THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE AND CANADIAN IDENTITY

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The cultural identity of Canada has long been an elusive concept; an enormous expanse of varying landscapes and diverse populations at a glance appear to be inhibiting the formation of a national coherence. Canada's Centennial celebrations, with the accompanying surge of national pride, offered a key moment to unite people behind a "Canadian identity." Important components of these celebrations were the Centennial building projects; municipal projects matched dollar for dollar by the federal government, with eleven provincial or territorial projects in their respective capitals, and two federal projects: the Fathers of Confederation Centre, in Charlottetown, and the National Arts Centre (NAC), in Ottawa. As the opus of the Centennial building program, the NAC offers a window into the intentions of the government and the architects of many of the projects—ARCOP—in the search for a uniquely Canadian architectural expression. Their quest was paralleled by similar efforts in other areas of the arts in Canada.

In the decades preceding the Canadian Centennial, the increasing concern of American cultural influence on Canada led to the foundation of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1949-1951), of which Vincent Massey, the Governor General of Canada, was appointed chairman in 1949. Massey expressly believed that the Canadian culture was one of an accommodating diversity,[1] and argued that Canada must break free of increasing American influence, realign itself with Europe—with which he believed

FIG. 1. THE FORMER CAPITOL THEATRE, WHICH ALTHOUGH QUITE A GRAND EDIFICE, WAS A MOVIE THEATRE REPURPOSED FOR OTHER EVENTS. IT WAS DEMOLISHED IN 1970. | LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA.

FIG. 2. THE CONFEDERATION CENTRE FOR THE ARTS WAS A PROTO-CENTENNIAL PROJECT COMMEMORATING THE CHARLOTTETOWN CONFERENCE. ALSO DESIGNED BY ARCOP, IT IS INTERESTING TO SEE THE FOCUS ON THE SCULPTURAL QUALITIES OF THE COURTYARD BETWEEN THE BUILDINGS, AND THE SIMPLICITY OF THE BUILDINGS THEMSELVES. | *CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE* IMAGE COLLECTION, RYERSON UNIVERSITY.

FIG. 3. UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA ROTUNDA, 1826. ARCHITECT: THOMAS JEFFERSON. | WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

that Canada had much in common—and foster the necessary development of the arts in order for this to happen. His strong views and experience informed his leadership of what came to be known as the Massey Commission and strongly influenced the recommendations of the 1951 *Massey Report*, widely considered the most important document in the history of Canadian cultural policy.[2]

Found within the *Massey Report* are descriptions of the cultural achievements of the country, followed by the committee's recommendations for the enhancement of Canadian culture, as well as briefs, studies, and letters, prepared by professional organizations and citizens, which dealt with the various fields of artistic expression. The Theatre section of the report describes performances mounted "in inappropriate and incongruous settings, in gymnasiums, churches, hotel rooms, school halls or in motion picture theatres rented for the occasion at ruinous cost."[3] Indeed, we know that this was the case in Ottawa for many large-scale productions that travelled through the city, including the Toronto and Montreal Symphony Orchestras,[4] which were forced to perform in school gymnasiums or a cinema called the Capitol Theatre (fig. 1). This section also interestingly begins with an excerpt of correspondence between Samuel Marchbanks—a pseudonym of Robertson Davies—and the fictional Apollo Fishhorn, Esq., on the state of theatre in Canada, relating specifically to the settings in which they take place:

> [E]very great drama, as you know, has been shaped by its playhouse. The Greek drama gained grandeur from its marble outdoor theatres; the Elizabethan drama was given fluidity by the extreme adaptability of the Elizabethan playhouse stage; French classical drama took its formal tone from its exquisite, candle-lit theatres.[5]

Marchbanks—or Davies—goes on to lament then that our own dramas would be coloured by their settings in gymnasiums of "the early concrete style," with the stories thus to be set in as many cellars as possible.

Further into the section, the discussion of a National Theatre arises: "although witnesses and other authorities on this matter differed in their conception of what a National Theatre should be and of how it should be brought about, there was wide agreement that it should be one of our cultural resources."[6] Though some of the authors thought a National Theatre building to be a wasteful endeavour without a company worthy of the title, the fragility of such an enterprise is noted, as the budgets of different governments could lead to their eventual demise. As in the earlier discussion of the setting forming the drama, we can see that in Canada there really was an acknowledgement of the need for a physical structure to allow for something to continue to form.

