

Wilderness Nation: The Myth of Nature in Canadian Architecture

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In the woods of the Venice Biennale Giardini, nestled between Great Britain's neo-Palladian villa and Germany's neo-classical monolith, Canada's pavilion camps out. Designed to be easily dismountable, the spiralling wood and glass construction squeezes between trees, embracing one specimen in its glass-enclosed courtyard and wrapping its wooden limbs around a second, which rises through its peaked roof and forms a verdant canopy overhead.

Italian collective Banfi Belgiojoso Peressutti Rogers (BBPR) built the pavilion in 1958, on commission from the Canadian government. The same year, the firm designed the Torre Velasca in the historic centre of Milan (figs. 1-2). The tower, a provocative example of a form of abstract historicism, distilled a symbolic essence of the city by boldly abstracting its medieval towers. In contrast, the firm's architectural representation of Canada was a small-scale, relatively modest structure. Its pared-down steel-beam roof, glass clerestory lights, and brick walls fit with the Italian collective's principle of employing simple materials in unadorned planes, but also camouflaged the structure against its wooded surroundings. In this setting, the spiralling, peaked-roof form called to mind not so much the Archimedes's spiral of its design sketches, as a more quintessentially Canadian structure—a Native teepee.

While the Venice pavilion was built a half-century ago, it reflects a stereotype of Canadian architecture whose roots reach back to pre-confederation

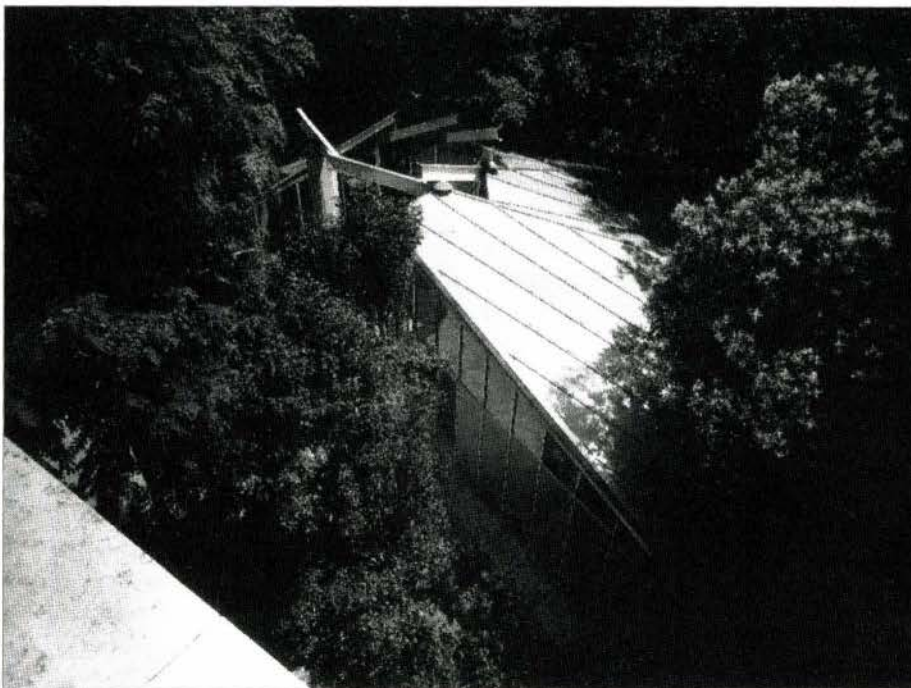


FIG. 1. BBPR, CANADIAN PAVILION, VENICE BIENNALE, 1958. | FROM SERENA MAFFIOLETTI, ED. BBPR, ZANICHELLI, BOLOGNA, 1994.



FIG. 2. BBPR, TORRE VELESCA, MILANO, 1958. | FROM SERENA MAFFIOLETTI, ED. *BBPR*. ZANICHELLI, BOLOGNA, 1994.

years, and which continues to resurface today. In international publications and exhibitions, Canadian architecture has often been represented by heavy timber cottages or rural constructions closely related to natural sites. When a national architecture is claimed to exist, it is often characterized as revealing links to the country's natural landscapes.

