

A Conversation with John Bland

John Bland s'inscrit à l'école d'architecture de l'université McGill en 1928 et gradue en 1933. Par la suite il obtient un diplôme d'urbanisme de l'Architectural Association à Londres. Il revient à McGill en 1939 et devient directeur de l'école de 1941 à 1973. Il est présentement professeur Emeritus à McGill enseignant un cours d'histoire de l'architecture canadienne.

John Bland entered McGill's School of Architecture in 1928 and graduated in 1933. He then attended the Architectural Association in London, receiving a diploma in Planning. He returned to McGill in 1939 and became director of the school in 1941, a position he held until 1973. He is now a Professor Emeritus and teaches a course on the history of Canadian Architecture.

TFC: What was McGill's School of Architecture like when you entered in 1928? For example, what were the entrance requirements, the class composition, etc.?

JB: We had a junior matriculation, but we had to have mathematics, trigonometry and geometry as well. We had to submit a portfolio, though the only drawings I had were drawings I had made as a child, or as a young man.

As for the class, we were mostly Canadians, although there were also some Americans. The people from the United States were often here because of family connections with McGill. I don't think they sought out the School of Architecture because it was a well-known school, though of course the university was well known. I don't think we had anybody from Europe, but among the Canadians, there were people from various parts of Canada. I think that's always been the case, though perhaps as a percentage there were more students from outside of Quebec then.

We were actually quite a big class at the time; I think we might have been as many as ten. Most of the classes were small, very small. Ramsey Traquair had an interesting approach to instruction. Aside from the first year class, which was an introductory year, he used to combine the upper years. It didn't really matter whether you did one thing before another, and perhaps there was an ideal sequence, but with such small classes he could merge two classes together and teach them; and the next year you would be merged again, but with another group. It seemed an awfully sensible way to teach a course in

architecture when there were so few students.

Interaction such as this between the various years in a school of architecture is very important, because the students teach themselves. The staff helps them as much as they can, but really it's the students who teach each other. So it's very, very important to have interaction among students for this reason.

TFC: Was there anyone on the staff at this time who had been around since the school's founding in 1896?

JB: No, however Percy Nobbs was on the staff. Now I suppose Nobbs was the virtual founder of the school because he was director in 1903 and led the school until World War I. Then he stayed on teaching the final year in design until 1939. He had two other courses that were rather philosophical courses. One was called aesthetics and the other was theory of planning, but he is chiefly remembered as an instructor in design.

Then Traquair was director for 25 years, until 1939, so he was director when I arrived. He was also in charge of the courses in the history of architecture, and a course called Ornament and Decoration. In these courses he was able to present his particular philosophy of architecture. He was an Arts and Crafts person, and continued the Arts and Crafts tradition at McGill. Actually, his true belief was that the best way to train as an architect was to work for an architect. He feared the university system was just interfering with the whole

educational process. Because of this, he insisted that people have jobs in the summertime, and in those days we had a very long summer, so there was plenty of time to get experience.

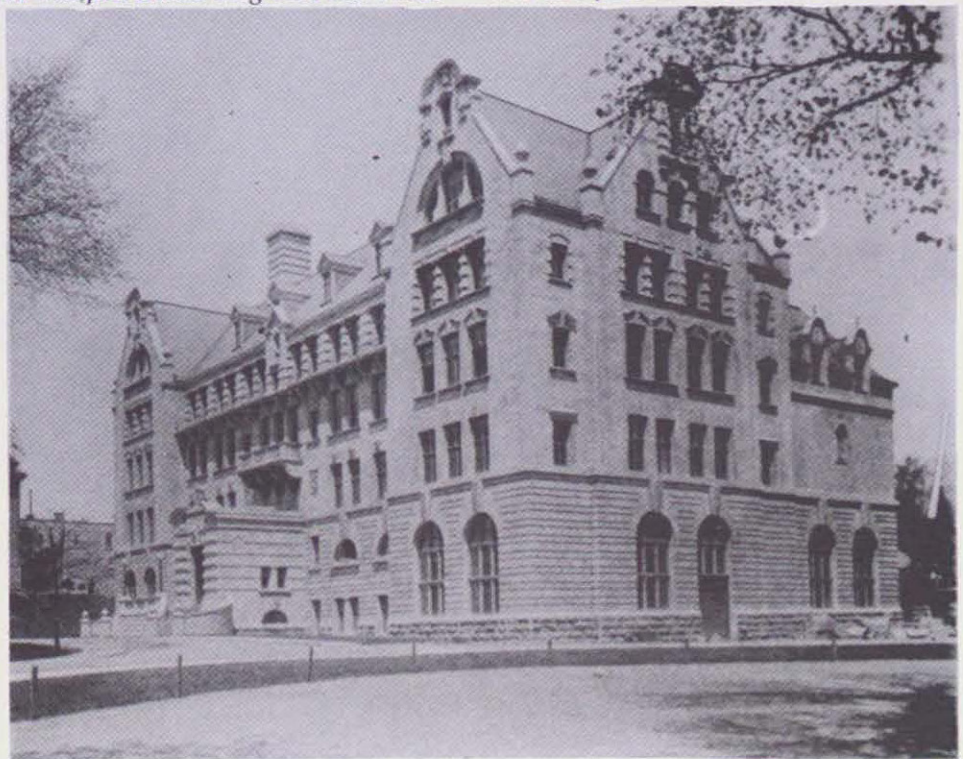
TFC: Could you describe something of the program?