The absence of an edifice to house the performing arts in the face of already established cultural institutions such as the National Gallery remained un-remedied for twelve years, at which point the 1963 commissioning of Centennial commemoration projects and the accompanying nationalism offered an

FIG. 4. DRAWING OF PANTHEON, ROME, BY PIRANESI. | WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

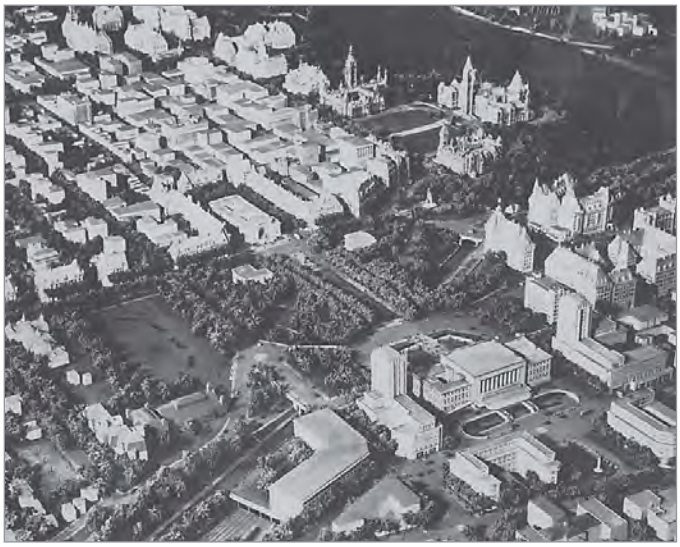

FIG. 5. A VIEW OF A MODEL OF JACQUES GREBER'S PLAN FOR OTTAWA, 1950. THE GREBER PLAN FOCUSED ON THE CREATION OF AXIAL BOULEVARDS AND VISTAS IN THE BEAUX-ARTS TRADITION. | RYERSON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES.

FIG. 6. THE PLAN'S BEAUX-ARTS CHARACTER BECOMES EVIDENT AGAIN IN THIS VIEW OF ONE OF THE PLANS FOR CITY HALL, WHICH DEMONSTRATES HEAVY CLASSICAL INFLUENCES IN THE DESIGN. | RYERSON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES.

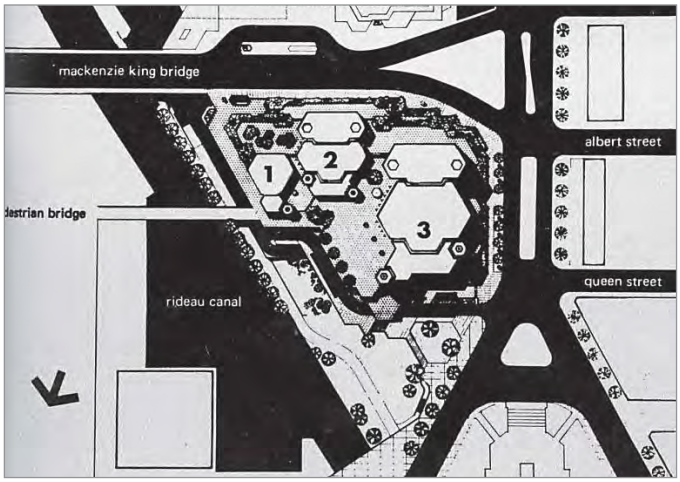

FIG. 7. NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE SITE PLAN, 1969. ARCHITECT: AFFLECK, DESBARATS, DIMAKOPOULOS, LEBENSOLD, SISE. | *CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE.*

