

Canadian Architecture:

Past Present and Future

by Bill Walker

Some 300 years of cultural history precede where Canadian architecture might be said to be 'at' today. Canada's buildings are as much products of aesthetic theories as of the realities imposed by a particular time and place. Over the past three centuries of building in Canada, the approach to architecture has progressed from the need to copy and transplant old world styles to the invention of new forms based on an understanding of Canadian topography and climate.

Sykes,
Imitation to Innovation

The history of Canadian architecture is essentially the history of borrowed styles, and even today much of our architecture can hardly be described as uniquely Canadian. The purpose of this review is to examine the history of architecture in Canada in an effort to understand the existing state of affairs and, further, how its future may be changing relative to our past traditions.

Although many writers on the early development of architecture in this country begin their accounts with the buildings of the first British and French settlements, one must not forget that there was building of a more indigenous nature going on before this. This building was of course the 'architecture' of the native people of this land: teepees, igloos, and totems of the Indians and Inuit. Unfortunately virtually none of this pre-European-settlement building exists today except through imitations and drawings based on the writings of our native peoples. But it was into this environment that the earliest settlers stepped, and to them it represented a cultural and technological void. The easiest method for building the new world was to utilize the technology and traditions of the homeland. This 'architectural invasion' was the beginning of the end for indigenous forms of building. From this time forward the architecture of Canada was a direct reflection of the history of styles as they evolved in Europe. It is important to realize at this point the development of Canada as a colony; for it is only natural that as a colony, the new settlers would imitate the cultural and sociological traditions of the homeland. Canada's experience is in contrast to the American situation which saw the severing of ties with the motherland (along with the rejection of much of the culture) and eventually the development of its own unique culture, its own heroes, and its own myths.

The earliest buildings put up by settlers in Canada have been divided, by some authors, into different categories which reflect



Top: St. Paul's Church, Halifax (1750). Above: Dominion Parliament Buildings, Ottawa (1859-1866, Thomas Fuller). Destroyed by fire in 1916.

the degree of settlement (some of these categories are, broadly: pioneer buildings, town buildings, and military works (Bland, 1976, Gowans, 1966). But again the earliest pioneer buildings (cabins, huts,) were temporary in nature and have not been a major component in the essential chain of styles imported from Europe. Most of them were constructed of wood and reflected very early European building traditions. And military works, although a part of this early sequence of building, did not have a direct influence on later architectural development. The buildings which begin the chain of styles are essentially those found in early towns and villages (houses, shops, churches).

It is at this time that one can distinguish the emergence of the two major traditions of architecture (and building), the British and the French. The French colony was, in the early stages, importing the Baroque style from its homeland and modifying it to suit local conditions. This was reflected not only in buildings but in town planning (for example, Place Royale in lower town Quebec City). There was a well established tradition in rubble building with shingle and later sheet tin roofing. This tradition is perhaps most easily distinguished in the early parish churches of Quebec. A series of these built for Monseigneur de Laval reflects a mix of medieval and Baroque traditions modified according to the availability of materials and craftsmen. The clapboard and wood framing, characteristic of some of their buildings, was in fact an adaptation of New England methods. The English tradition in Canada was of course influenced by this building style of New England, which in turn was inherited from both the France of the Louis and the England of the Georges. A good example of the Georgian style introduced by the British is St. Paul's Church in Halifax, built in the 1750's. The forms and composition make the church look very much like those found in London in the same period. What distinguishes the new world buildings from those of the homelands is the degree of modification of the original style. Primarily because of a lack of similar materials and craftsmen and the differing climatic conditions, modifications to the European models were being constantly made.

The British tradition in architecture developed alongside the French in Canada and it was not until the early 1780's, with the beginning of a heavy English-speaking immigration, that it began to dominate. But the French tradition continued to develop in spite of the English majority. Culturally it relied to an increasing degree on the Roman Catholic religion. English Canada of course, leaned more heavily on British institutions to set themselves apart from both the French and now the Americans.