Beyond architecture, the idea of landscape is embedded in Canadian nationalism more broadly. In 2007, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) ran a poll to select the Seven Wonders of Canada. From thousands of nominees, judges picked the Canoe to top a list including Niagara Falls, the Rockies, the Igloo, and Prairie Skies. Over a million audience votes yielded another nature-themed "top seven," including the Bay of Fundy, Nahanni National Park, the Northern Lights, and Ontario's Sleeping Giant geological formation.

With a population density of 3.3 people per square kilometre, it is not surprising

that Canada identifies with large-scale, open landscapes. Nevertheless, over eighty percent of Canadians live in urban centres. Accordingly, the country's architectural production is predominantly urban, although these constructions elicit far less attention than the country's rural production. When and why, as a nation, did Canada begin to identify with northern lights, canoes, and cottage architecture? This paper will attempt to bring a historical perspective to the question, tracing the paired ideas of wilderness and nationalism in a series of iconic Canadian constructions from 1830 to 1930, and suggesting links to today's discussions of architectural nationalism and regionalism.

CATHARINE PARR TRAILL'S LOG-CABIN, 1836

Early Canadians were driven by the intention to "[reduce] a wilderness into a fruitful country,"² imposing agricultural order on an unwieldy landscape. Nature in pre-confederation Canada was

not the adventure-filled battleground of the American frontier—rather, it remained staunchly omnipresent and harshly indifferent to human moods. In pioneer accounts of settlement by Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill,³ natural environments were constant sources of deception to the sisters' British aesthetic sensibilities. "Canada is not the land for the idle sensualist," Traill warned. Moodie's romantic penchant for picturesque beauty was constantly foiled by the hidden dangers of the Canadian landscape: the "picture-perfect" city of Québec suffered from a cholera epidemic, a scenic view of a lake glimpsed through a new clearing preceded a fallow fire, a canoe trip on picturesque waters turned treacherous with a hidden undercurrent (figs. 3-4).

As interpreted over a century later, the pioneer idea of an unforgiving, harsh wilderness underlies Margaret Atwood's contention that bare survival—"hanging on, staying alive"—comprises a central characteristic of Canadian literature. Far from the heroic battles of the American West or the romantic woods of Walden Pond, Moodie's wilderness engendered prosaic seasonal struggle and suffering, in the form of sweltering summers, freezing winters, and malnutrition. "Nature seen as dead, or alive but indifferent, or alive and actively hostile towards man," Atwood notes morosely, "is a common image in Canadian literature."⁴

In Atwood's assessment, the hostility of the Canadian environment is a given, and the telling moment lies in how characters respond to nature's adversities. Both Moodie and Traill asserted the power of Victorian civilization against wilderness, cultivating domestic niceties in the midst of calamity. Literary scholar D.M.R. Bentley argues that the sisters perceived British America as "a



FIG. 3. QUEBEC CITY. | FROM *THE BACKWOODS OF CANADA* (1929 ED.).

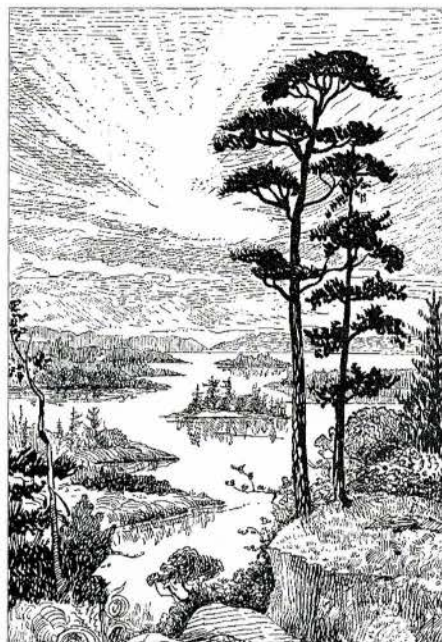


FIG. 4. RICE LAKE. | FROM *THE BACKWOODS OF CANADA* (1929 ED.).



