

## ERIC ROSS ARTHUR: MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE AND THE VERNACULAR TRADITION

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The discovery of the modest yet ingenious “early” and “small” buildings of Ontario, from churches and barns to houses, played an important role in shaping Eric Arthur’s approach—as designer and publicist—to modernist architecture for Canada. Arthur [1898-1982]—like a number of architects of his and successive generations in the Americas and Europe—appropriated lessons from a range of extant vernacular (and classical) building types, both “anonymous” and “pedigreed,” for new architectures that were responsive to changing economic, social, and spatial needs.

Shortly after arriving to Canada in 1923 by way of Liverpool, the New Zealand native, along with his students in the Department of Architecture of the University of Toronto, embarked on a project to measure and draw early and small houses and buildings of Ontario. In July 1937, just a decade after he began his explorations of what he referred to as “colonial” buildings, Arthur was appointed editor of the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* (an influential position he retained until 1966).<sup>1</sup> The titles of his first two studies, *Small Houses of the Late 18<sup>th</sup> and the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries in Ontario* (1926) and *The Early Buildings of Ontario* (1938), published by the University of Toronto Press, eschew the term “Architecture” in favour of the nouns “house” and “building” and the adjectives “early” and “small.”<sup>2</sup> While Arthur focused exclusively on houses for his 1926 publication, in his second book of 1938 he also included utilitarian buildings such as barns and mills (figs. 1-3). It is no coincidence that

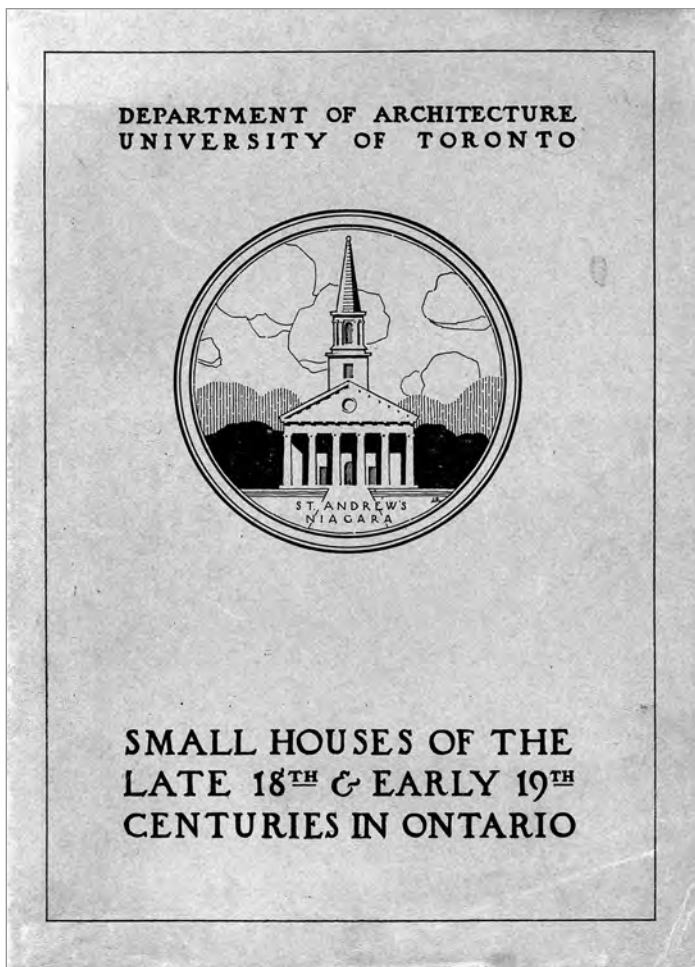


FIG. 1. COVER. | ARTHUR, *SMALL HOUSES OF THE LATE 18<sup>TH</sup> AND THE EARLY 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES IN ONTARIO*.