During the mid-eighteenth century excavations at Athens, Herculaneum and Pompeii uncovered many new artifacts from the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. These discoveries sparked renewed interest in those cultures and led to the sequence of revivals of 'classical' styles. The Neo-Classical style hit Canada around the turn of the nineteenth century. It travelled from the United States with immigrants fleeing the civil war, and from Britain. In Britain the style was thought to reflect the slowly growing power of the country as it built towards its status of 'Empire', although it was adopted more as a fashion. In the United States, however, the classical style was embraced as something of a monument to the victory gained over Britain in the war of independence, and as a symbol of democratic society. As the century progressed architecture in Canada reflected the successive Revival styles occurring in England, Italy, and France: Classic Revival, Gothic Revival, and Italianate. Of these, the Gothic Revival seemed to have had the most profound influence. One of the first Gothic Revival buildings in Canada was Notre-Dame Cathedral in Montreal which predates even the British Houses of Parliament, built in 1836. The Gothic Revival style was chosen for Canada's own Parliament Building (begun in 1861) thus reaffirming the cultural-historical links to Britain. The eclectic style of the Victorian period was quite widespread in Canada, and relatively long-lasting. The three phases (Early, High, and Late) extend from the 1820's to the 1930's. Many fine examples of Victorian housing remain today in the older districts of Halifax, Montreal, Toronto



and other major cities. The style was, of course, not limited to residential design but many of the grand Victorian public buildings have since been demolished.

Architecture in Canada, unlike painting and in a lesser degree our sculpture has shown a decidedly tenacious adherence to traditional forms. Prevailing fashions, taste of client, or the passing mood of the architect, are among the causes for the appearance in our streets year after year of new buildings of entirely unrelated scale and style. The appearance of our streets truly illustrates the chaos of our time. But very few of our buildings, apart possibly from the present day domestic, no matter what the style or other pretension may be, can be any stretch of the imagination be considered good architecture, or even architecture at all.

Colgate,

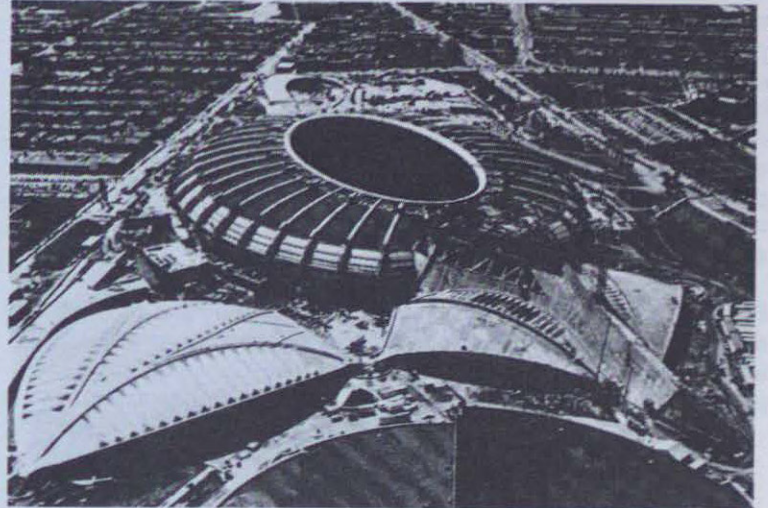
Canadian Art: Its Origins and Development

Toward the end of the nineteenth century a significant shift of influence appears. The English tradition begins to give way to the burgeoning dominance of architects south of the border. This new source of architectural style and theory has been the most influential through to the present day: beginning with imports of the early 'Modern' Americans, such as Sullivan and Richardson and following through with full blown International Style and the present day 'Post-Modern'.

The early American influence can be found in both private (that is, residential) and public buildings. It begins with the end of the revivals. Notable examples include: the old Toronto City Hall (Edward Lennox), and Benevenuto, Toronto resident of S.H. Janes, a developer, (Stanford White, 1890). The 'quintessentially Canadian' Chateau style hotel of the railways (Chateau Frontenac, Quebec City by Bruce Price), although developed by an American architect, was intended to be uniquely Canadian. This early American influence was merely the preamble to the International Style invasion. Early development of the International Style occurred primarily in Europe. Its existence in North America up until the late '20's was modest at best. The reasons for its sudden popularity are certainly as numerous as those who have written about it. It was economical, convenient, 'appropriate' and so on. Many claim, its essence was a reaction against the ornamentation of styles past. But whatever the case, this style was picked up in Canada in the same way as all others before. After the mid-40's modern architecture was here (and everywhere) to stay.



Opposite: City Hall, Toronto (1958-1963, Viljo Revell).
Left: Chateau Frontenac, Québec City (1890, Bruce Price; 1923, E. Maxwell and W.S. Maxwell). Right: Olympic Stadium Complex, Montréal (1974-1976, Roger Taillibert).