FIG. 5. LOG HOUSE. | FROM *THE BACKWOODS OF CANADA* (1846 ED.) (P. 75).

country [...] in the process of becoming a unique combination of the best of the Old and the New worlds," mixing British respectability with a dose of American individualism and egalitarianism.⁵ The sisters' log houses were accordingly civilized, modest nodes of order in the woods. "What a nut-shell!" I think I hear you exclaim," wrote Traill of her recently constructed dwelling (fig. 5).

So it is at present, but we purpose adding a handsome frame front as soon as we can [...] When the house is completed, we shall have a verandah in front [...] which forms an agreeable addition in the summer, being used as a sort of outer room [...] Few houses, either log or frame, are without them. The pillars look extremely pretty, wreathed with the luxuriant hop-vine, mixed with the scarlet creeper and "morning

glory" [...] these stoups are really a considerable ornament, as they conceal in a great measure the rough logs, and break the barn-like form of the building.⁶

Traill planned to cultivate a civilized aesthetic—a handsome façade, social verandah, and ornamental climbing plants—to hide the rough construction of her house. In choosing imported and local plants, she literally blended British and North American materials to bring the picturesque into the domestic realm. She thus created a familiar aesthetic order that contrasted the deceptive appearances of the surrounding wilderness (fig. 6).

CANOE COURT, 1851

The attempt to transpose British civilization onto the Canadian wilderness became a proto-nationalist project in one of Canada's earliest international displays: the *Canadian Court* at the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition in London, England, designed by German architect and theoretician Gottfried Semper. Unfurled a decade after the British Act of Union joined Upper and Lower Canada, the pavilion showcased the abundant natural resources of the colony, alongside their more modest manufactured products.

The display offered a sharp contrast between wilderness resources and signs of civilization. The largest quantity of goods, occupying cases along the sides and back, was a "highly instructive series" of mineral samples, including specimens of gold, copper, iron-ore, and bog-iron. Three full pages in the official catalogue explained the distribution and commercial applications of these minerals. Furs were also everywhere in the display, in the form of pelts, sleigh-ropes, and moose-heads (fig. 7).



FIG. 6. WESTOVE, MRS. TRAILL'S HOME AT LAKEFIELD, 1925. | C.P. MEREDITH/LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, 1968-067 NPC PA-026904.

In counterpoint to the “raw materials [that] preponderate,” accoutrements of Victorian culture occupied the centre of the court. In the middle stood a pair of sleighs, a prize-winning fire engine, a wooden piano, and carved black walnut settees (fig. 8). Accompanying catalogue descriptions emphasized that these were artefacts of civilized leisure: “Sleighting forms the chief and most highly-relished amusement of the Canadians during winter [...] It is no uncommon thing to see a score or thirty of these sleighs at one time careering over the frozen snow in the ‘fashionable drives.’” The piano was designed to resist temperature changes, showing “the rapid improvement of the colony, and its capabilities of manufacturing what is suited to the demands of its inhabitants.”⁷

Also notable in the display was the appearance of a novel symbol for the relationship between civilization and wilderness: the birch-bark canoes suspended above the court as well as atop a timber “trophy” in the main

arcade adjacent (fig. 9).⁸ Aesthetically, the inclusion of these elements was unusual: “It was somewhat curious to see the mixture of the works of a savage population with the clearest evidence of English civilization,” commented one illustrated volume.⁹ The canoes acted as anthropological curiosities, and were especially noteworthy given designer Semper’s interest in questions of primitive origin. Their prominence, moreover, implied the centrality of these “savage” artefacts for the colony—and as such, they began to constitute a “curious,” distinctive iconography for Canada.

Historically, canoes were key to Canada’s economy and geography, providing the practical means of traversing Laurentian basin forests to reach the furs, timbers, and minerals proudly displayed in 1851. Geographer Harold Innis has argued that the physical contours of early Canada were generated by the logic of canoe routes, needed to access the interior. In this framework, the canoe may be read as an emblem of

the ongoing movement and exchange between civilized nodes in Canada and its resource-rich wilderness areas.

