M Fram

Early Ontario Cottage, hipped roof variant, Port Hope.

Recognizing Ontario architecture; or the sums of its parts

by
Mark Fram

> Working on these collages, I realized how much thinking goes into seeing—into ordering and reordering the endless sequence of details which our eyes deliver to our mind. Each of these squares (photos within the collages) assumes a different perspective, a different focal point around which the surroundings recede to background. The general perspective is built up from hundreds of micro-perspectives. Which is to say, memory plays a crucial role in perception. At any given monent, my eyes may catch this or that detail—they really can't keep any wide field in focus all at once—and it's only my memory of the immediately previous details which allows me to form a continuous image of the world. Otherwise, for instance, turning my head the world would black out at the sides—but it doesn't! Which is really quite remarkable when you think about it . . .
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> David Hockney, quoted in **Cameraworks** (New York: Knopf, 1984) p. 16

It is Toronto, 1894. F.M. Bell-Smith's painting, "Lights of a City Street", looks eastward from the southwest corner of King and Yonge streets (the principal commercial intersection of the day) to the spire of St. James' Cathedral.*

It is early evening on a wintry day, chilly and damp. Daily life at the heart of English Canada's chief city is being played out by its gentlemen, ladies, newsboys, constables and streetcars against a modestly electrified stage set of shopfronts and darkening facades. The almost photographic perspective permits a streetcorner telegraph pole to match St. James' in height and sharply etches the portraits; one is recognizable as the artist, another as his son. But the architecture is a sketchy backdrop, vague and obscure. The clarity of the architectural setting that one finds in earlier or contemporary urban views by, say, Gustave Caillebotte or William Powell Frith is muddied in the murky English mists of Bell-Smith's Toronto. The painting is a confident portrait of newly metropolitan citizens, but a tentative view of the metropolis itself.

Ontario architecture, be it high-style or low, seems always to have been backdrop, stage-setting, never sufficiently confident to stand for itself—it always stands for something else. The province has a distaste for the real monuments of Europe or the United States—its memorials are almost invariably modest and self-effacing. They have been, almost always, watered down from their sources.

Those buildings that have stepped out of their deferential Ontario character have usually been liable to ridicule, or that most damning of

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Main Street Ontario, picturesque variant, Port Hope.

native critical responses: "Eh, it's okay, I suppose . . . but I wouldn't live in it."

In the last two centuries the western world has endured many revivals of the grand classicism of Greece, Rome, and the European Renaissance, often at extraordinary scale. But most of Ontario's classically styled buildings have been quite domestic in scale, as if to mitigate their pride and grandeur. Only church steeples could be **tall.** Many early "cathedrals of commerce" were designed in eclectic fashion to seem smaller than their true height. Perhaps the quintessential Ontario style could be called contextual anonymity; one cannot make **too** grand a gesture, **too** much fuss. But a little bit is okay, or at least tolerable.

The most powerful influence on Ontario architecture through two centuries has been commerce, the import and export trade in commodities. To this province (more than any other?), architecture, like culture, has been part of a general circulation and exchange of goods, services and hard cash. It is hard to distinguish the often interchangeable individual elements of the building stock of Ontario from those of its North American neighbours, and equally hard to distinguish them from region to region within its huge sprawl across the map.

But these types and features combine into larger ensembles that can be considered characteristic of particular regions within the province and the nation. Small town main streets in Ontario differ from those elsewhere because of the timing of their development. Many towns, having been fully developed during peaks of Ontario's economy in the 1850s, 1880s or early 1910s, never regained that prosperity. Their building stock has survived aging and inconsistent maintenance in many cases almost unscathed, if a little worse for wear and tear. Meanwhile, massive redevelopment has overwhelmed the older buildings of bigger cities and of those smaller centres whose economic prosperity did manage to revive from time to time. In these places, the juxtaposition of different styles and scales of architecture is clear evidence of the economic cycles (at least where the newer buildings were built beside the old, rather than on its ruins).

Though northern and southern Ontario may appear to belong to different planets, their characters spring from common roots. What binds the agricultural, industrial and urban landscapes of the south to the single-industry resource settlements and wildlands of the north is commerce (its single common denominator through time has been the railroad). Ontario's landscapes are created and driven by commercial exchange, with only very subtle deference to cultural variation. There are indeed more or less distinguishable cultural landscapes within the province. But these are often carved up and divided by administrative boundaries; seldom are they reinforced by social or political institutions, by the sorts of ties that elsewhere enable vernacular dialects or distinctive house types (correspondences that also make them easier to study).

