

# An Age of Transition: Architecture in Toronto, 1920 - 1940

*“Culturally and socially the world is in a state of transition — a period of great architectural expression is open to us ... a period of analysis and experimentation ... a period of transition.”<sup>1</sup>*



Figure 1. The original design for the Eaton's College Street complex, with tower. (RAIC Journal, December 1928, p. 431)

The Twenties and Thirties. An era of exuberance, followed by a decade of desperation. Toronto's citizens began to experience the quickened pace of modern times. Toronto's architecture began to reflect the profound impact of modern technology. The rich ornament of Victorian architecture was swept aside as a bold new skyline emerged. Reacting to what the design community considered to be the excess of the Victorian era, the new architecture was dedicated to the twin gods of technology and modernism. Crisper, cleaner and more restrained than its predecessors, this architecture did not abandon all of the aesthetic devices of the previous era. Instead, it updated them. It became a streamlined version of what had come before — a portent of what was destined to arise: an architecture of transition.

Toronto celebrated the end of the Great War with a building boom that transformed its skyline. By the mid-1920s buildings and building rates were climbing at a similar pace: quite high and very quickly. A peak came in 1928, when an unprecedented \$51.5 million was spent on construction.<sup>2</sup>

The era's exuberance carried over to the drafting table. The city's larger companies planned prestigious office towers. The 34 storey Canadian Bank of Commerce became the tallest building in the British Empire. Designed intermittently between 1917 and 1928, Eaton's College Street retail/office complex would have surpassed this with a 40 storey tower — if it had been completed as designed (figure 1).

The boom went bust in 1929. As the Depression set in most developers decided to either scale down grand designs or shelve plans completely. Many decided simply to make do, renovating existing structures instead of gambling on new ones. The ironically named Victory Building was symbolic of these disastrous times. Designed as a general purpose office tower, its foundations were laid in 1929. Within 18 months it was complete. In the meantime the Depression had tightened its grip on the economy. The Victory Building would not see a single tenant until 1938. Its empty floors were a grim and highly visible reminder of how the economy had turned sour.

The decline bottomed out in 1933. That year the City Architect's Department reported that only \$4.5 million had been spent on construction in Toronto. Though it made a slight recovery, the industry remained depressed for the remainder of the decade; its strongest year saw barely one fifth the activity of 1928. The era, however, retained an exciting potential for architecture. Though arid years for their profession, Toronto's architects designed some of the City's most unusual and fascinating buildings during this time.

Their architecture was driven by two impulses. The first was an enthusiasm generated by the potential they saw in new technology. "The first steel girder means for us nothing less," wrote critic Erich Mendelsohn, "than the same feeling of release with which the Middle Ages greeted the first vault as a triumph over the principles of classical construction."<sup>3</sup>

The second impulse was an almost universal rejection of everything built prior to 1919. As humorist P.G. Wodehouse observed: "Whatever may be said in favour of the Victorians, it is pretty generally admitted that few of them were to be trusted within reach of a trowel and a pile of bricks."<sup>4</sup>

John Lyle, one of the era's most articulate Canadian architects, commented on the Victorian in Toronto:

When one drives about Toronto and sees the endless mongrel combinations of shooting roofs, gabbing gables and strutting bow windows that jostle each other on a 25 foot front, he is moved almost to tears.<sup>5</sup>

Lyle speculated on a possible remedy for his heartbreak. "We need a tonic," he wrote in 1932, "and I see signs that a few of us have been at the bottle — some take it in moderation, others have been more reckless, while others again claim that it is more nauseating than castor oil. This medicine is called 'modernism.'"<sup>6</sup>

*by Boyde Beck*



Figure 2. Mosaic by J.E.H. MacDonald on the Concourse Building, Baldwin and Green, architects, 1928. (City of Toronto Archives)

Toronto's architects, however, held back somewhat from a full embrace of the modern. As Lyle himself cautioned:

It must be borne in mind that there is no such thing as an architectural style born overnight. It is a gradual growth: known motifs and styles of different periods forming the basis of the designer's inspiration. In turn, by reasons of climatic conditions or of cost, through his scholarship and ability, he is able to impart that cachet which stamps his building with a personal or national touch.<sup>7</sup>

