

# NARRATING CANADA'S MODERNISMS

## From Grain Elevators to Museums

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FIG. 1. CANADIAN NATIONAL VIMY MEMORIAL, FRANCE (WALTER ALLWARD, 1920-1936). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LANE BORSTAD.

### PLACE AND POWER

Narratives of Canada's modernisms are inevitably predicated upon by its vast and diverse geography yet confined by its location in the Americas. The territory that was dismissed by Voltaire as "a few acres of snow" shares what has been defined as the world's longest border with neighbouring United States. Arguably among the oldest modern nations, with Confederation in July 1, 1867, predating German federation and coinciding with the reconsolidation of the United States post the Civil War, Canada was among the earliest to divest colonial subaltern status (while still maintaining governmental and commercial relations with the United Kingdom). Yet across the gamut of measures, from economic to cultural, its contribution is still subject to a colonialism of financial and political power. Even if Sir Arthur Currie at Vimy Ridge implemented military strategy far more intelligent and effective than his British counterparts, and Canadian regiments landing at Juno Beach outperformed both British and American units on D-Day 1944, Canadian achievement tends to be displaced in the hierarchy of historical narratives (fig. 1). The memory and outcome of those conflicts lie at the chronological core of our new survey book, *Canada – Modern Architectures in History* (Reaktion Books, London, 2016).

### WARFARE AND MODERNISM

The World Wars successively rendered modern movement theory, and practices relevant to designing and efforts at postwar social improvement. If the First



FIG. 2. CANADIAN GOVERNMENT GRAIN ELEVATOR AT OGDEN, ALBERTA (1911), ILLUSTRATED IN LE CORBUSIER, *VERS UNE ARCHITECTURE* (1923, CHAMPS-FLAMMARION). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, HARRY POLLARD ARCHIVES.



FIG. 3. ERNEST CORMIER HOUSE AT MONTREAL, ENTRANCE (ERNEST CORMIER, 1930-1931). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SANDRA COHEN-ROSE AND COLIN ROSE.

War ruptured cultural (including religious) tradition, it also privileged technology and materialism. Those phenomena were compounded through the Second World War that in Canada also saw the formulation of Reconstruction policy. Two anecdotes may suffice to indicate warfare's legacy on design thinking. It concerns Walter Gropius before he took up direction of the Bauhaus. Being buried alive during an artillery barrage when serving as a young sergeant of signals, he had visceral reason later to embrace modernism's stress on transparency and spatial interpenetration. Le Corbusier, working in aeronautical war production alike rethought design processes and objectives in terms of transparency and spatial innovation. Moreover, in company with Gropius, Le Corbusier had already recognized the need for thoroughgoing recalibration of architectural practice. Toward that end, they shared admiration for Canadian application of concrete technique and functionalist aesthetic, particularly in the construction of larger-scale grain elevators, or silos described by Le Corbusier as "fruits of the new age" (fig. 2). The association with radical, modernist, reconstitution of the built

fabric continued into the reconstruction, modernization, of the social fabric over the baby-boom decades. Indeed, one figure central to post-1945 Reconstruction in Canada, C.D. Howe, had become wealthy as engineer-builder of these grain elevators that inspired the formulation of modernist "New Spirit" design aesthetic. This episode (discussed in the third chapter of our book) is just one of the many that belong to a remarkable compass of modernist architecture, and planning which remains less acknowledged in wider territory of modernism's historiography beyond Canada. Such international exposure through early modernist polemic and its early criticism not only increased Canada's visibility, it also went counter to the wilderness nation cliché.

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Nonetheless, while wishing to recover the full compass of Canadian architectural and planning production and re-position it in the main discourse of modernism's wide travel throughout the global, we spurned the trope of historical victimhood. Instead of attending to the absence of proper

recognition of Canadian modernist enterprise, we concentrated on its narration. We recognized that it was the relatively small number of "publicists"—critics and historians—rather than the quality or the variety of Canada's modern architectures that have resulted in larger bodies of criticism and scholarship on other nations like the United States, Britain, or even Australia. Thus, instead, our objective was to relate the pattern of evolving modernity in Canada. We sought to explain how the idea of representing the present shifted from reformed historicism and craft sensibility toward more thoroughgoing modernization, as especially envisioned in Art Deco (as seen in Ernest Cormier's House at Montreal, 1930-1931) and Streamline Moderne, and on to a more comprehensive adoption of modern movement praxis (fig. 3). Here we endeavoured to clarify some of the fuzzy terminology, modernity being especially elastic: being applied to architecture on which advanced building materials and internal function were dressed with historical articulation as well as to architecture which derived its formal composition from function, structure, and materials while eschewing historicist iconography.



