



Both the Varscona Theatre and the Eaton's department store were built in 1939 and demolished in 1987.

## Beyond the West Edmonton Mall: an Architectural Historian Discovers Alberta

by Dorothy Field

When I first came to Edmonton from Victoria just under two years ago, my expectations were not high. Like many with no first-hand experience of the city I subscribed, by default, to the stereotypical view of Alberta in general and Edmonton in particular as a place with no history and no real architecture. After all, I knew I would find no Versailles, no Ankor Wat, no Forbidden City, no Empire State Building, just the West Edmonton Mall. For an architectural historian there did not seem to be much to look forward to.

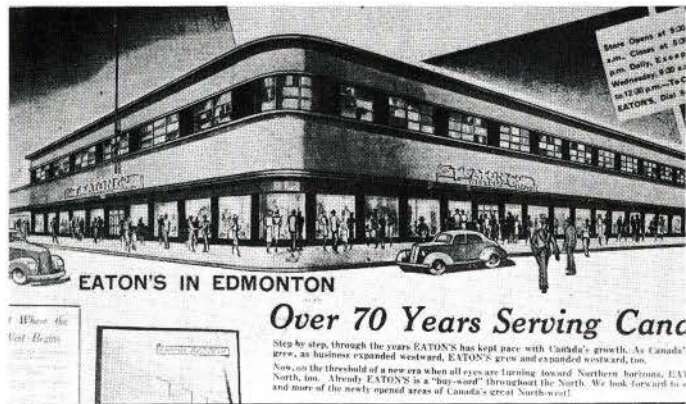
As luck would have it I was immediately proven wrong. To my surprise and delight I arrived during a genuine architectural controversy. A Moderne style theatre of 1940—the Varscona—was about to be demolished, and concerned groups and individuals were lobbying for its retention as an historical resource. Evidently, not only was there architecture of interest in Edmonton, but there were people who were interested in it as well. Unfortunately the debate did not end as one might have hoped: the theatre was bulldozed one quiet Sunday morning, and a poor replica in brick has since been erected.

The Varscona affair did, however, put me in mind of the inventory of Art Deco and Moderne architecture I had participated in several years previously in Victoria. Looking around at the combination of concern for the architecture and the lack of a comprehensive survey of Edmonton Moderne, it seemed to me that the time was ripe for a similar study in Edmonton. In due course I prepared and submitted a grant proposal to the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, with only a modest amount of hope for a favourable outcome. When the letter confirming my grant arrived I was, again, pleasantly surprised.

Setting to with a will I launched into the task of recording all of Edmonton's Art Deco and Moderne architecture—a task I envisioned completing in four weeks at the most. The project was to be summarized in a report composed of a photographic inventory of the buildings, a short commentary on the history of the style and its development in Edmonton, as well as an evaluation of the contents of the inventory on historical and stylistic bases. Seventeen rolls of film later, and less than half way

through the city, the enormity of the project was becoming clear. Edmonton, it appeared, had a rather large number of buildings fitting my criteria (predominantly in the Moderne category) scattered all over the city. Recording them was turning out to be a much bigger job than expected.

It is rather ironic that though large commercial buildings in these styles naturally attracted more attention than small residential projects when constructed, few examples now remain of the more spectacular essays in Moderne and Art Deco in Edmonton, Redevelopment, especially in the city's downtown core, has claimed all but a few of these structures. For example, in 1987 Edmonton's Eaton's department store, acknowledged by many to be one of western Canada's—and certainly Edmonton's—finest Moderne buildings, became the latest victim of this trend. While high profile structures have gradually fallen to the march





of time, houses of modest dimensions survive in large numbers in Edmonton, and it is these which today are the main representatives of the Moderne style in this city.

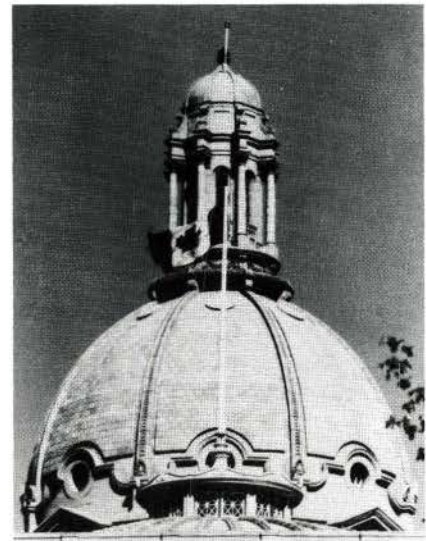
Though of widely varying merit in the formal design sense, the numerous residential examples do demonstrate that there was a widespread familiarity with the acceptance of the flat-roofed Moderne style. The origins and development of the early modern styles in Edmonton, especially those associated with house design, remain unexplored to the present. Even so, it would seem reasonable to propose a significant west coast (both U.S. and B.C.) component to the influences which resulted in Edmonton's Moderne architecture. It is one of the goals of this project to provide a model for this process beyond the often overused 'vernacular' theory.