Or, as Percy Nobbs observed in 1930: "What about this growing interest in Modernity? One may well hope great things of it, always provided we and our clients do not lose our heads over it."<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the 1920s and '30s Toronto's architects seemed to heed these warnings as they worked to define and refine their own style of modern architecture. The role of ornament was at the heart of the conflict between the proponents and opponents of "modernity." "Over ornament we are uncertain," wrote critic and historian Kenneth Clark. "We are in a state of reaction, not creation." He likened the European scene to the aftermath of an orgy:

Like guests at an unwholesome banquet we have woken up with the feeling that the pangs of hunger must be preferable to indigestion. In consequence, our best architects have created a style of such severity that every decorative motif, even the simplest moulding, has been excluded.<sup>9</sup>

Clark might have been more uncomfortable in Toronto. Her architects were largely unwilling to part entirely with ornament in their designs. "We must not forget that without symbolism in the form of fresh, vital, contemporary decoration," John Lyle wrote, "the public's interest in architecture is bound to wane, if not die altogether."<sup>10</sup> The key word here is "contemporary." Toronto's version of modern architecture was quite accommodating to ornament. It merely insisted its themes and motifs be modern in nature and execution. What resulted might be called a conservative modern style.

This conservative modernism drew on several motifs and themes. In addition to the new building forms technology made possible, it also placed modern interpretations on traditional architectural devices. As a consequence, many of the era's major concerns and influences played across the surfaces of the City's buildings.

One such concern was nationalism. John Lyle was an architect who believed that the development of a national style of architecture was essential in Canada. He held that this style would grow out of the incorporation of nationalistic themes in building ornament. "When we examine our more serious architecture," he wrote, "we look in vain for a distinctly national note .... Why do we have to go to Europe for either traditional or modern ornament? We have here in Canada, in our fauna, flora, bird and marine life, a wealth of possible material."<sup>11</sup> Lyle's 1929 Dominion Bank was just one example of this philosophy, incorporating Canadian plants, animals and industrial images in its decorative panels.

Figure 3. A deified figure on Chapman and Oxley's Toronto Hydro Building, 1931-33. (City of Toronto Archives)



Another powerful image was that of the machine. “Every man has the mechanical sense,” wrote Le Corbusier. “The feeling for mechanics exists and is justified by our daily activities. The feeling in regard to machinery is one of respect, gratitude and esteem.”<sup>12</sup> The concept of an increasingly mechanized society intrigued the architects of the '20s and '30s. The technology of steel and possibilities of reinforced concrete dominated the structural aspects of their designs. Moreover, the machine was moving into the domain of the craftsman. Perhaps as a result, the image of the machine and technology crept into a great deal of their ornamental work.

The declining role of the craftsman on the building site disturbed many critics and observers. Percy Nobbs commented:

It is not to our credit as a civilized people that, in the period 1825-1850, stone cutting was often executed with a precision and refinement which would have satisfied Gabriel or Adam. Work of this class is not to be got, for love nor money, by hand or machine, in Canada today. Thus craftsmanship, which is at least the life, if not the soul of architecture, is left to perish.<sup>13</sup>

Kenneth Clark, while not optimistic over the trend, was realistic about the need to change with the times. “We should all like to return to medieval conditions ... we may envy the Baroque architects with their army of skilled workmen ... But we know that those conditions are gone, and no amount of make-believe will bring them back to our time.”<sup>14</sup>

Percy Nobbs, ever the conciliator, maintained some common ground had to be found. “Canadian architecture,” he concluded, “will be poor, heartless stuff if we fail frankly to accept the mechanization of mass-production, on the one hand, or to retain a place for the skilled artificer, on the other.”<sup>15</sup>

Baldwin and Green's Concourse Building is a good example of this compromise (figure 2). Its entrance archway contains both mosaics from the hand of a Group of Seven member [J.E.H. MacDonald] and cast concrete panels.

Other architects went further in their adoration of the machine. Instead of bemoaning the demise of craftsmanship, some set out to glorify the technological age that had brought about the decline. On the surface of Chapman and Oxley's Toronto Hydro Building, for instance, technology was abstracted, made almost mythic, as deified figures transformed energy into industry (figure 3). Even when it was not mythologizing the modern, much of the period's ornament had a stylized, “machine” look. This look was best captured in the crisp, mechanized images Charles Comfort designed for the Toronto Stock Exchange (figure 4). A tribute to modern times, the figures in Comfort's murals, frieze and door panels were heroic in both pose and proportion.