JB: Well, there was an English trained architect named Carless in charge of the beginners, and he presented architecture to the students as detail. We never did any plans and we never designed any real construction, but we would design a window, a doorway, a balustrade, something of that kind. Then we would design something that had the orders in it, and we had to produce a big rendered sheet which was a very studied thing.

We had to stretch the paper and we had to grind our own ink; and wasn't that a touch of the arts and crafts, the whole notion I mean? We didn't have to make the paper, but the idea that you had to get right down to the fundamentals by handling the materials, that was Traquair's belief.

TFC: Was there any influence from Le Corbusier or the Bauhaus movement at this time?

JB: No, that came later, probably with me when I returned from England in 1939. Traquair was aware of the Modern movement in architecture in Europe, and managed to give us some explanation of it, but it really didn't mean much to us. I guess that Nobbs was the person who influenced us the



McDonald Engineering Building, McGill University, Montreal. Percy Nobbs, 1907

most, and he preached regionalism and architecture through understanding materials and using materials, particularly through working with craftsmen. He always tried to design with the craftsmen in mind, and certainly when he took a job, he more than hoped that the builders would be people that he would select.

TFC: Nobbs must have been near the end of his career at this time. Was he still a popular source of inspiration?

JB: Nobbs is not a person who gets to the end of his career easily. He had lots of vigour. He took a year off when I was in school to write his book on design, and I think I missed a good deal of Nobbs as a result. Now is that a book anybody reads anymore? It was a book on design which was kind of a summary of his attitude, his point of view, his teaching philosophy, everything, but it was in 1932-33, and close to the end of his teaching life.

The book appeared at a time when there was a great new spirit in architecture. Le Corbusier was writing, Mies van der Rohe was doing surprising things, the Dutch had splendid new buildings, and people were interested in the Swedes too; and here comes Nobbs with a book. It was published in England and it was totally Victorian. It had a Victorian attitude, a Victorian point of view. It's a good book if you want to find out something about the Arts and Crafts ideas, but with the acceptance of machine manufacture the Arts and Crafts had been carried much further by this time, so I don't think the book was a great success.

TFC: The Sun Life Building was under construction at that time. What was

the feeling towards such a building, given that its classical vocabulary is in fact no more than a veneer of granite on a steel framework within?

JB: I think we admired the Sun Life Building, admired it from the point of view of its materials and its details. Nobody was concerned about the fact that it was a steel frame building clothed in antique details. That didn't worry anyone except old Traquair, oddly enough. He felt that the steel armature of the building had played no role in the apparent design. I think he was hoping for an architecture that had a structural source.

TFC: How was business for architects when you graduated in 1933?

JB: The early thirties were bad everywhere, and they were certainly bad here in Montreal. There was a time when no buildings were going up at all. We graduated right at the peak, or rather bottom, of the depression. I was lucky enough to be able to go to London, to the AA.

TFC: Was there much difference in the emphasis on the way things were designed there, compared to what you had learned at McGill?

