

Building is a handmaiden of power Architecture is the companion of culture

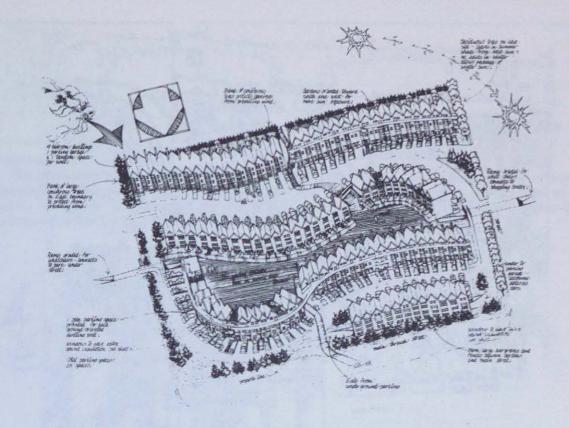
## WESTERN CANADIAN APPROACHES

by Roger Kemble

ou can imagine my dismay upon reading the British Architectural Review issue on Canadian architecture to find that the Holt Renfrew store in Regina was included in the lexicon of our countries greatest. Surely, I thought, we deserve better attention than this. Admittedly our best is somewhat obscured and we must not depend upon external opinions to strengthen our national self-image. Nevertheless, and in spite of the evidently complacent attitude evinced by those editors, our architecture does lack a zeitgeist that would inspire the outside observer. This is not to say the architectural profession has failed. It is with absolute admiration that I respect many of my colleagues — hell, I know what they're up against — who, in spite of apparently insurmountable obstacles, occasionally are able to retrieve magnificence in their creative pursuits.

It is unfortunate that so many of the generative decisions to do with architecture and urban design are in the hands of a lacklustre bunch of bureaucrats whose only ambition in life is to protect their wizened little jobs at all costs. I don't wish to engage in a diatribe against governments, corporations or banks, for I sincerely believe that with the best intentions these institutions could, potentially, have a positive influence on the urban environment. Essentially I believe that a national architecture can only come from a cadre of elite whose courage and imagination will give impetus to the bravest of our artists. A role model for a creative bureaucrat for me is a man named Frank Pick. He was, incidentally, a distinguished old boy from my own school in Great Britain. Frank Pick was the general manager of the London transport system during its more dynamic years. It was due to his influences that the strong visual

This medium density urban housing project was part of our submission to an energy conservation competition. I have included it to illustrate my propensity to articulate urban space with free flowing building forms. Upon these forms I apply a profusion of pedestrian scale detailed ornamentation to fulfill the principle of sustained interest. Nevertheless, we didn't win. My approach was pas au courant. Heaven knows conservation is a perennial situation. Historically, the traditional rural cottage form was the most cost-effective form we've ever known. All these fatuous sloping skylights, chicken coop shapes, atriums with glass tops have failed to convince me of their effectiveness - at least conservationwise, anyway. It's all a rationalization for trendy style.



image, amongst other things, of that system was developed. The station designs, the logo graphics and the incredibly easy to read schedules were all developed during his tenure. In its prime, the system was a great achievement. The totally integrated London transport system came about only because of courage and imagination.

It isn't worth dwelling upon but, for the most part, the instigators of the architectural monsters that festoon the Canadian landscape show themselves to be mean spirited bottom liners who are frightened to death of their own shadows. This isn't a result of recent economic uncertainties. This condition has been accumulating for the last twenty-five years. What a hell of a way to build a country.

Now having said all that and in spite of having to devote ninetyfive percent of my energies to financial survival — and I'll bet I'm not alone — there's still something left over for the greater pursuit of *la vie d'architure*. It's wonderful and I love it.

As for my own work, well I haven't done much building in the past two years. Getting my ideas built is very important to me. But I've had time to cogitate theories and work through many latent ideas. When the opportunities begin to flow again I'll have a comprehensive vocabulary of new ideas to draw upon.

It is urban design that is my consuming interest now. It expands our vision into a complexity of conditions that need architectural preparation and has, for the most part, been neglected.

Regional architecture in Canada has always been preoccupied with the 'funky'. I have never seen myself as part of the West Coast movement. It is in my opinion, as it is conventionally practiced, an intellectually lazy style. Admittedly the matrons love it. It's good for business. But essentially everything comes out looking like the shed at the bottom of the garden. Because it is totally residential in

character it cannot be adapted to urban design. The West Coast version of landscaping seems capable only of unquestioningly transporting the Black Tusk meadow wilderness into downtown Vancouver. It covers everything with formless bushes and trees, that, when grown to maturity will be so damn huge, drastic action of some sort will have to be carried out.