FIG. 4. REGENT PARK SOUTH HOUSING AT TORONTO (PETER DICKINSON AND CMHC CENTRAL [CANADIAN] MORTGAGE AND HOUSING CORPORATION (1957-1961). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HUGH ROBERTSON PANDA ASSOCIATES, CANADIAN ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.



FIG. 5. POSTER FOR CPR RESORTS C. 1926, SHOWING THE BANFF SPRINGS HOTEL, BANFF, ALBERTA. | BRUCE PRICE 1888; WALTER PAINTER 1906-1914; AND J.W. ORROCK, 1925-1928.

## TRACKING MODERNISM'S POTENCY

By the same token, we argue for a more liberal understanding of modernism's generative potency. We track the quite rapid reflexive critique of conventionalized modernist architecture—posited as partly caused by orthodoxies in pedagogy at the expanded architectural schools, and typified by repetition of motifs or standardized solution for building types like apartments and offices. Indeed, by the beginning of the 1960s the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC) was concerned by the diminishing agency of architects in the build-out of urbanizing Canada, while students at McGill railed against modernism's apparent collusion with crass capitalism and consumerism. Nevertheless, we recognize that consumerism, alongside massive downtown renewal and suburbanization of major cities such as Montreal,

Toronto, and Vancouver, carried modernist design thinking into the spatial scenery of usual activity. Albeit contributing to the embourgeoisement of the societal and aesthetic idealism of the originating modern movements, these processes also accompanied the evisceration of civic core often for expressways and poorly serviced social housing schemes. Politics more than architecture precipitated degradation (not unlike notorious American examples like Pruitt Igoe in St. Louis) in several of the Central [later Canada] Housing and Mortgage Corporation projects; the negative factors were chiefly insufficient maintenance funding and community and retail facilities. A case in point is the recently re-invigorated modernist housing of Regent Park in Toronto (fig. 4). And automobile design and manufacture that had so stimulated not only Gropius and Le Corbusier but also Frank Lloyd Wright and Richard Neutra, plus Peter Dickinson and Fred Hollingsworth in Canada, became

source of demolition, displacement, congestion, and pollution so powerfully excoriated by adoptive Canadian Jane Jacobs. Recall the anti-Spadina expressway campaign she and others led that ended with the cancellation in 1971 of the proposed project that would have bulldozed nineteenth-century neighbourhoods of Toronto. But we do not celebrate modernism's demise amidst the end-of-it-all critique of the 1970s. Instead, we read the evident counter- or so-called post-modern phase as more reactive than proactive. We posit that urban design, more than historicist pastiche, was the positive result of a re-thinking of some of modernist's abstract—a-contextual—qualities. Moreover, we allow for the ongoing potency of modernist design thought—especially its emphasis on analysis of ends and means in conjunction with embrace of contemporary materials, techniques, and mindset—in Canadian architecture of the millennium as exemplified by



FIG. 6. MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, VANCOUVER (ERICKSON ASSOCIATES WITH CORNELIA OBERLANDER LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, 1971-1976). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SERGE AMBROSE.



FIG. 7. INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT AT WINNIPEG, INTERIOR (GREEN, BLANKSTEIN, RUSSELL & ASSOCIATES, 1960-1964; JOHN GRAHAM MOSAICIST). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HUGH ROBERTSON PANDA ASSOCIATES, CANADIAN ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.

the work of, among many others, the Patkaus, Peter Cardew, Saucier + Perrotte, and MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects. Thus we regard modernism more as a dynamic weave of design aspiration than a set of design dogma welded to specific aesthetic conceits.

### FRAMING MODERNISM'S GENEALOGY

One further dimension of historical framing concerns how we view modernism's genealogy. Turning again to the matter of clarifying the meaning of modernity, we begin the narrative of Canadian modern architectures with the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) to Terminal City, Vancouver. The year of 1886 is moreover a legitimate marker of both (settler) nationhood and substantive design culture. In this trajectory we acknowledge the transformation of the

role of nature from that of mere resource to be exploited—first primary materials and then agriculture—to nature as a source of beauty, recreation, and national identity. Paradoxically, nature ignores political boundaries; the Rockies and the Prairies cross Canadian and American territories. The CPR rail and telegraph system (soon to be outmoded by the invention of the telephone by Scottish-Canadian Alexander Graham Bell), in being less a national dream than an imperial project—it was not infrequently then called the “Thin Red Line” after a Scottish regiment at the Battle of Balaclava in 1854 during the Crimean War—represents the continuing-to-this-day flows of capital as much across as within Canada. These flows, currently primarily from Asia, inevitably affect local conditions of design practice as well as framing international readings of Canadian social economy.