The notion that a building's fabric should reflect its function drove many of Toronto's architects. Some interpreted literally the concept that form should express function. They designed coinage reliefs for banks, turbine entablatures for generating stations — even a continuous history of the mail service for the city's main postal station. In their Ontario Hydro Building, Sproatt and Rolph employed functional expression by topping the pilasters flanking the entrance with power dams (figure 5).

The new materials available to architects also influenced design in Toronto. As technology freed much of the external wall from its structural responsibilities, architects were given more scope to play with aesthetic devices. Windows, for instance, could be wrapped



Figure 4. Medallion from the Toronto Stock Exchange, designed by Charles Comfort. (Peter Goodwin, City of Toronto)

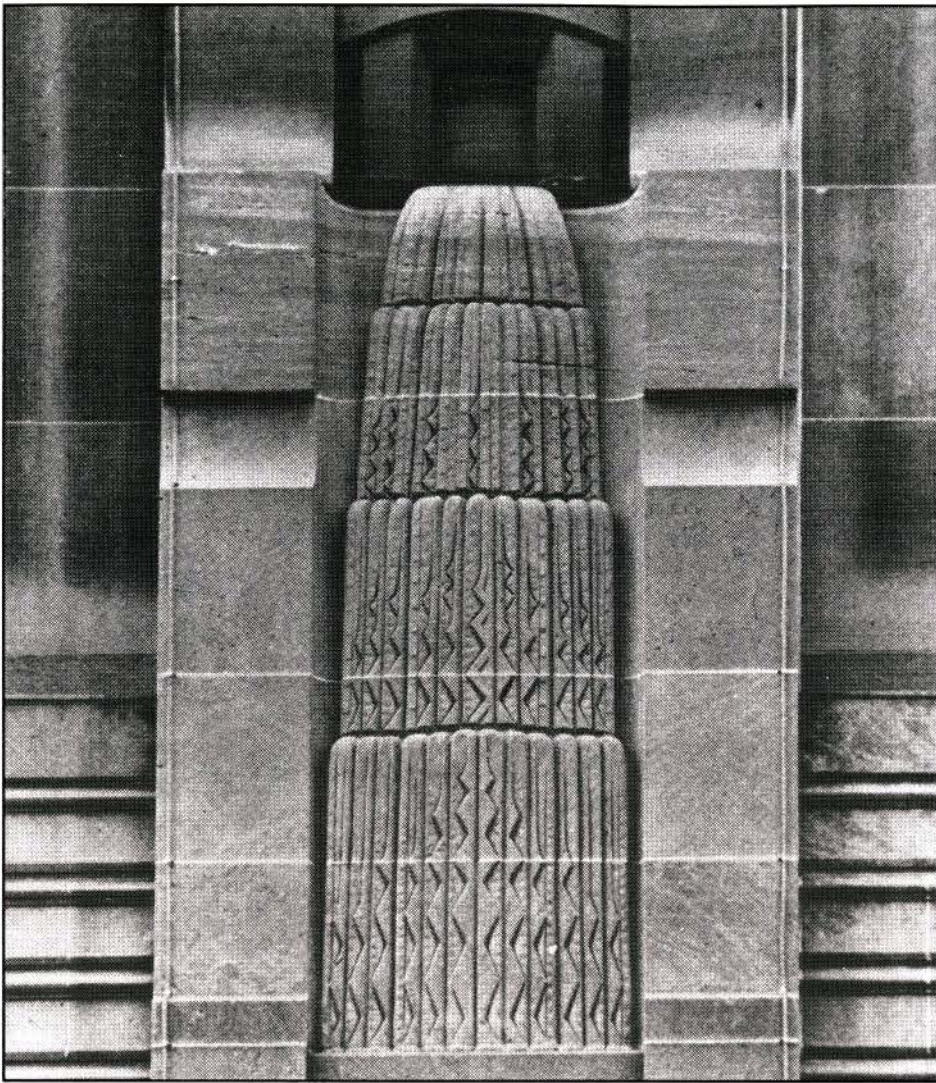


Figure 5. The Ontario Hydro Building's 'dam pilaster' by Sproatt and Rolph, 1935-45. (City of Toronto Archives)

around corners or employed in long bands without interference from structural supports. John Lyle characterized this sort of modernity as “a daring use of modern materials.” The Globe and Mail Building, for instance, employed alternate bands of glass and concrete, both to define its floor lines and give the illusion of lateral movement. The Mathers and Haldenby design seemed to pause while stretching around the corner of King and York, before tearing off in both directions (figure 6).

