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Bank of Montreal, Winnipeg (1913) by McKim, Mead and White, architects.

Historical Metaphor and the Evolution of Architectural Style

by D.W. Lovell

Ernest Isbell Barott's 1929 design for the Ottawa Bank of Montreal is one of the works featured in the recent Canadian Centre for Architecture exhibition on that architect. This is a particularly significant example of Barott's architecture and it is noted as "his last great work of the twenties." Indeed the architect won the commission by a design competition and subsequent to its construction was awarded the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Gold Medal.

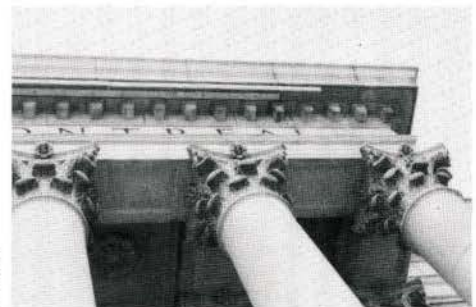
No doubt the Gold Medal paid tribute to the long standing career of achievement which was Barott's, however, it recognized as well the new design step that he had taken. The balanced classical massing while reflecting a logical plan of the banking facilities nevertheless stripped and rationalized traditional forms. The edifice is described by Susan Wagg, the Barott exhibit curator, as a protomodern simplicity creating a traditional while up to date image.

Just as Barott's design was successful in bridging the gap between historical styles and new architectural pressures, the Winnipeg Bank of Montreal by McKim, Mead and White in 1913, made a similar accomplishment. Executed in conjunction with Winnipeg architect J.N. Semmens the bank combines two ancient Roman building types: a temple and a basilica. A porticoed temple facade dominates the exterior while the interior is modelled after the spatial organization of a basilica. The classical grandeur and opulence of materials such as marble, limestone and gold leaf achieved the social status desired by a banking establishment of that period. Of interest here is that the architects were able to incorporate both historical precedent with the elements of modernization, such as the use of metal windows with frieze panels as well as the use of abstracted columns along the side elevation. Barott has taken this abstraction one step further by removing the capital detail.



Author

Interior Banking Hall



Author

Portico Corinthian Columns

These two projects show the steady and calculated steps in an evolution of rationalized design leading to the Modern style. By using historical precedent and an understanding of decorative elements these architects contributed in a lasting sense to the beauty of these two cityscapes. As architectural practitioners return to decoration in their designs the juxtaposition of old and new can be seen in almost all building types, from the Canadian Embassy in Washington to pizza restaurants. A significant question as to what is a valid style or merely a fad confronts the architectural observer today. Only those architects who are able to achieve a rationalized balance between historical elements and modern function will be able to make the lasting contribution that these two buildings and their designers have.