The railway stations and hotels, part of new initiatives in tourism and health, demonstrated the Victorian-Edwardian desire to control rapid change through associative cultural referencing: historicism as aesthetic-cum-mental sheet-anchor amidst volatile economy. Take the romantic yet technologically advanced design for the Banff Springs Hotel originally designed by American architect Bruce Price, opened in 1888, in Alberta. The first building was replaced with a newer version designed by CPR architect Walter Painter and completed in 1914, with further additions by J.W. Orrock completed in 1928 (fig. 5). It was opened in the same year in which Geological Survey of Canada member Robert Bell “discovered” the oil sands of the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers. The external articulation cemented the new facility into the patrimony of historical French and Scottish aristocracy

by way of more recent iconography of British and American hotel construction. The architectural dressing also embodied ideas of superior culture that legitimated the elitism of Thorstein Veblen's "leisure class" as well as the harsh alienation of indigenous place and community. It took provincial hearings of the Advisory Committee (IV) on Reconstruction during 1944 to voice the legitimacy of First Nations material culture, and hence residual right to citizenship. Victoria's Royal Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology was founded in 1886, but First Nations exhibits were only extensively displayed when a modernist Centennial building project was inaugurated in 1968; Arthur Erickson's monumental and modernist *paen* to indigenous structural and cultural production, the Museum of Anthropology, opened in 1976 at the University of British Columbia, conferred even greater legitimacy to the First Nations (fig. 6). And the socialist impulse within modern movement ideology helped the framing of policy that eventually contributed to major social reform toward not only the First Nations but also toward the French linguistic tradition and increasingly diverse ethnicity of Canada. However, our narrative is critical rather than positivist in acknowledging the shortcomings of modernist authoritarianism—particularly in early post-1945 urban redevelopment—and of governmental, corporate, and entrepreneurial interest.

### STRUCTURING A NARRATIVE OF CANADIAN MODERNISM

To that end, *Canada – Modern Architectures in History* is based upon a thematic approach matched with a temporal scaffold. These themes define major types of modern activity requiring architectural accommodation; and they run through our periodization: Modernity

in Canada 1886-1914, Modernizing the Dominion 1914-1945, Modernism and Reconstruction 1945-1967—divided into two parts respectively focused on housing and on other architectural production—Rethinking Modernism 1967-1986, Regenerative Modernism 1986-present, and finally Canada's Modernist Legacy. The thematic scaffold is only partly derived from modern movement discourse. Recall the four functions—dwelling, work, recreation, and transportation—identified and consolidated by 1933 by the CIAM (Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne). Hence, given the movement's preoccupation with providing affordable housing for lower income citizens, but also the prominence of elite houses in modernism's development, the primary theme is dwelling. Thereafter, in an approximate hierarchy of Canadian architectural work, are: connecting, from rail to road and air transportation facilities; learning, accounting for both professional education and the tremendous expansion of public education especially from the 1950s; representing, encompassing the use of photography and media (following modernist praxis as exemplified, for example, in Hugh Robertson's photographic work for Toronto-based Panda Associates), and marketing to promote design and its part in shaping collective identity; working, covering the daily environs of labour of all sorts; constructing, dealing with methods and machinery of building, and including Canada's underground mega-cities; consuming, addressing the architecture of retail consumption; and lastly recreating, which focuses on the design of places of worship, acculturation, and leisure. The scaffold is just that: not a permanently fixed feature but a framework for constructing the historical narrative, and allowing for consideration of not just iconic edifice but the more ordinary fabric of Canadian living.

### DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

This weld of time and theme brings out some characteristics of modernism's Canadian narrative. Besides Canada's linkages with its pioneering phase, is a continuing contribution whether through professional network, events, or émigré practices. To be sure, Canada's architectural profession was shaped over the years by waves of émigrés from both America, England (Commonwealth Institute), and mainland Europe. For example, Canadian-born and educated Wells Coates's participation in CIAM or the Festival of Britain, or Hazen Sise's acquaintance with Le Corbusier and work together with John Bland and Fred Lasserre on the MARS (Modern Architectural Research Group) exhibition at London in 1938. By contrast, Canadian architects never enjoyed the level of either government or patron funding available to their American peers. Only John B. Parkin Associates came near to replicating the scale of major US firms like SOM. Some federal programs yielded strong design outcomes, notably the series of international air terminals, at Winnipeg and Toronto, albeit in a more austere vein of modernism (fig. 7).

In Canada public housing, welfare, and educational commissions were as extensive as those for commercial offices and apartments and formed the backbone of practice. And a number reflected the RAIC's promotion of the allied arts, exemplified by artist Bertram Binning's mosaic tile ornamentation of the BC Electric Building (1955-1957, Thompson Berwick and Pratt) at Vancouver. But individual practitioners were able to prosper, like Fred Hollingsworth who created an array of admirable houses that also reflected the imbrication of Asian aesthetic into Canadian modernist practice. Hart Massey, as later Bryan MacKay-Lyons, provide



FIG. 8. CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE AT MONTREAL (PETER ROSE WITH PHYLLIS LAMBERT AND EROL ARGUN, 1985-1989; INCORPORATING THE SHAUGHNESSY HOUSE, W.T. THOMAS, 1874). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MICHELANGELO SABATINO.



FIG. 9. BATA HEAD OFFICE AT DON MILLS (JOHN B. PARKIN ASSOCIATES, 1964). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HUGH ROBERTSON PANDA ASSOCIATES, CANADIAN ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.

a timely reminder that Canadian modernism is to be found throughout the country. Experimentation exists alongside more cautious fulfillment of specification, although Henriquez Partners Architects have recently recalled the possibility of bold architectonic that is yet functional and sustainable in their just completed Telus Garden Building at Vancouver.

### SITUATING THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Canada's modern histories of architecture are a narrative of urban build-out in what is (and continues to be in most instances) a relatively abundant supply of vacant land. Consequently, the city focus recurs in the historiography of modern architectures in Canada, spanning the successive phases of modernity, modernization to modernism. Eric Arthur's *Toronto. No Mean City* (1964, University of Toronto Press) was the progenitor of a series of books about and guides to the larger cities coast-to-coast. A major contributor to this genre was Vancouver and Hong-Kong-based

preservationist Harold Kalman, who also wrote the most comprehensive overview of Canadian architecture and building. With *A History of Canadian Architecture* of 1994 (Oxford University Press), and subsequent *A Concise History of Canadian Architecture* (2000, Oxford University Press), Kalman greatly expanded earlier histories of architecture in terms of typology, production, and the professional as well as social contexts. Notable among such contextual histories were Alan Gowans's *Building Canada: An Architectural History of Canadian Life* (1966, University of Toronto Press), Kelly Crossman's *Architecture in Transition. From Art to Practice 1885-1906* (1987, McGill-Queen's University Press), and Geoffrey Simmins's *Ontario Association of Architects. A Centennial History* (1989, Ontario Association of Architects). The cultural politics of design, including investigation of several facets of modernism, figure more prominently in Windsor Liscombe's anthology *Architecture and the Canadian Fabric* (2011, University of British Columbia Press).

Alongside stands a significant literature by Canadian architect scholars on the ideological, experiential, and performative aspects of modern architectures. The intellectual origins were traced by Peter Collins in *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture* (1965, Faber and Faber). Collins, British-born but Canadian resident, was by then on the faculty of the McGill School, having previously assisted Auguste Perret on the reconstruction of Le Havre and assessed that designer's legacy in *Concrete: the Vision of a New Architecture* (1959, Horizon Press). Collins's interest in aesthetic and functional probity was explored in his last book, *Architectural Judgement* (1971, University of Toronto Press). But the impact of his first book, arguing the point-counterpoint development of modern/list theory and practice, was greater—as evinced by Panayotis Tournikiotis's extensive analysis in *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (1999, MIT Press). The phenomenological registers of architecture have been investigated by Canadian-born and educated architect

and theorist George Baird in *Meaning in Architecture* (1968, Braziller) and *The Space of Appearance* (1995, MIT Press). Baird, who taught architecture at Toronto and Harvard Universities, published a monograph on Alvar Aalto (Bijutsu Shuppan-sha [Tokyo] 1968 reprinted in 1970 by Thames & Hudson), the lyrical and craft adaptation of whose modernist design was much admired in Canada during those years. The arrival during the 1980s of Alberto Perez-Gomez [1949--], Mexican-born architectural historian and theorist of phenomenology, at Ottawa's Carleton University and subsequently McGill's School of Architecture, has had a considerable impact on the teaching of theory and design in Canada and beyond. Take his influential study *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (1983, MIT Press) and his *Chora (Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture)* series launched in 1994 (McGill-Queen's University Press). The performance of architecture especially in the urban setting and as a component of visual culture fascinated Melvin Charney, curator of the exhibition *Les Maisons de la rue Sherbrooke* (1976) and designer of the architectonic sculpture garden at the CCA (Canadian Centre for Architecture).