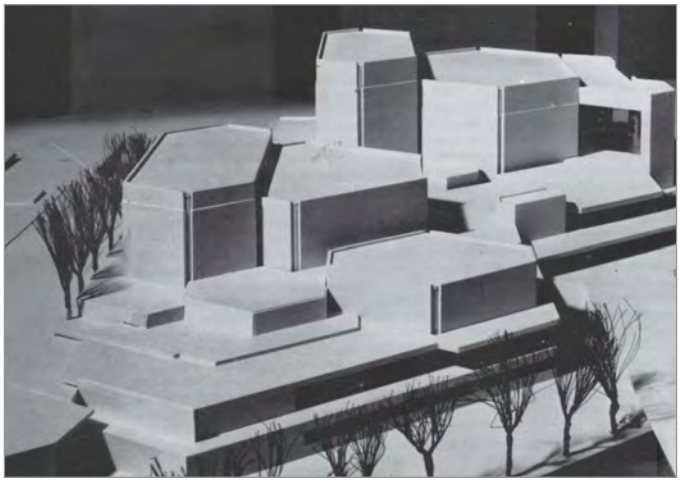

FIG. 8. A VIEW OF AN EARLY MODEL OF THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE, SHOWING THE PROTRUDING VOLUMES, REFERRED TO BY THE ARCHITECTS AS BOULDERS OR GREAT STONES IN THEIR EARLY DESCRIPTIONS. | *CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE.*

FIG. 9. A VIEW OF THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE FROM THE RIDEAU CANAL, SHOWING THE INTERLINKING TERRACES CASCADING TOWARD THE CANAL. | *CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE* IMAGE COLLECTION, RYERSON UNIVERSITY.

opportune time to revisit the discussion of such a project. The citizens of Ottawa's desire for a theatre building was further enhanced by the emerging idea of a grand cultural edifice in the capital to commemorate the Centennial, as presented to then Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson by Ottawa native and newspaper heir Hamilton Southam.[7] This, in turn, led to the generation of *The Study of a National Centre for the Performing Arts*, or the "Brown Book"—as it has come to be called—in 1963.

In October of the following year, Canadians witnessed the opening of the Confederation Centre for the Arts in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, meant to commemorate a meeting at the Province House between the fathers of Confederation one hundred years earlier. The Confederation Centre served as a sort of prototype for the Centennial building program, inciting other provinces and cities to start thinking of a more permanent monument of the year (fig. 2).

At the opening of the Confederation Centre in October 1964, Prime Minister Pearson noted:

> [The Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building] is a tribute to those famous men who founded our Confederation. But it is also dedicated to the fostering of those things that enrich the mind and delight the heart, those intangible but precious things that give meaning to a society and help create from it a civilization and a culture.[8]

It is well understood that the need to showcase these aspects of culture was important at that point in time, and so the National Arts Centre, as the second—and only other—Federal project, with the explicit mission as a place for the formation of culture, is extremely important in this regard. But how to forge an architecture, something that by its very nature must become tangible, to represent such disparate regions, climates, and cultures throughout the country? Although Pearson was most likely speaking in terms of the cultural value of the theatrical and musical productions that would take place within the Confederation Centre, his insight rings true for the architecture of the complex as well.

Architecture can be read as one of the key indicators of the state of a society, and the architecture of Canada's Centennial building program exemplified this notion. Architecture has long been used to metaphorically align young, post-colonial nations with the achievements of long-established societies as a tool to allude to the longevity of the current one. For example, following the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Latrobe advocated an ancient Roman-inspired Georgian Palladianism in order to philosophically align the United States with the power, stability, and longevity of both the Roman and British empires during turbulent times[9] (figs. 3-4). Interestingly, within the *Massey Report*, it is this imitation which is explicitly discussed:

> [T]he prevailing pattern of Federal Government buildings at Ottawa has been a matter of severe comment. Although, in theory, there is to be no regimentation on style in the buildings contemplated under the new Capital Plan, there is a danger, we are told, that the "romanticism" of the Chateau Laurier will be replaced by that of Greece and Rome.[10] (fig. 5)

The problem of an "architecture of imitation" is explicitly called upon by the architect consultants of the report as a primary problem in the formation of a Canadian architectural culture. The authors of that section took issue with this mode of practice specifically because they felt that Canada had distinct and obvious differences to the societies who developed these unique architectures, and that they were being misappropriated, and even diminished with the use of inferior materials. But it was also noted in the same section that "this 'cult of the extinct' is the inevitable striving for form in building of a country without architectural roots . . . This literary attitude toward architecture, we are told, is far from dead"[11] (fig. 6). And so, rather than imitate, it became public policy that an architecture should be created in order to attempt to forge a unique, modern, Canadian identity. Architecture, at such a significant time in Canada's history, was given the role of "culture creator."