Winter has intervened and given me an opportunity not only to regroup for another assault in the spring (for a projected completion date in June), but to look back on the project thus far. Three points obtrude: first, that this type of architecture was an important part of Alberta's material culture from the twenties to the fifties; second, that there is an awareness and growing appreciation amongst the public of early modern architecture as an historical resource in Alberta; and third, that these first two points are reflected in the willingness of government agencies and arms-length bodies to support projects dealing with this subject.

Any serious discussion of the history of architecture in Alberta must necessarily take place on its own terms and in an appropriate context premised on a sound foundation of facts. It is hoped that the report generated by this project will contribute towards this fund of knowledge; it is comforting, however, to note that other parallel efforts have been pursued in recent years. For example, the recent publication of Trevor Boddy's survey entitled **Modern Architecture in Alberta** bodes well for the future development of this discipline, not only because it introduces a new body of information, but because the support it received from the academically connected Canadian Plains Research Center and the Historic Sites Service branch of Alberta's Ministry of Culture and Multiculturalism demonstrates that a new degree of interest and respect has arisen in this field.

In relation to the study "Art Deco and Moderne in Edmonton", the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation and the Historic Sites Service have been very supportive in terms of funding and professional consultation. Having come to Alberta with some trepidation, it has been a relief to discover that the Wild Rose province is full of interesting architecture, and ever more receptive to its study.

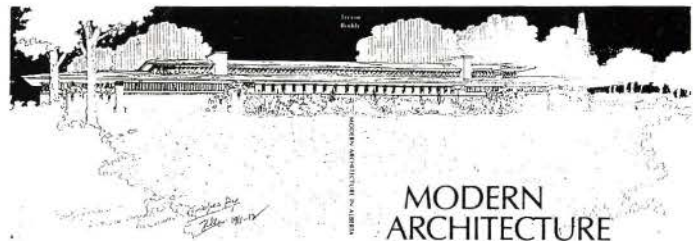
And the West Edmonton Mall isn't so bad either, if you take a pair of sunglasses and a ball of yarn. □



## New Publications

### Historic Edmonton

Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, through the Alberta Inventory Programme of Potential Historic Sites has recently collaborated with Lone Pine Publishing, The Edmonton Journal and SPARE (the Society for the Protection of Architectural Resources in Edmonton) on a publication entitled, **Historic Edmonton. An Architectural and Pictorial Guide**, authored by Jac Macdonald with a forward by Diana Thomas Kordan. The hardcover book is 208 pages in length and profusely illustrated with both historic and contemporary photographs. Historical and architectural information is provided on each building. Walking and driving tour routes are also included as an additional feature. Copies of the book are available for \$29.95 (plus \$2.00 for postage and handling) from Lone Pine Publishing, Suite 414, 10357-109 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T5J 1N3.



## Modern Architecture in Alberta

by Trevor Boddy

Modern Architecture in Alberta is the third in a series of books jointly published by Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism and the Canadian Plains Research Center. The book traces the development of Modern architecture in Alberta since 1925, with particular emphasis on public buildings in Calgary and Edmonton. The author, Trevor Boddy, achieves a balance in his study between architectural history and criticism. The general profession is from historical commentary, utilizing stylistic analysis for the oldest buildings, to a more critical and sociological treatment of recent architectural developments. The overall structure charts change through the history of ideas in architectural design.

**Modern Architecture in Alberta** is illustrated with 154 photographs, some in colour, which capture the spirit and atmosphere of various architectural trends in post-1925 Alberta.

Born in Edmonton and a graduate of both the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary Environmental Design Programme, Trevor Boddy is an architectural historian and critic. He has written widely on Canadian art and architecture for such magazines as **The Architectural Review**, **Progressive Architecture**, **Canadian Art**, **Canadian Forum**, and **The Canadian Architect**. His major essay on the Mississauga City Hall was published in the 1984 book on that project by Rizzoli International of New York.



73 Ravine Drive, one of Edmonton's finest examples of residential Moderne.





Figure 8. Prince of Wales Hotel, Waterton.

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