

# MAINTAINING A CANADIAN ARCHITECTURE

By Gayle Webber

**T**hat architecture is designed and built in Canada is, of course, insufficient to make it Canadian in the sense which concerns us architects. We are looking for a combination of features, qualities, attitudes, that, when blended together create something described by the term 'Canadian'. This desired end has two obvious advantages; we would belong to a 'group', building in the Canadian style and whether we chose to break free of it or adhere to dictates of the style we would at least be provided with a basis from which to work, and the second advantage would be recognition in the worldwide architectural scene. With pride the Canadian cultural identity would be advanced and further defined. Credibility, respectability as Canadian architects would await. Others could come here to study our Villages and monuments!

So where is this style we want so badly? The emergence of Canadian architecture is dependent upon a variety of factors, but foremost among these must be a general and unified set of values and ambitions held by Canadian architects. Above and beyond local or regional influences, we must look for a consensus of opinion in architectural values in their largest sense, among Canadian architects. We cannot hope to patiently wait for this promised form, this Canadian architecture, to appear. We cannot look to the forests and say wooden, shingled architecture is ours and therefore we shall build only with these materials, nor can we reason that because our climate is cold (?) our architecture has no northern windows (thus eclipsing any opportunity to view the northern lights from indoors?) and that this shall be its determining characteristic. These are important aspects, but, they cannot form the essence or heart of our architecture. Climate, environment, pattern nor detail generate architecture although certainly contribute to its creation. Ideals, given in terms of architecture, are needed to describe Canadian architecture and these ideals must be gracious enough to span across every building type and every building location.

We, as Canadian architects must establish what we want, what we like, and what is relevant to us and to the society for which we build. We must find and examine our own values, updating them to suit today and our future. Renaissance buildings, for examples, speak of proportion, symmetry, attention to detail, but also represent a more abstracted set of ideals celebrating the rebirth of humanism, the value of man. Modernism, while creating smooth, planar white images, was fascinated by the power and promise of technology. What we believe in, perhaps, is not important; feeding ourselves and our families, beauty, proportion, chickens in all pots, so long as we *do* believe in something. A response is necessary. Last year, while speaking at my school, Peter Rose asked who our heroes were. Unfortunately no one answered. Have we really no heroes? No values? (surely if we had values, others with similar values and greater architectural skill would be found to admire?) How can we expect to have architecture?

The vast exchange of information via the international architectural media also plays a role in Canadian architecture. Innovative design throughout the world is almost immediately available on glossy pages, as are the latest technological advancements. This cannot help but provide inspiration and/or spark the architect to higher quality design. Editorials and critiques point out that all is not yet perfect in the world, that hope remains for the unpublished masses. This media information often leans towards 'trendy' design. Our perceptions of one particular architectural style may be slanted out of proportion while we ignore the 'just plain good' design of another. Circulation value can oppose quality architectural design only if the consumer desires to see flashy, more superficial work. We have an obligation to know what our peers do; to realize the state of the art. Many students, however, can better carry on a discussion of directions in Italian rationalism than they can one on directions in Canadian architecture (I've yet to discover what real practitioners best discuss). In school, as an academic exercise and learning tool, this is valuable. Perhaps one can be more objective about a foreign culture and its architecture. But, a time must come when we rid ourselves of our obsession with Italian rationalism, post modernism, or whatever and turn our eye to Canadian 'something-or-otherism'. Once our own architectural values are established, in relation to this culture, the merit of other styles and trends can be seen in our own terms. Of course architectural events in the rest of the world have meaning for us, but the useful nature of this meaning in our own design can only be determined when we know what we are looking for and even, why we search. For Canadian architecture we can only look to ourselves, and by extension to our culture, realizing the importance of consciously acting in the formation and direction of our own stylistic expression,

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