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE

Designed starting in 1964 by Affleck, Desbarats, Dimakopoulos, Lebensold, Sise, later known as ARCOP, The National Arts Centre, as the national opus of the Centennial building program, represents a significant point in Canada's architectural history. What were the architects attempting to state about Canadian society? Is "Canadian identity" rooted in the landscape that their designs aimed to evoke? The NAC offers a concrete, landscape-derived answer to the question "What is Canadian culture?"

The NAC forms a series of terraces cascading down toward the Rideau Canal, with the extruded forms creating a series of environments that eventually lead to the canal bank, and the main entrance (fig. 7). The uppermost terrace is level with the Mackenzie King Bridge; three volumes protrude through this terrace, expressing the eight-hundred-seat theatre, the flexible studio and the

two-thousand-three-hundred-seat opera house-concert hall[12] (fig. 8). The terraces cascade down the hill from this point, creating the sense of Laurentian granite boulders perched on the bank of the canal, and allowing for multiple paths to be taken from the street, meandering between the boulder forms, and down to the lower levels; it is a building that creates a simulated landscape (fig. 9). The hexagonal forms of the performance volume "boulders" offer a geometric motif that pervades every aspect of the design, from the interior finishes to the paving stones on the terraces, to the angled stairs.

Read against the recommendations of the *Massey Report*, the architecture of the NAC can be understood as rejecting the imitation of traditional architectural styles from elsewhere, in favour of an abstract, formal and material exploration of the Canadian identity as an emanation of the landscape. It is fitting then, that the building can be read as a "non-building"; an assembly of abstract objects in a field. The architects may have been linking Canadian identity to the natural beauty and power of the Canadian landscape, or the lack of traditional architectural forms could be seen as a critique or echo of Canada's lack of a coherent identity as a country. In its most basic sense, architecture is the piling of stones; the image of "boulders" on the terrace may imply the architects' commentary that there truly was no Canadian architectural identity and that all that could be done, at that moment, was pile stones.

And yet, although Canada lacked a clear and characteristic architectural expression at the time, other arts had developed clear Canadian identities. The *Massey Report* section on Painting cites the Group of Seven[13] as embodying a descriptive and romantic tradition: "that is to say, while restricting themselves to the essentials of the object depicted, they undertook to suggest through, but beyond the immediate object, the whole grandeur and wildness of the Canadian landscape"[14] (fig. 10).

It is clear that, in painting, the culture of Canada was understood as being expressed through Canadians' literal "common ground." The *Massey Report* assertion that the Canadian painting scene was rightly rooted in the landscape offers clues for architecture as well, which were taken up and explored in the 1960s and 1970s. Canadian architects came to reference the "common ground," or landscape, as the new root of a uniquely Canadian architecture, and to create an architecture free of references to the forms and symbols of past societies and colonial powers as a way to avoid marginalizing or giving preference to any of the unique identities that form Canada. Much as in Canadian painting, the emphasis becomes not on the object, but on the atmosphere. Pure, unadorned geometries rise up above to meet the sky, and surround the occupant.

In *The New Brutalism*, Reyner Banham, while discussing the Smithson's move toward a "basic" architecture, notes: "they saw, in Mediterranean peasant buildings, an anonymous architecture of simple and rugged geometrical forms, smooth-walled and small-windowed, unaffectedly and immemorially at home in its landscape setting."[15] This description of a neutral architecture of geometric form seems to fit very well with the realization of the National Arts Centre, as it uses sheer vertical surfaces of concrete faced in coarse granite aggregate to allow light to play on it rather than to adorn the surfaces with anything further, as well as manufacturing a landscape in which these forms can sit. It is also interesting to note,

FIG. 10. LAWREN HARRIS MOUNT THULE, BYLOT ISLAND, 1930. THE GEOMETRIC COMPLEXITIES OF MOUNT THULE ARE REDUCED OUT IN THIS PAINTING, LEAVING AN ABSTRACTED GEOMETRIC EXPRESSION IN WHICH THE PLAY OF LIGHT ACROSS SURFACES BECOMES EVIDENT. THERE IS NO TRACE OF PEOPLE OR WILDLIFE, JUST A BARE LANDSCAPE. | JIM GORMAN, VANCOUVER ART GALLERY.