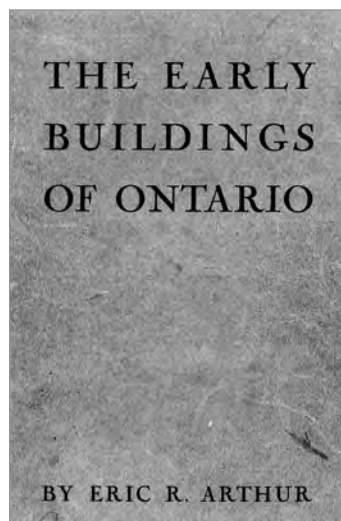


FIG. 2. COVER. | ARTHUR, *THE EARLY BUILDINGS OF ONTARIO*.



THE MILL AT MEADOWVALE

This mill has been a popular subject for artists for many years. From the photograph, the mill may be judged as a building; but you get no impression of the beauty of its setting or the charm of the village which it dominates. Though the building is a lofty one, the designer has given it a horizontal feeling through the double eaves at the top (though this may have been an addition), the marked horizontality of the weather boarding, and the stone base. The stonework taken from the bed of the stream is well done, and the three arches give shadows and striking reflections in the water. The concrete buttresses are modern and do not detract very much from this particularly pleasing example of rural architecture.



BARN NEAR PENETANGUISHENE

This barn is a striking contrast to the modern barn in sheet metal and patent materials. The louvred ventilator at the top is well detailed and proportioned. The eaves have just the right projection and the proportion of wall to roof could hardly be improved. The construction of the "masonry" section is unusual though common enough in the Penetang-Wyevale district. Short logs 12 inches to 18 inches in length are laid in mortar and form a sturdy and inexpensive wall. It will be noticed that the corners of the octagon are strengthened by carrying the real masonry up as a pier. Inside, the heavy timbering, the great height of the roof, and the mysterious lighting give the building the appearance of a Gothic cathedral. There are other octagonal barns in the province, but most of them have suffered from "modern improvements".

FIG. 3. THE MILL AT MEADOWVALE AND BARN NEAR PENETANGUISHENE. | ARTHUR, *THE EARLY BUILDINGS OF ONTARIO*, P. 19.

even the classically inspired buildings—mainly realized in wood—that sparked Arthur's imagination possess informal (*i.e.*, vernacular, "ordinary") qualities that make them appear far removed in scale and materiality from the monumentality of the Beaux-Arts tradition in which Arthur was trained in Liverpool under the tutelage of Charles Herbert Reilly [1874-1948]. Although Arthur's interest in the "quiet charm and dignity" of these early and small buildings led him to become a pioneering advocate for heritage in Canada (he was a founding member of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario in 1932), he also deployed the lessons they revealed when designing "modern" architecture.

The discovery of modest vernacular and scaled-down classical buildings by architects from the 1910s well into the 1970s played an important role in the rise, consolidation, and questioning of the Modern Movement in Europe and the Americas. This early discovery fueled the pursuit of a reformist attitude aimed at undercutting the perceived excesses of stylistic historicism and bombastic

classicism. Arts & Crafts advocates such as the American Charles Keeler penned an early manifesto to modesty—*The Simple Home* (1904). As architects in Europe and the Americas began to receive commissions for housing and houses, they started looking for "small" precedents that could help them to downsize domestic architectural types such as the villa. Boston-based architect Guy Lowell [1870-1927], a graduate of Harvard and the École des Beaux-Arts, published two books that highlight smallness and predate by a decade Arthur's studies: *Smaller Italian Villas and Farmhouses* (1916) and *More Small Italian Villas and Farmhouses* (1920), both published by the Architectural Book Publishing Co. of New York. Lowell's large format books make abundant use of the "new" medium of photography (as do Arthur's studies) to illustrate smaller-scale villas and models for middle-class clients who could not afford to emulate imperial or princely palaces.<sup>3</sup> In Europe, Josef Hoffmann [1870-1956] published in *Der Architekt* his travel sketches of modest-sized vernacular dwellings in Capri that he, like Arthur and his students, observed and drew

first hand. In 1911, the same year that Le Corbusier [1887-1965] travelled to the Eastern Mediterranean and "discovered" its vernacular buildings, Hoffmann presented a talk in which he described the experience of travelling in 1896 to places including Capri and Anacapri as a turning point in his architectural education and career: "Finally I fled into the Campagn [*sic*] and refreshed myself at the simple peasant buildings, that without pomp and without stylistic architecture nevertheless give the land its special character"<sup>4</sup> (fig. 4). Hoffmann followed the lead of Karl Friedrich Schinkel [1781-1841], John Ruskin [1819-1900], and Charles Rennie Mackintosh [1868-1928] and they were the first to simultaneously study and appropriate the lessons from both vernacular buildings and Classical monuments and sites.