Even in my residential work I see design in the context of universal principles. Whether I'm designing a house or a city my criteria is based on a clear understanding of the design process. My writings over the last twenty years have helped me develop that process.

Unfortunately, I have, until recently, been dubbed a residential architect. It came about simply because an opportunity was never presented to do anything else. I have tried hard to dislodge this image; I suspect I am about to succeed. That is not to say residential architecture is unimportant. Historically, it has been the crucible that germinated many of our profound ideas. God bless those wonderful house clients who, with courage and imagination (or was it wild abandon), struggled with me to add something, inchoate as it may be, to the lexicon of this great elusive thing we call Canadian architecture.

I have given a great deal of thought to the design of urban architecture recently. I have published a number of articles on the subject. I would like to illustrate some practical applications of these theories. I have included diagrams of two recent projects for this purpose.

The essence of urban architecture is public space. It seems that even the most recent and significant urban design undertakings in this country are still locked into the old nineteen fifties modern architecture habits. We still conceive of cities as solid buildings and roads for getting to them. The interpretation is in large highrise hulks surrounded by meaningless open spaces crisscrossed by roads. These may look fine in model form but they are hell to live



This illustrates a mixed use complex within the urban boundaries of Vançouver. It is situated on a bridging site between a busy thoroughfare and a single-family residential neighbourhood. The commercial component and the apartments faced the thoroughfare. They formed a four storey buffer building to reduce noise interference going to the residential neighbourhood. It serpentines to provide a free-flowing urban space for pedestrian congregation; a focal point for activity. Each lineal form of building curved to follow a southwest orientation in order that each family residence had a sunny garden during the time of day it is in use. The density of townhouses diminished as it approached the residential area.

in. For all the economic rationalizations for persistence in this thinking there are contemporary countervailing reasons for not doing so.

The essence of urban space is the manner by which it is enclosed. The quality of the surfaces, the articulation of enclosure all mitigate toward its ultimate amenity.

In order to guide me — in virgin territory for me at least — through the labyrinth of complexity in the architectural approach to urban design I have developed a guideline. It is called 'The principle of sustained interest'. I have explained this in the Spring edition of the Montana State Architectural Review.

The essential approach to the principle is to treat architecture as it is perceived by the pedestrian. It is far too easy to create pedestrian interest by the time worn cliché of shops and boutiques. It is too easy to hide monstrous blank faces behind billows of bushes and other ephemeral paraphernalia. But how many boutiques can a city sustain? Just when do too many bushes become havens for night-time marauders? I am stretching the point for emphasis. Nevertheless, urban design is a polystemenous condition that goes far beyond parks and boutiques.

The principle of sustained interest, therefore, addresses the vast majority of building surfaces that, of necessity, cannot be plastered with merchandise nor be obscured by bushes.

As for my personal approach to west coast design I find evidence of the most recent vitality to be in the now defunct but greatly admired Art Deco period. On the west coast, no doubt elsewhere too, there is a profusion of examples of this wonderful style. It seemed to prevail into the early Fifties.

The salient characteristics seem to be a texture of prolific decoration applied to a purposeful structural frame enclosing a very well articulated spatial plan configuration. In the smaller scale buildings the form takes on a constructivist briskness, often in stark white stucco. Glazed tile coloured detailing is sometimes set in the stucco. Seldom could the builders resist the urge to include a wavy line cornice or other such device with which to wrap the design. Geometric curves and rectangles were fluidly combined. I enjoy the vast source of forms; I use it. This is the historic icon reference point from which I derive my own west coast idiom.

So much for the idiom as it applies to individual buildings. My reference point for the accumulated building form of urban design is Georgian London. The latter period of this time produced some incredibly moving urban spaces; evinced for instance on the Royal Mile of Regent Street. It was built within the context of an embryonic democratic system. In contrast the European urban design of that time usually came about at the behest of one authoritarian emperor or another; it shows. It looks a bit shabby now but when I was in my late teens it must have been at the apex of its glory. I remember walking past Swan and Edgars. Being a teenager I was not quite conscious of the architectural impact - I couldn't keep my eyes off the, literally, thousands of beautiful women - but the subliminal impact of the free flowing serpentine space as it encouraged the movement of traffic is indelible. Obviously we cannot slavishly emulate this period now. It has, though, a potent historical image role model for me.

The two illustrations show how I attempt in my design to escape authoritarian banalities by following through on a clearly defined design procedure of principles. I somehow try to avoid the symbolism of power. I believe that any society, organization or individual that has a need for the typology of power have long ago lost it. They are consumed by a mirage of their fantasies.

Roger Kemble is an architect practicing in Vancouver.