FIGS. 11-12. WITHIN THE TERRACES, THERE IS A SENSE OF CLOSURE AND SOLIDITY. | MITCHELL MAY.

FIG. 13. PLACE BONAVENTURE, AS SEEN FROM THE AIR, REVEALS AN INNER GARDEN WITHIN THE CITY. | BING MAPS.

FIG. 14. FROM ELGIN STREET, THE BUILDING PRESENTS NO OBVIOUS ENTRANCE, BUT VARIOUS STAIRWAYS AND SMALL STOREFRONTS TO INVITE THE PASSER-BY TO EXPLORE ON TOP AND BESIDE IT. | *CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE* IMAGE COLLECTION, RYERSON UNIVERSITY.

again in the earlier *Massey Report* (in the Architecture and Town Planning section), that there are mentions of this simplicity. In an excerpt from the special report prepared by Eric Arthur, there is a discussion of the emerging "engineering architecture," and the merits of their "simplicity of form, unbroken surface texture and the play of shadow."[16] Mentioned specifically are the grain elevators of the Prairies and the Great Lakes, structures not meant to symbolize anything other than their function, but having taken on a broader meaning as some of the largest structures in their settings, and thus akin in some ways to the peasant dwellings described by Banham. The NAC remains within this discussion, seeming to make the case that the architect was "resetting" architecture in Canada. This monument to culture makes no reference to buildings as we knew them; there are no visual links to the past, or any form of stripped-down classicism, but the replacement of "architecture" with pure geometry and form outside of the traditional discourse. It is not a building in a landscape, but a landscape in itself (figs. 11-12).

Nevertheless, the Canadian landscape it aims to emulate is not necessarily a welcoming one. Northrop Frye identifies the "garrison mentality" as a persistent and fundamental theme of Canadian literature, wherein the hostility of the external environment evokes an introverted and intellectual character growth. Frye posits that this development in Canadian literature is indeed influenced by physical realities of the built form of Canada, noting that in "the earliest maps of the country the only inhabited centres are forts,"[17] literal garrisons, and that this theme of isolation and fortification has become a part of the Canadian imagination. This notion of defense with the hostile "cultural" environment pointed out by the *Massey Report*, in which Canadian culture, already fleeting and ephemeral, is increasingly diluted by American influence; as expressed in the architecture of the NAC, Canadian culture is to be secured within a fortress-like edifice, protected by the weight and mass of the rough concrete forms.

This notion of isolation and fortification as a crucial part of the Canadian identity also brings to mind the notion of the sublime landscape; the idea of a landscape that awes the viewer with grandeur, power, and thus danger was found in Canadian landscape paintings of the Group of Seven. The relationship between architecture and landscape was obviously important, but was especially so during the period of heroic Canadian architecture of the 1960s and 1970s. In his 1994 essay entitled "Back to the Future," Peter Buchanan retrospectively looks at mid- to late-twentieth-century modern Canadian architecture, and describes a few prominent projects of the time that were sited at the tops of hills, and built at a scale so as to complement the landscape, such as Arthur Erickson's Simon Fraser University. Conversely, there was also the trend of bringing the "natural" landscape into the city, such as the roof garden of Place Bonaventure by ARCOP, in Montreal (1964)[18] (fig. 13). In the case of the National Arts Centre, the aforementioned idea of "building as landscape" re-emerges, creating a heroic

FIG. 15-16-17. PROGRESSING THROUGH THE ENTRY SEQUENCE, ONE IS MET WITH A SORT OF BLANK SIDE, DESCENDING UNDER A TERRACE, WITH THE VIEW OPENING UP TO THE RIVER AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STEPS, AT WHICH POINT THE ENTRANCE IS FOUND.

FIG. 15. GOOGLE MAPS.