It was not long before Canada was turning out its own architects, well versed in the language of Modernism. The Parkin partnership was the first firm to develop a practice based on the new style. John C. Parkin had studied at Harvard and returned to Toronto with teaching of Walter Gropius. For a time, during the Fifties and early Sixties, the work of the Parkin firm led the field in Canada, but the best work in this style was still to be found outside the country. Firms such as Skidmore Owings and Merrill were the masters of corporate architecture. Again, Canada was in second place with the 'provincial' variants. The foreign dominance continued with not only the imported style but also imported architects. Numerous major corporate towers in downtown Toronto, Montréal, Calgary etc. were designed by well known Americans such as Mies van der Rohe, I.M. Pei, and the large firms such as SOM. Toronto's City Hall was designed by the Finnish architect Viljo Revell and Montréal's Olympic Stadium by a French architect. Even some of the notable Canadian architects were 'imports' (for example, Moshe Safdie, John Andrews, Barton Myers). These architects along with others (Affleck, Erickson, Thom, Moriyama) did gain international recognition for Canadian works. But again many of their efforts were a part of the wider movement which sought to transplant local needs and social values with a universal solution. The International Style has been a very big part of Canadian architecture ever since the Second World War. It has dominated our downtown skylines and it continues to develop into the Eighties. But its position of dominance has impeded the evolution of a relevant Canadian architecture. Many people remark disparagingly when they see another 'glass box' rise within the city today. And this questioning of architectural values is just what seems to be running through the minds of many Canadian architects as well. Slowly their efforts are taking new directions.

To me, therefore, the most interesting and most 'Canadian' architectural achievements are those that show themselves most aware of their human and community context, those that show what you might call architectural conscience. You will know what I mean.

Parkin,
Canada: An Inside View

We are now left with the question, "Is there such a thing as Canadian architecture?". It is apparent that our very historical and cultural background has left us with a collection of styles which have developed outside of this country before being imported for

our own use. Well, the direction of architecture in Canada does seem to be changing. Canadian architects today appear to be moving away from the idea of architecture as universal. Instead, they would appear to be looking towards local needs and values as a basis for design. As well, the problem of Canadian climate has spawned new ideas which are somewhat unique to the Canadian situation. The fact that there is snow on the ground for the better part of the year in most areas of the country (and during the winter temperatures invariably drop below 0° C) has led to development of interior open spaces either within many larger buildings and/or within and between these buildings. It has allowed those of us from the land of cold and snow to experience temperate climates year-round as well as the social interaction this permits. These interior open spaces are manifest in various forms: indoor streets, atria, underground shopping concourses and walkways. And they can be found, in one form or another, in virtually every major city across the country.

The modern Canadian roots for this idea reach back to 1962 and Place Ville Marie in Montréal. It was here that I.M. Pei in association with Affleck, *et al* employed an underground concourse which would insulate pedestrians from both an unpleasant climate and the urban environment at street level. In addition it reached down to connect with rail services and provided a basis for an entire network of similar interconnected walkways extending throughout the downtown. Winter (or just plain bad weather) was no longer a barrier to pedestrian traffic and/or the associated gathering of people. In Toronto a similarly extensive underground system now exists and in Calgary the same ideal has been elevated to the +15 level. Large atria are also a part of these systems. They provide the open spaces within which much of the social interaction occurs. In buildings without connecting walkways they are usually the central focus and they allow a limited visual connection to the outside environment.

Eaton's Centre, in Toronto, typifies this idea of the atrium space. In this, and other examples, the effort is made to relate the interior space to the social uses and the exterior form to the locational context. Whether this second objective is being met is questionable, but the idea of being able to negate the weather and enjoy social interaction year-round seems to be very popular.

This is not the only way in which Canadian architects have begun to respond to the vagaries of their situation. For there are a number of what one may call 'regional' architects coming into

relative prominence. Architects such as Peter Rose, Clifford Weins, Etienne Gaboury, Barry Downs to mention only a few appear to be responding to climate, culture, history and geography in many of their works. These works are generally small scale and their deployment of forms and materials seem 'characteristic' of the particular region. Some have, at one time or another, been cast as 'Post-Modern' but this is probably because their approach to architecture involves a search for local values and needs, and this is in contrast to a 'universal' solution. The elements they choose reflect the uniqueness of the region and the associations they conjure give meaning to the building as a work of architecture. Even architects who are accomplished within the International Style have demonstrated this ability to design more meaningful works. Arthur Erickson is one example. Many of his works in British Columbia seem to respond more fully to their context (not just physical) and the richness which they express is in apparent contrast to his works elsewhere which seem to follow more universal design principles.