If commerce is truly the engine of design in Ontario, we whould see the particulars of this commercial influence on architectural form in channels of transport and communication, in literature, advertising, popular imagery, ephemera, and their chance combinations and coincidences. There can be little prospect of understanding the architecture of a region with little distinction unless we explore sources that are less then distinct themselves. This poses a fascinating challenge to cultural history, and to the understanding and valuing of our inherited environments in parts of the world "colonized" after the industrial revolution was well under way.

If we are to understand the evolution and look of particular places as collections of micro-perspectives bound together by memories (individual and collective memories of real, if unknowably anonymous, historical characters), then we will have to assign importance to aggregates of features. Where individual features are seldom distinctive on their own such aggregates may well be distinctive, even for such a blur as Ontario.

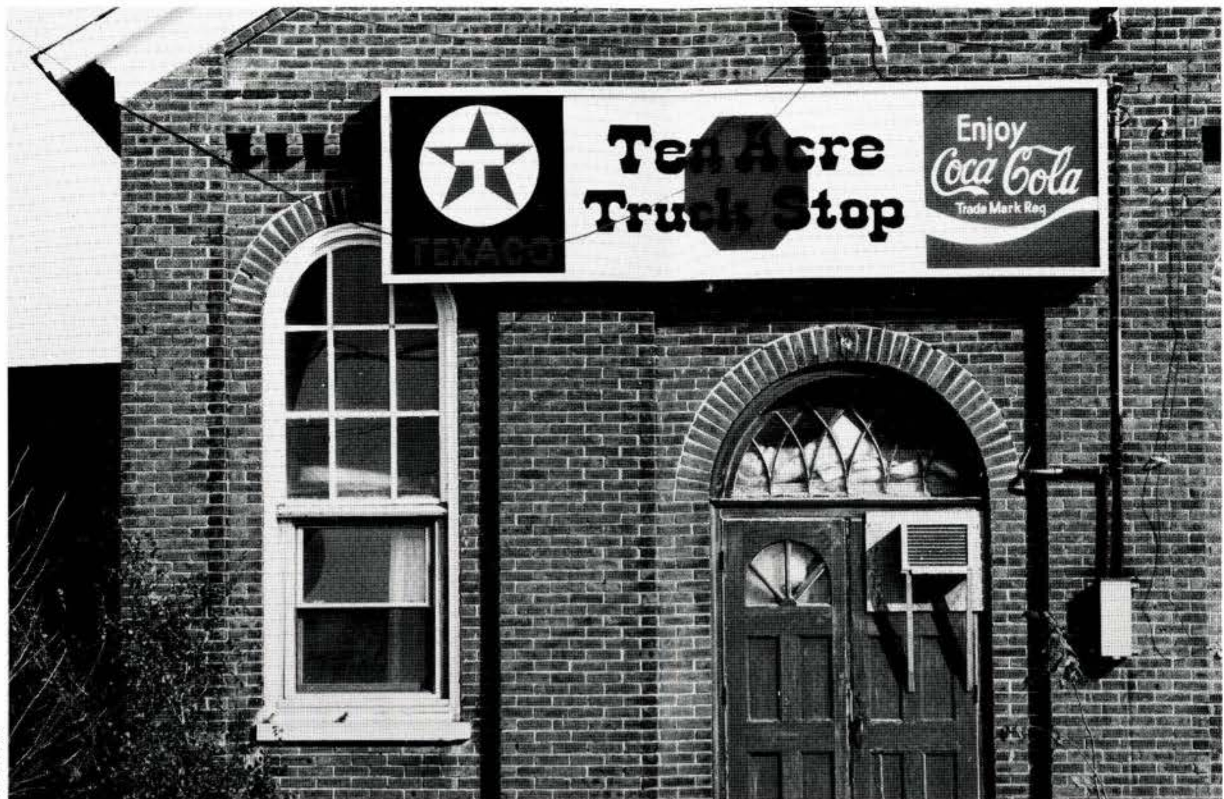
After all, there are very few distinct Ontario architectural types.

There is the front-gabled Gothic revival farmhouse, that palpable icon of the Upper Canadian Orangeman and his family (suitably ennobled in Carl Schaefer's many "Ontario Farmhouse" paintings, or in A.J. Casson's splendid watercolours of the stereotypical Ontario village). It **must** be Ontario vernacular—it may be found elsewhere in the nineteenth-century landscapes of North America and Europe, but nowhere in such consistent form with such profuse variety of log, stone, brick, clapboard and gingerbread than in southern Ontario.