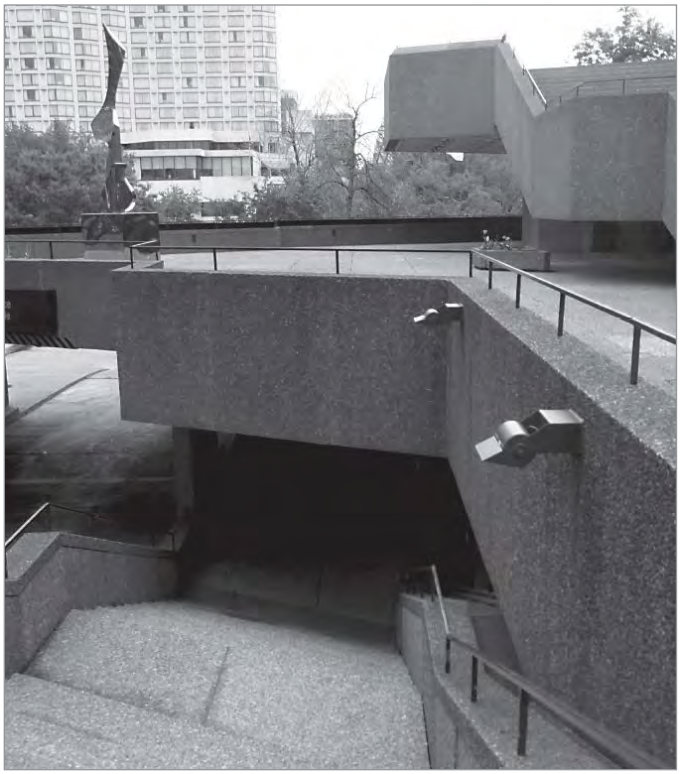

FIG. 16. MITCHELL MAY.

FIG. 17. *CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE* IMAGE COLLECTION, RYERSON UNIVERSITY.

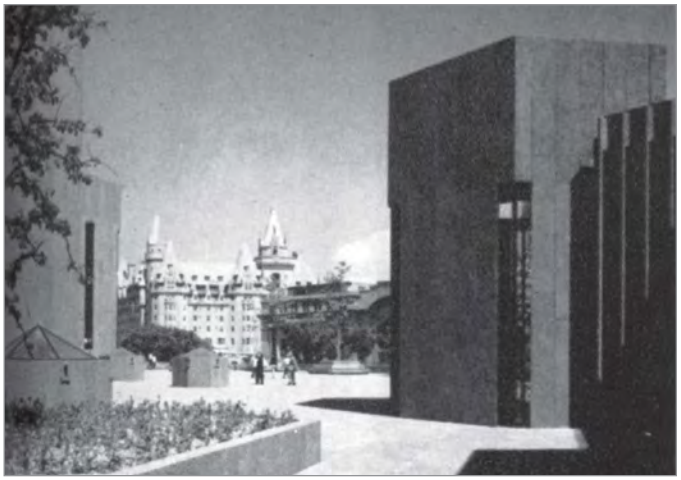

FIG. 18. WHERE THERE IS A DEFINITE SENSE OF ENCLOSURE AT SOME POINTS ON THE TERRACES, THEY ARE CONTRASTED BY SUCH MOMENTS AS THE VIEW OPENING UP TO THE CHATEAU LAURIER, WITH THE BUILDING CAREFULLY FRAMING VIEWS BEYOND ITSELF. | *CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE* IMAGE COLLECTION, RYERSON UNIVERSITY.

outcropping of rocks on the bank of the canal. The building turns its back on the city (fig. 14), challenging visitors to walk through the landscape, until they are confronted with the canal, approximating a river, at which point they can turn and be embraced by the building. Within the "Brown Book," a report of mostly technical considerations and studies in aid of making a case for the theatre, there is a small section called Concept, in which the distinction between a cinema and a theatre is made: one does not wander in off the street to a theatre in the same way one does to a cinema. The cinema, the author notes, is a signboard inviting people in, whereas a theatre is a place of ceremony. The ideal siting of the building is further described as on a hill, with promenades surrounding a round building. The procession to the building, of which one is able to experience the awesomeness, is seen as important at that early stage. The entrance procession of

the NAC as rendered by the architects, in which one crosses over the landscape "promenade" surrounding the protruding buildings, or descends to face out to the canal, then, is a part of the ceremony and the seriousness of the institution. For the most part, windows do not face out to the street, but the canal, as if to force people to realize the vastness and extreme power of the Canadian landscape through the connection with the canal and surrounding open space (figs. 15-17).