As the machine-age aesthetic gained momentum with the help of slogans such as "International Style," other expressions of "Canadian" vernacular buildings began to impact modernist architecture. Walter Gropius supported his functionalist and social ideas of design by illustrating grain





FIG. 4. JOSEF HOFFMAN, 1897, "ARCHITEKTONISCHES VON DER INSEL CAPRI," DER ARCHITEKT, VOL. 3, P. 13-14.



FIG. 5. CANADIAN GOVERNMENT GRAIN ELEVATOR AT OGDEN, ALBERTA (1911), ILLUSTRATED IN LE CORBUSIER, *VERS UNE ARCHITECTURE*. | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, HARRY POLLARD ARCHIVES.

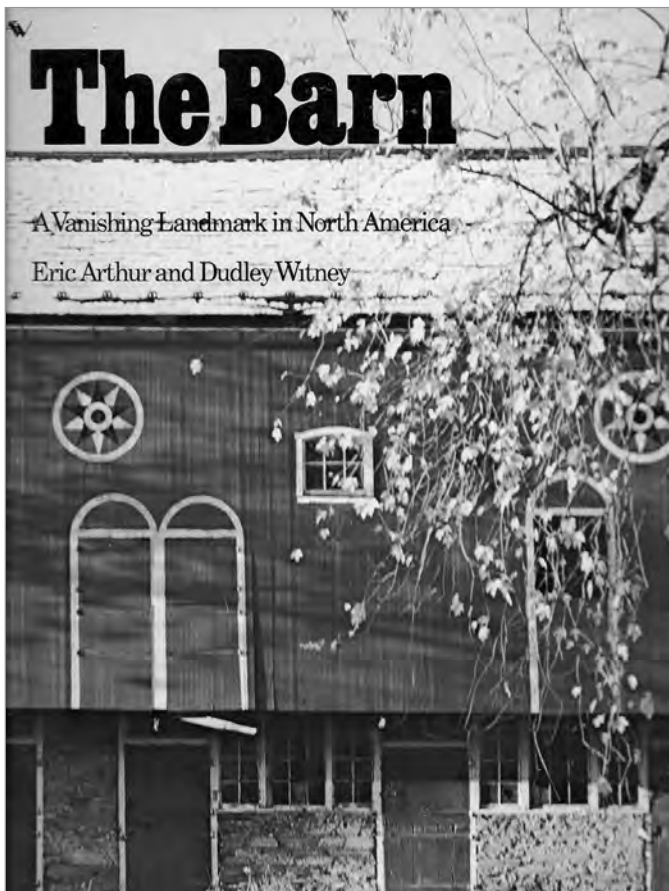


FIG. 6. COVER. | ARTHUR, *THE BARN – A VANISHING LANDMARK IN NORTH AMERICA*.



FIG. 7. ALOIS MATANOVIC, PHOTOGRAPH (C. 1972) PUBLISHED IN ARTHUR, *THE BARN – A VANISHING LANDMARK IN NORTH AMERICA*.

elevators at Montreal and Fort William (now Thunder Bay) in his 1913 essay published in the *Werkbund's Jahrbuch*. Le Corbusier also used photographs of the same elevators in his seminal 1923 book *Vers une architecture* (Champs, Flammarion; English translation, 1927), reviewed favourably in the November 1929 issue of the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (JRAIC)*. Le Corbusier selected those at Fort William, the Canadian Government elevator at Ogden, Alberta (1911), and Montreal—albeit misattributed to an US location—and wrote in *Vers une architecture*: “Thus we have the American grain elevators and factories, the magnificent First Fruits of the new age” (fig. 5).