### WORDING THE MODERNIST LEGACY

The preponderance of historical inquiry produced mainly by critics and historians based in Canadian academic settings has been directed to the centres and leaders of modernist production. The sequence begins with Vancouver, followed by Montreal (stopping on the brink of modernist success), Winnipeg, and most recently Toronto; the moving force behind the two first publications, accompanying travelling exhibitions, was the CCA under the direction of the founding director, architect, historian, and preservationist, Phyllis Lambert. Housed



FIG. 10. ISMAILI CENTRE AND AGA KHAN MUSEUM (CHARLES CORREA AND FUMIHIKO MAKI RESPECTIVELY WITH MORIYAMA & TOSHIBA, 2010-2014). | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF GEOFF GRENVILLE.

in a building opened in 1989 and designed by Peter Rose (in collaboration with Lambert), the Centre reintegrates the historic Shaughnessy House with a highly modern provision of diverse research and administrative function (fig. 8).

The scope of internationally minded publications has been enlarged by regional studies, such as the recent overview of modernism's impact upon Newfoundland, and an on-going collection of typological, thematic, and monographic writings. The company town, from Arvida (1927) to Kitimat (1950), utilitarian and sports or leisure buildings, domestic and religious architecture together with urban planning and infrastructure development, have received most attention. The thematic fabric spans gender factors, both in terms of practice and articulation of identity, professional history, and architectural discourse, as well as stylistic phenomena including the association between architecture and the allied arts. Articles on those topics have appeared in major international journals

like *Architectural History*, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, *DOCOMOMO*, and *Urban History*. But a particular venue for recovering the history of modernism from "sea to sea" has been *Architecture in/au Canada*, the *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada* directed by Luc Noppen. The monographic structure is more solid than extensive. Again there is greater emphasis on major regional figures especially in Western and Central Canada, albeit embracing architectural discourse, critical reception, and photography. The virtual edifice thus constructed is of commendable and comprehensive design achievement in which the ideological and aesthetic impetus of modernism has been adapted to the distinctive yet diverse conditions, material and cultural, of Canada. Similarly the campaign to preserve the architectural legacy of modernism, that, due to weak legislative provision and funding, has been less determined in Canada than in Europe and the United States. Nonetheless, DOCOMOMO chapters (Canada-Atlantic,

British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec), Heritage Canada, The National Trust as well as private initiatives like Dominion Modern are working to increase awareness of modern architecture and design heritage in Canada at a time when many buildings are threatened. Recall for example the demolition of the Bata Shoe Headquarters designed by John B. Parkin Associates (1965) to make place for the new Aga Khan Museum (Fumihiko Maki with Moriyama & Teshima Architects) and Ismaili Centre Toronto (Charles Correa with Moriyama & Teshima Architects), both opened in 2014 (figs. 9-10).

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Far from exhaustive, *Canada – Modern Architectures in History* aims to stimulate new scholarship while acknowledging the efforts that have thus far been made to trace the history of the architecture and built environments on the eve of Canada's one hundred and fiftieth anniversary

celebrations in 2017. Our text at least serves to place Canadian modernist design in the larger world of modernism, in particular to relate the force of modern movement theory and practice to building out of national infrastructure and institutions, regional centres of governance, learning, commerce and culture as well as more local buildings for housing, consumption, and leisure that helped constitute increasing independent nationhood. It is an architecture both more diverse and distinguished than hitherto fully acknowledged. Its diversity and quality derive from the extraordinary range of geography and climate but also of society, culture, and politics. More broadly, Canadian modernism has displayed respect for topography matched by technological innovation. During the modernist era a distinct Canadian design attitude coalesced: a liberal, experimental, hybrid, pragmatic mindset intent less upon the sources or dogma of architectural language than thinking about the formation of inclusive spaces and places.