A final influence was that of Art Deco. As Aldous Huxley described it, “Modern simplicities are rich and sumptuous; we are Quakers whose severely cut clothes are made of damask and silver.”<sup>16</sup> The streamlining of hard edges was a particular characteristic of Art Deco. From furniture to locomotives, tanks to buildings, the Art Deco style seemed determined to find the perfect balance between angle and curve. In Toronto, the International Harvester Building represented one such attempt (figure 7). Art Deco exoticism and lines were also blended into the Tip Top Tailor’s Building and Charles Dolphin’s Consumer’s Gas Building.

The trend of this era in Toronto was toward the minimal. Some architects, working in industrial settings, executed buildings that would have found acceptance among the most radical prophets of the Modern and International styles. The overall trend, however, was more conservative. It was as if someone had applied heat to the richly encrusted surfaces of the previous era; softening its hard edges, melting away what had come to be seen as excess. This heat, however, did not reduce the architecture to the bare, structuralist bones demanded by the extremes of Modernist theory. Toronto preferred its architecture streamlined and restrained, but not shorn of its antecedents. This preference marks it as an architecture of transition — a bridge between the fussiness of the Victorian and starkness of the modern.



Figure 7. The International Harvester Building. (City of Toronto Archives, Public Works Collection 33-71)

Figure 6. The Globe and Mail Building by Mathers and Haldenby (1937): "stretching around the corner ... before tearing off in both directions." (RAIC Journal, August 1938, p. 175)



#### NOTES

- 1 Jacques Carlu, from a lecture at the Art Gallery of Toronto, 10 February 1931.
- 2 These figures are based on the City Architect's Building Permit records.
- 3 Erich Mendelsohn, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (hereafter RAIC) *Journal*, December 1930, p. 455.
- 4 P.G. Wodehouse, quoted in Susan Lasdun, *Victorians at Home* (New York: Abrams, 1982).
- 5 John Lyle, *RAIC Journal*, March 1932, p. 70.
- 6 John Lyle, *RAIC Journal*, April 1929, p. 136.
- 7 John Lyle, *RAIC Journal*, February 1927, p. 60.
- 8 Percy Nobbs, *RAIC Journal*, September 1930, p. 314.
- 9 Kenneth Clark, "Address to the Royal Institute of British Architects' Centenary Conference," reprinted in *RAIC Journal*, January 1935, p. 7.
- 10 John Lyle, *RAIC Journal*, March 1932, p. 69.
- 11 John Lyle, *RAIC Journal*, April 1929, p. 135.
- 12 Le Corbusier, *Toward A New Architecture* (London: Architectural Press, 1927), p. 119.
- 13 Percy Nobbs, *RAIC Journal*, November 1930, p. 389.
- 14 Kenneth Clark, *RAIC Journal*, January 1935, p. 8.
- 15 Percy Nobbs, *RAIC Journal*, November 1930, p. 392.
- 16 Aldous Huxley, *Studio Magazine*, 1930. *Art Deco* is often used to describe a broad spectrum of this era's architecture. Other labels, used both then and now, include *Style Moderne*, *Stripped Architecture*, *Jazz*, *The California Style*, *The International Style*, and *Conservative Modern*.

*tive Modern*. Many other terms could be added. The eclectic nature of the period's architecture defies all but the most generic labels.

*Conservative Modern* was a term first used in a 1936 edition of the magazine *Stone*. *Stone* also referred to it as a transitional style. The term was also quoted in a later issue of the *RAIC Journal*. It is a useful distinction to make, if only to separate the style that dominated the "modern" architecture of the 1930s from the more severe International Style, which came to dominate perceptions of "modern" architecture following the Second World War.

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Boyde Beck, a native of Prince Edward Island, is currently employed by the Prince Edward Island Museum. This article is based on research originally undertaken for an exhibition at the City of Toronto's Market Gallery, and was presented at the SSAC's 1988 conference in Vancouver.