

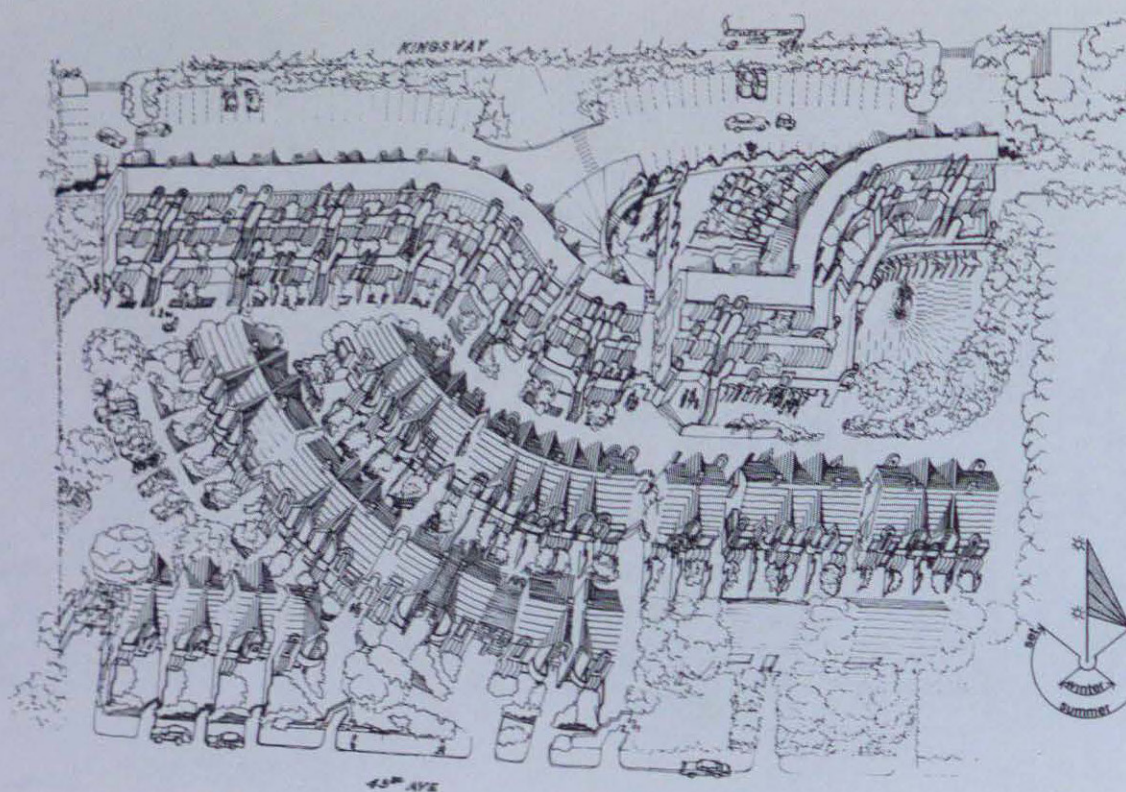
*Building is a handmaiden of power
Architecture is the companion of culture*

WESTERN CANADIAN APPROACHES

by Roger Kemble

You 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 illustrates a mixed use complex within the urban boundaries of Vancouver. 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 serpentine 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 nighttime 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.

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