The Gothic revival farmhouse has indeed become a cultural stereotype, symbolizing the Ulster-born WASPness of southern Ontario, even though it was in truth a kind of localized form built as often by newer American or European immigrants. It became the Upper Canadian "house style", no less indicative of social or cultural aspirations than the suburban ranch-style bungalow after 1950.

The simple Gothic farmhouse even offers folkloric interest. Ontario may have relatively little indigenous folklore compared to, say, Quebec or the Maritimes or the wild North, but that porchless second-storey door in many farmhouse gables has perplexed hundreds of architectural excursions to Mariposa country and beyond. Is it for a future porch? Furniture deliveries? Ready fire escape? Extra light in the centre hall? Or is it really for mother-in-law?

There are certainly other forms that might contend for a place as



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Sequent occupation of a facade, near Trenton.

"Ontario vernacular". In **Toronto Architecture** (Toronto: Mercury Books, 1985), Patricia McHugh isolates from the conventional litany of Victorian stylistic labels a couple that she finds particular to Toronto, the "Bay-n-Gable" of 1875-1890, and the "Annex House" of 1888-1899. These subsets of the much abused category of "Queen Anne" have achieved astounding longevity—more than one developer is building new infill row houses in the city in imitation of these century-old models.

There are typical schools and churches that reappear frequently in Ontario towns. These, often the work of the same architectural practice or the result of a particular political program, are often town landmarks, yet it is the topography and the surrounding context that makes them distinctive for their locales, rather than their intrinsic architecture.

Indeed, there are many examples of these types having been adapted or "customized" for Ontario and subsequently shipped (usually in drawn form or in the heads of migrating architects and builders) to Western Canada when it was colonized in the wake of the transcontinental railroads. A brief glance at downtown Calgary, for instance, will show that this export trade from Toronto continues apace.

It should be clear that it is not sufficient to seek a regional character in architecture—Ontario-ness—in the individual or in the typical. It's a quality that can only be found when individual buildings and other artifacts are gathered together in the lumpy stew that geographers call a cultural landscape.

The current thrust of studies in Ontario architecture, be they biographical, geographical, architectural, technological, genealogical, art-historical, culture-historical, or just-plain-historical, all seem to be directed toward the type or the style, taken out of community context in order to infer some rules or conventions of influence or development. In order to understand what a place or region really is, and furthermore, to know what is important to protect, these "microscopic" studies must begin to be integrated. Such work should demonstrate how the individual relates to the community, how the connection between them guarantees their distinction.

Ontario is merely a slice out of Canada, with all its complexities and contradictions intact. No less than the nation as a whole, it requires some such integration or at least dialogue of disciplines. Its environment as a whole, and its architecture in particular, demand to be considered whole, **in situ.** Otherwise, we will lose it, in bits and pieces, to those who continue to regard it as only a medium of exchange.

This issue of the **Bulletin** has been put together according to this all-encompassing view. We include buildings historical and modern, perspectives descriptive and normative, places individual and contextual. We are no more able to pin the tail on the much abused notion of Ontario than anyone else. We merely point out how mobile the target is.

Parenthetically, this is a bit of excuse for dwelling on Toronto and its environs for the cases we look at in this issue of the Bulletin. After all, to the outsider Toronto embodies all those "Upper Canadian characteristics" alleged to be typical of the province anyway. So we have used the provincial capital as a stand-in for the small towns from which it grew. The challenge is to look as closely and as comprehensively in other places to see if the surrogate is accurate.

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The papers are arranged from the historical to the editorial. We see first how Osgoode Hall embodied and symbolized the changes in taste and substance as Upper Canadian architecture coped with the influences from abroad. We then peek behind the facades at the commercial heart of Toronto as it grew into the nation's financial centre, to see how the facade and the office did, and did not, fit together. Next, Mississauga's new city hall, now nearing completion adjoining the commercial heart of the late twentieth century, the shopping mall, shows us how traditional architectural preoccupations from before modernism may produce the classic building for the next century. We go on to examine the province's rather uneven record in keeping its architectural heritage for that same future, and explore how its communities are struggling forward with little support from Queen's Park. The theme carries to its conclusion as we see hear some strong arguments for what the provincial government ought to do to maintain that heritage.

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* *(The painting may be found reproduced in colour in Peter Mellen's* ***Landmarks of Canadian Art,*** *1978, page 137, and in monochrome in Edith Firth's* ***Toronto in Art,*** *1983, page 66.)*