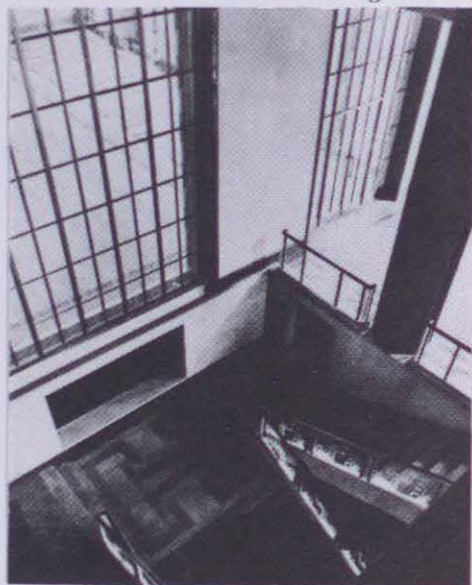
JB: Oh yes, entirely. I learned that immediately at the AA. When I was at the AA I was a freak. They couldn't believe that anybody would design the way I designed; it was so old-fashioned. Even my funny lettering made everybody hoot. But it was quite an experience, let me tell you, because criticism isn't taken easily by young people, and so you learn how to do things in a different way. When I joined the AA, I was of course a latecomer. And as in any school, students had been together for

a long time and so they had formed a pretty strong group. But they had to find room for me, and the only room available was with the girls. So I was in the studio called "the nunnery", totally ignored by everybody.

TFC: Despite the fact that you seemed to be a relic from the past, did you find that your training at McGill had prepared you to do the kind of things they were doing, or was the whole approach entirely different?

JB: I think it was only a matter of design. But you know every school has a different attitude. There were some pretty strong personalities at the AA then, and the students designed accordingly. At that time there was a great influence of Swedish architecture which was much admired: Grey Wornum's new RIBA building, for instance.

You know students, and I guess all



R.I.B.A. Building, London. Main stair with Henry Florence Hall beyond.

architects, have a very superficial view of things. We look at the surface and we look at the patterns and we like it or we don't like it, but we don't look at it very carefully. But British work at that time was very thoroughly put together. I bet you could go into the RIBA building today and you'd be quite amazed by the skillfulness of the craftsmanship. It's probably regarded as entirely old hat now, but some of the rooms were very nicely made.

My goodness, I remember being there one night when Frank Lloyd Wright came to give a lecture. The main lecture room was quite elaborate, and he walked very slowly down the aisle from the back of the room. It seemed he looked at every detail. He was a magician you know, old Frank Lloyd Wright. And when he finally got to the platform he asked for the lights to be put out entirely and it seemed a criticism of the building, and I know it made everybody laugh and jeer. It must have hurt old Grey Wornum quite a lot.



Sun Life Building, Dominion Square, Montreal. Darling & Pearson, 1913-1935.



R.I.B.A. Building, London, by Grey Wornum, 1932.

TFC: What was your reaction upon first experiencing a Le Corbusier building?

JB: I think the first Le Corbusier building I saw was the Armée du Salut. It was just unbelievable, unbelievable! I still find it marvelous because there was the work of a man who had a heart and had a soul, feeling. And to build this beautiful building for bums, waifs and strays, and he had them so happy there. And then the next building that I

got to know quite well was the Swiss House at the Cité Universitaire. I don't know what it looks like today, but it was an exciting thing.

They are very surprising, you know, Le Corbusier buildings. Today I suppose people might see them as a bit of old hat but at that time, that Swiss building that sat up on its pilotis, we'd never seen anything like that before. And Le Corbusier produced a building (I don't know whether people know it

very well) which was a great big tent at the Paris Exhibition of 1937. He had a little airplane suspended in it, and there was a wonderful feeling of space and color. And he used big, big photographic blowups. He had a lot to say. But compared to some buildings...

Canada also had a pavilion at the exhibition. It was so awful it made you feel ashamed. Architecture can give you pleasure, but when architecture gives you pain it really is something. It was a grain elevator. Not a real grain elevator, but a building in the form of a grain elevator. It was silvered, and it had big frightful lettering, "Canada"... terrible, awful! And it had other elements of the Canadian spirit, I guess you'd say, maple leaves and things. And inside it had pictures of farmland, and great big bottles of preserved fruit. It was just unbelievably frightful. And there it was, with people looking at it. And then you'd go around the corner, and you'd see something that had such spirit from Switzerland. Or there was Le Corbusier's tent, things of that kind.

