characteristics — it is a building by a Finnish architect with a group of Finnish colleagues and then modified somewhat and reworked in a local office. Certainly the procedure that selected the design was framed locally and was curiously Canadian in some ways. But the jury that selected the building was dominated by a Finnish American architect, who dominated a number of other competitions in the same way and produced buildings which became landmarks and which are, each in their way, a part of a particular nation's architecture — look at the Sydney Opera House. But that is a very odd way to produce a national architecture — it throws some interesting light on the notion of a national architecture.

I think notions of an architecture that responds to the particular place and time in a more sensitive way are appearing more and more. I think it is a very exciting time in architecture. We have very good people working very hard at producing better considered buildings. As I've said all through this, I think there are factors which contribute to producing buildings — to producing an architecture — which in some ways will be distinctively Canadian. But whether anyone will be able at a glance to see that it is Canadian architecture is another question.