

# CANADIAN CITIES INSPECTED AND DECRIED

A Review of *The Canadian City, St. John's to Victoria; A Critical Commentary*, text and illustrations by Roger Kemble. Montreal: Harvest House Ltd., 1989.

No dry, formal treatise, this! Roger Kemble does not mince words. Canada's cities are "uninhabitable." They are no more than "weak symbols of overpowering, destructive, out-of-control, artless international finance gone berserk." Architecture itself "has degenerated into aimless, formless, mass-produced, all-too-tangible apparitions, rooted in write-offs and tax dodgers, the product of harassed minds clinging tenuously to imagined reality." And in order to clean up the mess, what are needed are "projects of a scale more extensive than those of Haussmann and Nash."

Roger Kemble ought to know. An architect and artist who did graduate work at The University of British Columbia's School of Community and Regional Planning, he visited sixteen major Canadian cities, and noted, sketched and measured what he saw. He even walked the streets with a sound level meter and took decibel readings everywhere from Jerry's Coffee Shop in Montreal to under Granville Bridge North in Vancouver. *The Canadian City* is the result of this odyssey, an elaborate response which presents the problems, points out the inadequacies, praises the (few) successes and offers advice on The Way to Do it Right.

While the book's title implies a general analysis of the Canadian city, in fact the focus is on the cities' public urban spaces -- plazas, squares, malls, streets and so forth -- specifically in the downtown areas. Kemble calls these the "media communication of the city" and argues that they are good indicators of how well the city "responds to our current needs." Through commentary as well as numerous pen and ink drawings, he presents, describes and analyses a series of public urban spaces to substantiate his claims.

Kemble assesses these spaces using various tests. One is based on "imaginary fields of influence" which emanate from their surrounding buildings and form patterns reminiscent of those made by iron filings near a magnet. In the case of Montreal's Place du Canada, for example, "the visual magnetic fields of influence surrounding the buildings are not strong enough to bridge the gaps in between." Moreover, "the fields of influence are inconclusive, contributing nothing to the sense of urban place enclosure." Another test involves the calculation of the height of surrounding buildings as a proportion of the horizontal dimensions between them. Thus it is shown, for example, that the Banque Nationale du Canada tower adjacent to Montreal's Place d'Armes, although "out of place in the Place d'Armes context (as) it is just another listless piece of commercial modernism," nevertheless "actually adds to the ambience of the space; it sets up wide contrasts in height, as well as contrasts in other elements." Collectively these tests are used to evaluate the presence or absence of twelve characteristics which Kemble isolates as "The Elements of Urban Space." They in turn are divided into three categories: Plastique (ambience; propinquity; scale; surface chiaroscuro; metre-proportion; enclosure-vista-view; and icon), Palette (materials; colour; texture; and permeability), and Emploi (ritual;

and grain motion). Plastique describes volume, "the moulding and shaping of form," palettes describes "materials used to construct and modify surfaces that enclose volume," and emploi refers to "activities that occur within the volume." As a checklist for analysing a space, this is quite exhaustive and useful.

Kemble also includes a list of six design requirements, "to guide a series of developments to result in our shared set of urban values." They relate to interim land use, site developments, environment, architectural form, use and occupancy, and movement. Given what Kemble says earlier in the book, the "shared set of urban values" seems not to be intended to reflect the will of all Canadians, since "the collectively expressed vision of a free, voting public today manifests its form in plastic shopping malls, restaurants and heritage bunkers."

Rather, these shared beliefs, as interpreted by Kemble, seem primarily to reflect the will of an "elite group" which is to be called upon to exercise leadership, and upon whom it will be incumbent to "inspire, educate and gently cajole." The inspired, educated and cajoled, on the other hand, are encouraged to participate in the decision-making process, and thus share these visions of urban space. How, in a multicultural country such as Canada, can such a cumulative perception exist? Kemble anticipates the question: although the very idea may "fly in the face of diversity," concern can nevertheless subside since "a shared vision is not to be adopted so rigorously as to exclude cultural variety and diversity."

*The Canadian City* does have some interesting and informative -- if highly subjective -- things to say. It addresses the layperson more successfully than the professional, in part because of the absence of historic and scholarly references within the text (although a reference list of books appears at its conclusion). Its biggest drawback is an acute loss of credibility due to the shrill and overly dramatic tone that characterizes most of the work. In fact, if Kemble had held a symbolic sound level meter to his own text, he would have noted many readings at the unacceptable level. Moreover, repetition and overstatement are rampant, and there exist numerous grammatical and stylistic errors that a good editor would not have missed. Witness Kemble's criticism of the society in which he finds himself:

Our most dearly held values are manicured, mortgaged lawns, cardboard fronts, mirroring sound sets for the soaps, gluttonous auto ways raked by motorized pesky metal midgits, eating up land and ubiquitous (sic) going-out-of-business, hanging on by the skin of their teeth, plastic malls.

Kemble had high hopes for his book. He wanted it to be an "awakening" that would "dislodge the current self-congratulatory smug condition and redefine the national dialogue on the subject." Unfortunately, *The Canadian City* never reaches the lofty heights for which it aims.

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