The other big thing in '37 was of course Sert's Spanish Pavilion, which was incomplete because Spain was at war. It had such a feeling; you could feel the fact that this country was in trauma. And it had that big Picasso, Guernica, inside.

These were very spirited men.

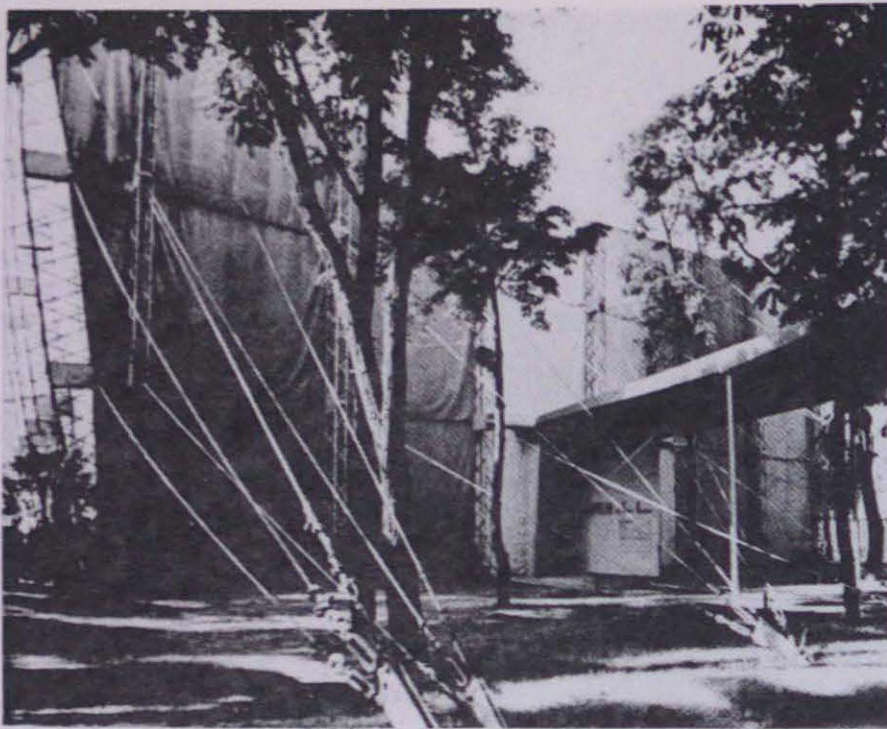
TFC: So in 1939 you came back to Canada and joined the McGill staff?

JB: Yes. By the late '30s the enrollment was really dropping, and in 1938 it was decided to close the school. The principal just saw no purpose in continuing. And both Nobbs and Traquair were about to retire, and it seemed that this would be a time when they wouldn't be replaced. But then they didn't close it.

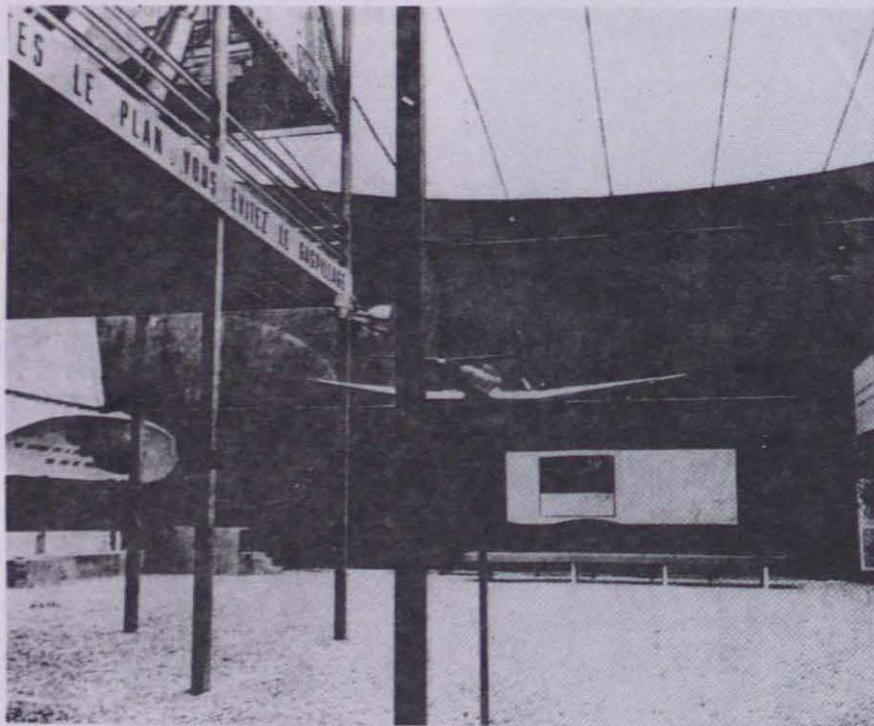
There was a man on the staff by the name of Phillip Turner, a practicing architect, and he campaigned to keep the school open. Eventually, Turner decided he could continue the school with the help of a young man, and a number of notable Montreal architects who would take over the design courses. That was when Turner offered me the job of being his assistant. I was glad to have such a job and I came back from London to take it. That was in 1939 and I've been here ever since.