Although interest in vernacular buildings continued from the 1910s well through the post-World War Two years, the 1960s witnessed a renewed fascination for “non-pedigreed” buildings of all sorts by professionals and laypeople alike; this interest in the “popular”—from roadside gas stations to pre-industrial buildings of the Mediterranean—was jumpstarted by Bernard Rudofsky’s book and exhibition, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-pedigreed Architecture* (Museum of Modern Art, 1964). In the same year that Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour published *Learning from Las Vegas* (MIT Press, 1972), Arthur (with photographer Dudley Witney) expanded his interest in the vernacular buildings of Canada with his study *The Barn: A Vanishing Landmark in North America* (M.F. Feheley Arts Co. Ltd., 1972) (fig. 6). Combining a responsibility for heritage with a continued interest in contemporary implications on practice, Arthur wrote: “In the foreseeable future, there is more than a possibility that, for many, the kind of barn illustrated in these pages will not be there to see. When one

considers the exposure of our old barns to the winds of change, as well as those other winds that have buffeted them for a century or more, the marvel is that any are left for those who would try to comprehend the secrets that they hold.”<sup>5</sup> In the introduction, Arthur selected a photograph by Alois Matanovic of a roadside Red Barn fast-food, a restaurant building designed in the shape of a barn with bright roadside marquee for advertising: “Even for the entrepreneur, there must linger nostalgic memories of the barn as a place of adventure and fun—memories that he hopes will be evoked in the minds of the patrons of his restaurant or dance hall. Hence the lure of the Red Barn”<sup>6</sup> (fig. 7). Thus, for Arthur, and a number of modernist architects of his ilk, the modest yet ingenuous qualities of extant vernacular buildings—whether churches, houses, or barns—provided valuable lessons with which to inform and transform the contemporary architectural practice with wit and humility.

## NOTES

1. Arthur’s first articles on the topic appeared in *JRAIC*, August 1927, vol. 4, p. 289-301; September 1927, p. 313-317; November 1927, p. 389-392; *JRAIC*, January 1928, vol. 5, p. 25-29; March 1928, p. 99-102; June 1928, p. 197-202; August 1928, p. 276-277; October 1928, p. 381-384; December 1928, p. 446-448; *JRAIC*, August 1929, vol. 6, p. 273-276. For an overview see: Keefer, Alec (ed.), 2001, *Eric Ross Arthur: Conservation in Context*, Toronto, Toronto Region Architectural Conservancy; and Sabatino, Michelangelo, 2001, “Eric Arthur: Practical Visions,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, vol. 26, nos. 1-2. p. 33-42. For an overview of the dialogue between twentieth-century architects and the vernacular tradition, see the introductions of my two books: Sabatino, Michelangelo, 2010, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy*, Toronto-Buffalo, University of Toronto Press [Paperback 2011]; and Lejeune, Jean-François and Michelangelo Sabatino (eds.), 2010, *Modern Architecture*

*and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities*, London, Routledge.

2. Scottish architect and historian Ramsay Traquair’s seminal publication *The Old Architecture of Quebec: A Study of the Buildings Erected in New France From the Earliest Explorers to the Middle of the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto, MacMillan 1947) also uses the term “buildings” (although “Architecture” is in the title). Arthur’s introduction to *Small Houses* credits McGill’s School of Architecture for their pioneering efforts in measuring and drawing extant buildings.
3. Blecksmith, Anne, 2002, “‘Raccolte di vedute’: Early Twentieth Century Architect’ Books and the Making of a Landscape for California,” *Art Documentation*, November, p. 14-17.
4. Sekler, Eduard F., 1985, *Josef Hoffmann: Monograph and Catalogue of Works*, New York, Princeton University Press, p. 486-493.
5. Arthur, Eric R., 1972, *The Barn: A Vanishing Landmark in North America*, Greenwich, CT, New York Graphic Society, p. 11.
6. *Id.*, p. 29.