It is clear that ideas about architecture are changing and it is not a shift happening only in Canada. It may be that this new direction is but one aspect of 'Post-Modernism' but for Canada it brings the possibility of developing a uniquely Canadian architecture.

Of late years, we have seen, there have been more and more evident departures from inherited forms. The baneful and stultifying influence of the dead hand in structure and decoration is visibly weakening, though the essential harmony of line, mass, colour and form has been retained. From this combination and new eclecticism emerges a novel and stimulating point of view in which the old is suffused with a strong contemporary feeling. Instead therefore of allowing itself to be overwhelmed by the influence of an inherited tradition, modern painting, sculpture and architecture in Canada have developed an individuality and freshness of perception peculiar to our day.

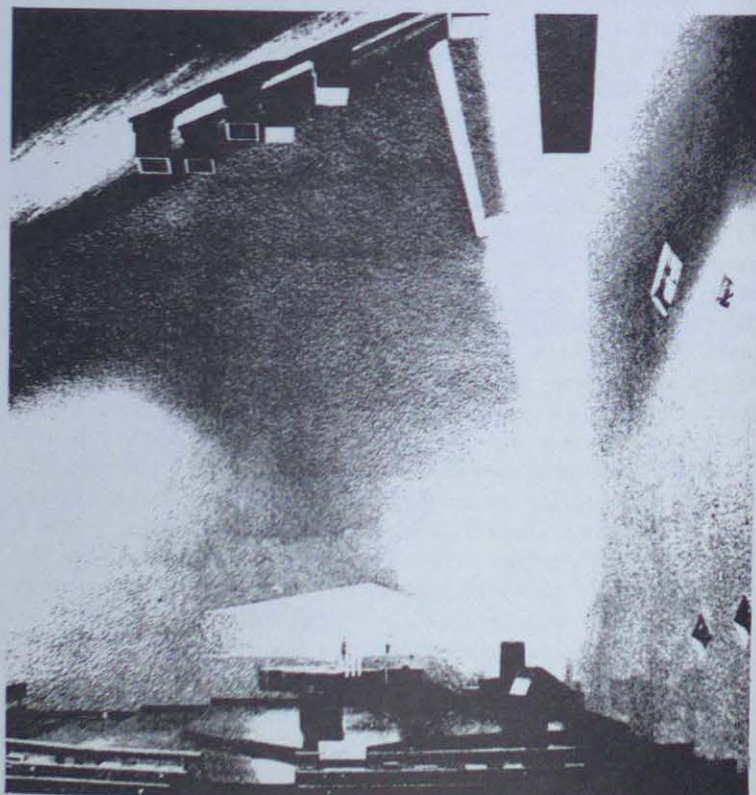
Colgate.

Canadian Art: Its Origin and Development

It is apparent, then, that the new directions being taken by Canadian architects may eventually lead to an architecture which is more meaningful to us as Canadians. The exact nature of this architecture is impossible to predict. But based on the cultural, historical, and physical diversity of this wide country, Canadian architecture of the future will likely be much more regional in nature. This is not to say that these architects are making a concerted effort to uncover regional aspects but rather the general tendency of architecture today is leading away from theories based on 'universal themes'. Instead it is looking towards an expression of those things in our lives which have more immediate meaning to us.

Canada's development as a nation has been through peaceful evolution rather than violent revolution (for examples, the United States). Our adaptation of foreign styles for our architecture has been an integral part of this process. Today, Canada is finally an independent nation but we do not possess a single strong identity. Ours is a nation of multiculturalism as opposed to a melting pot: and integration of cultures and histories rather than an assimilation. It is inevitable that an architecture which gives meaning to our dreams and aspirations will reflect this mosaic. It will be responsive to regional differences. And so, Canadian architecture will likely be identified as a collection of architectures; for it is improbable, given our history, that this culturally, historically, and geographically diverse nation we call Canada will ever mould into a single entity.

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Top: Pavillon Soixante-dix, St. Sauveur (1979, Peter Rose with James Righter and Peter Lanken). Centre: False Creek Development, Vancouver (1979, Downs, Archambault). Bottom: Blessed Sacrament Church, Winnipeg (1970, Etienne Gaboury).