TFC: How were you received when you returned from London imbued with the new architectural spirit?

JB: I think I was again a bit of a freak. In 1937, I think it was, McGill had a competition, which was open to graduates, for a gymnasium-armory. So a friend of mine in London who was also a graduate of McGill worked with me and we submitted a scheme. It wasn't a Le Corbusier scheme, but it was at least



Pavillon des Temps Nouveau, World Exhibition, Paris. Le Corbusier & Jeanneret, 1937.



Pavillon des Temps Nouveau, interior.

a modern concept. It was simple and stark, and it had a good swimming pool, a good gym, and a good big rink. Those were the three main elements. Well the people on the juries just couldn't believe that anybody would do anything like that. The other schemes weren't, of course, classic, but they were axial and fussy. And the only person who liked our scheme was the Director of Athletics. He thought it was great. But we didn't get anywhere with it.

I think that was the reason Turner asked me to come back. I think he thought that if someone could do this sort of design, maybe it might be useful

to have him around.

TFC: Compared with when you graduated, how had things at McGill changed?

JB: The trend was completely different. We admired Gropius and we certainly admired Le Corbusier. We had much more of a feeling for modern design.

TFC: Following the rather quiet period during the war, what was the impact of the veterans when they arrived?

JB: Oh, that was fascinating. We had no idea what we should expect. The people who came back were a most extraordinary group. They had immense energy and optimism. They really felt

that architecture was one of the things that could be used to make the world a little bit better.

Arthur Erickson was a star at this time, as he still is. He was a very clever man, and here he was working with us, and with a lot of energy! There were others too. Aimé Desautels was a veteran who had had no real training before, but he had genius.

TFC: Are there any particular trends from the past 40 years that stand out in your mind?

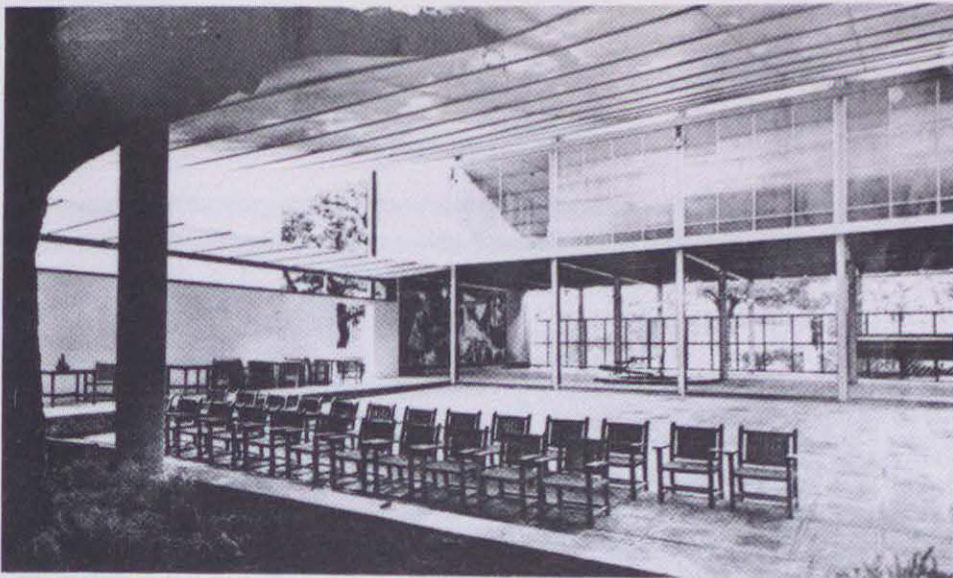
JB: Perhaps 1967 was sort of a watermark year with the Expo here in Montreal. There was great excitement and a lot of us felt very satisfied with what had happened since the war had ended. As soon as the war was over people began to do business. Montreal grew and things kept happening. But Expo '67 was a kind of culmination.