The fact that the building faces the Rideau Canal is also a literal manifestation of the garrison mentality, within a larger historical landscape of militarism. The Rideau Canal was built to ensure that the link between Kingston and Montreal could not be severed by an American invasion following the War of 1812. By analogy, the NAC was built at a time of perceived "cultural" invasion from the United States, as evidenced the *Massey Report*'s call for Canadians to "shake off" American influence, and look to Europe, understood in the report to be the place of common Canadian roots. It is interesting then that the NAC, a building meant to give birth to a Canadian culture, has its main entrance oriented toward the canal, and forces confrontation of the duality of this simulated natural environment. This essential infrastructural tool allowed for the maintenance of the connections between two important cities at the time, serving a defensive role, as well as uniting disparate parts of the country into a whole in the face of external threat.

This year (2013) marks the fiftieth anniversary of the "Brown Book," the document that served as the template by which the NAC was conceived, and in less than that time-lapse, the building has faced proposed alterations on a number of occasions. Seemingly, these are not minor changes, but ones that are meant to alter key characteristics of the design and expression of the building. As opposed to the contemplative landscape and the almost defensive weightiness of the building, concepts such as a four-storey glass pavilion with a tunnel carving into the building to access the canal side lobbies have been proposed. Rather than maintain the challenging entrance that pulls visitors through the landscape, such an entrance pavilion would devalue the terraces that have been created to cross and reflect upon before and after each performance. Fifty years after the cultural quest of the Massey Commission and the Centennial preparations, there is a proposal to fundamentally alter a building that was a significant attempt at discussion of the Canadian identity in architecture, into a building that is just like many others.

When the National Arts Centre first opened, it was praised for establishing not just a place for the arts to prosper, but for the creation of an urban environment where there was none before. And now in a single act, there is the potential to destroy the intention of this building. The introduction of built elements such as the earlier proposed glass pavilion threatens to totally undermine the reading of the centre as a landscape. The NAC grew out of the Massey-initiated project to forge a unique cultural expression in the Canadian arts, in order to demonstrate the growth of Canada from a colony into a country all its own. Alterations insensitive to the NAC, a structure conceived under this important mandate, would signify an abandonment of this cultural project (fig. 18). Where the National Arts Centre of the Centennial said that Canada was a forward-looking, optimistic nation, what does this say about Canadians, now that they are so quickly willing to turn their backs on this landscape that was modeled after their own?

NOTES

1. Finlay, Karen A., 2004, *The Force of Culture: Vincent Massey and Canadian Sovereignty*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, p. 206.
2. *Id.* : 211.
3. Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences 1949-1951 (1951), *Massey Report*, Ottawa, Edmont Cloutier.
4. Jennings, Sarah, 2009, *Art and Politics: The History of the National Arts Centre*, Toronto, Dundurn Press, p. 18.
5. *Massey Report* : 192.
6. *Id.* : 193-194.
7. Jennings : 18.
8. Pearson, Lester B., n.d., *Our History - Confederation Centre for the Arts*, retrieved from [http://www.confederationcentre.com/en/our-history.php], accessed February 12, 2012.
9. McDowell, Peggy and Richard Meyer, 1994, *The Revival Styles in American Memorial Art*, Wisconsin, Popular Press, p. 23.
10. *Massey Report* : 220.
11. *Id.* : 217-218.
12. National Arts Centre, Ottawa, July 1969, *Canadian Architect*, vol. 14, no. 7, p. 30-63.
13. A group of Canadian landscape painters active in the early twentieth century.
14. *Massey Report* : 205.
15. Banham, Reyner, 1966, *The New Brutalism*, New York, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, p. 46-47.
16. *Massey Report* : 218.
17. Frye, Northrop, 1971, *The Bush Garden*, Toronto, Anasi Press, p. 224-226, retrieved from [http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/headers/0660.xml], accessed March 3, 2012.
18. Buchanan, Peter, 1994, "Back to the Future," *Canadian Architect*, vol. 39, no. 3, p. 20-30.