We had, for instance, Bucky Fuller here. Bucky Fuller gave a short course at McGill and we built a dome out of cardboard. It was great fun. And then he built that really amazing dome, and we gave him an honorary degree. And some of the other buildings were great fun. A lot of former students also returned. For instance Erickson was back in Montreal at the time, and built one of the pavilions.

I guess I also relate a new philosophy to the late sixties, and to Joe Baker. Joe Baker was the first person in our little community to point out the reckless destruction of buildings to make sites for new buildings. A new building, it was felt, was always such an improvement over the old one, that no one worried about it. But Joe Baker drew attention to a lot of needless and careless destruction, and we had students becoming very much interested in a sort of minor architecture. We had classes which were actively involved in repairing old buildings, putting in plumbing and lavatories and that sort of thing. I think the interest in making do, not restoration, but rather recycling, put a big question mark over new buildings altogether and the spirit of new buildings.

TFC: What are your observations on the current state of Modern architecture, or the advent of Post-Modernism?

JB: I think that its when design becomes routine and thoughtless that it becomes uninteresting as far as the spectator is concerned, or as far as the user is concerned. It's when architects are captivated by their problems and working on the edge of real solutions that architecture has an excitement. But when it becomes just routine, it becomes bloody well careless and you get buildings that are totally uninteresting and everything is brought down as a result. This has become a problem with modern architecture.



Spanish Pavilion, World Exhibition, Paris. José Luis Sert, 1937.



Maison Alcan, Montreal. Sherbrooke Street frontage. Arcop Associates, 1983. Preservation of the existing streetscape, with the new building behind, shows a new attitude in modern architecture.

However, it's not just a modern phenomenon, because you can see it in old buildings too. If you go to the outskirts of Paris, you can see the most tawdry buildings, which you can tell belong to the Beaux Arts spirit of design. You can find all kinds of buildings that are just totally routine. People felt at the time

that that kind of architecture had no future at all.

The same thing can happen with modern buildings. There's a building near Place Ville Marie that's a good example. Shocking building! Bad detail, hideously built. And this has become routine architecture. It's almost any-

mous. Who did that? Who knows? Nobody knows. Now if you walk around that building and compare it with P.V.M.... Have you ever seen how they handle their goods entrance and their garbage at P.V.M.? It's astonishing how the building has been considered. In many respects it seems flawless. But if you go back to that other place...

TFC: Do you feel that in architectural training today, the basic recipe that you followed is still valid, or should there now be a greater artistic or humanistic emphasis, for instance?

JB: I think that you have to have a good strong emphasis on science, as in my day. Science is one of the things that we have, and to ignore it would be wrong. But architecture is the same as it's always been. The architect is confronted with a problem which is not unique, and he has to take advantage of all of the circumstances that he finds in designing a building. I think that we ought to avoid trite solutions; I think that it's a complicated matter. Certainly changes are occurring. I can see that changes are occurring, and I think I can see why. But I don't think there's a need to go overboard. There's a lot of what we see in post-modernism that's just pure trash, and doesn't seem to me to have any substance at all.

TFC: Looking ahead to the architecture of the future, what are your thoughts on what it might hold?

JB: I think that we will probably make many improvements on what we do now; but we're not going to jump into a non-industrial situation, are we? We're not going to return to the pick and shovel, and hammer and sickle. We haven't yet seen all that a scientific attitude can do in production and materials; it allows much more skill and the product is a better product. The only way to judge what a building may be like in the future is to say, "How may it be improved?": aesthetically, and mechanically and structurally and so on.

People are as aware of architecture today as they've ever been. We have our sight, we have our touch, we can feel things. Just as you can enter an early Christian church in Rome, for instance, and you see the materials there and you can enjoy the building and you feel it has architectural quality, I think you can feel the same thing about a modern building.

The new Alcan Building is a good example. Beautiful materials and well thought out; it's a very successful building, and people really enjoy it. Taking this building as an example, I think the prospects for the future are very interesting. ■

Nicholas Holman is a graduate of the University of Toronto who is currently studying architecture at McGill.