Geographers have characterized that pattern of development as a dichotomy between civilized “baselands” and wilderness “hinterlands.” Extrapolating to the cultural realm, historian William L. Morton has written that the “alternate penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life, and forms the basic elements of Canadian character.”¹⁰ As a symbol for this both physical and metaphorical journey, Daniel Francis asserts: “the canoe emerges as the mother image of our national dream-life, the symbol of our oneness with a rugged northern landscape, the vessel in which we are recreated as Canadians.”¹¹ In its ensemble, the Canadian display began to consolidate a national self-image marked by a dichotomy between civilization—home of pianos, sleigh-races, and ornate wood furniture—and the wilderness—source of minerals, timber, and furs. The canoe became key to a “national” story of making expeditions outwards from civilized centres to penetrate the wilderness, and assumed an iconic status it would hold for decades to come.

BANFF SPRINGS HOTEL, 1889

This duality between wilderness and civilization was also prominent in natural tourism, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the 1860s, tourists from Britain, Canada, and the Eastern United States were drawn to the Muskoka region East of Georgian Bay to see “true” wilderness landscapes. For the British whose own wooded regions were planted and owned by aristocrats, the Canadian wilderness was linked to contemporary questions of class and

privilege. For Americans, the forest recalled their own decimated wildernesses and hinted at spiritual meanings. Both audiences sought to recapture a lost past in the Canadian forest. Wilderness was transformed from an everyday reality of homesteading and a practical source of natural resources to a sanctified place apart from civilized life. Tourist literature wooed urbanites with promises of healthful wilderness sojourns providing a “rest-cure” to urban malaise.¹²

That new valuation of wilderness was especially prominent in the architectural development and representation of Banff (fig. 10). Following the transnational railway’s completion in 1885, the federal government designated ten square miles in the Banff area as the nation’s first park reservation, protecting the economic interests of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the area.¹³ The first in a chain of luxury resorts, the Banff Springs Hotel was built on the mountainside site in 1887; it boasted spectacular scenery and medicinal hot springs.

The idea of creating a park reserve at Banff drew from the precedent of the United States, which designated its first national park at Yellowstone in 1871, a decade earlier. However, the immediate architectural development of Banff Springs into a luxury resort was notable. Facilities at Yellowstone were initially primitive shelters and tent-camps.¹⁴ The design of the Banff Springs Hotel was from the first grand in scale.

Designed by American architect Bruce Price, the original building featured steep hipped roofs, dormers with pointed finials, corner turrets, and oriels (fig. 11). To observers at the time, these characteristics recalled Loire valley châteaux, Swiss chalets, or Scottish baronial



FIG. 7. CANADIAN PAVILION, FROM *DICKINSON'S COMPREHENSIVE PICTURES OF THE GREAT EXHIBITION OF 1851*. LONDON, DICKINSON, 1854. | COURTESY OF AVERY LIBRARY.

models,¹⁵ styles distinguished by a close relationship with their landscape settings. Price’s work attempted to respond to a rugged landscape, and in so doing forge a national architecture for Canada. His development of an original expression came into full fruition with the later Windsor Station (1888-1889) and Château Frontenac (1892-1893). Through these, a distinct “château style” evolved with, in architectural historian Harold Kalman’s assessment, no recognizable European precedent.¹⁶ The style quickly became a national idiom, deployed for federal legislative buildings and hotels along both the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National railways (CPR and CNR), including the Banff Springs Hotel of 1928, rebuilt after a fire.

Special first-class railway carriages, outfitted to rival American cars, extended the luxury environment at Banff to the space of the journey itself: interiors were finished in carved mahogany, deep plush upholstery and carpets, and shining brass, glass, and mirrors. Part of

the romance of Western travel was the passengers’ very separation from the wilderness through which they passed. “Inside the Pullman all is luxury; outside is Nature in her most rugged mode,” wrote one British tourist.¹⁷ Seen from the civilized safety of a train window or from a hotel terrace, wilderness was experienced as a picturesque setting, providing relief from the stresses of urban life even while the viewer was maintained with urbanity’s comforts. The CPR carried visitors across the unsettled hinterland of Canada’s vast landscapes, while keeping them contained within a heartland of luxury hotels and railcars.

WILDERNESS NATION, 1910-1929

The valuation of wilderness in and of itself became a conscious project of cultural nationalism in the first decades of the twentieth century, as Canada sought to consolidate its national identity. Benedict Anderson has argued that nations are less the product of inherent

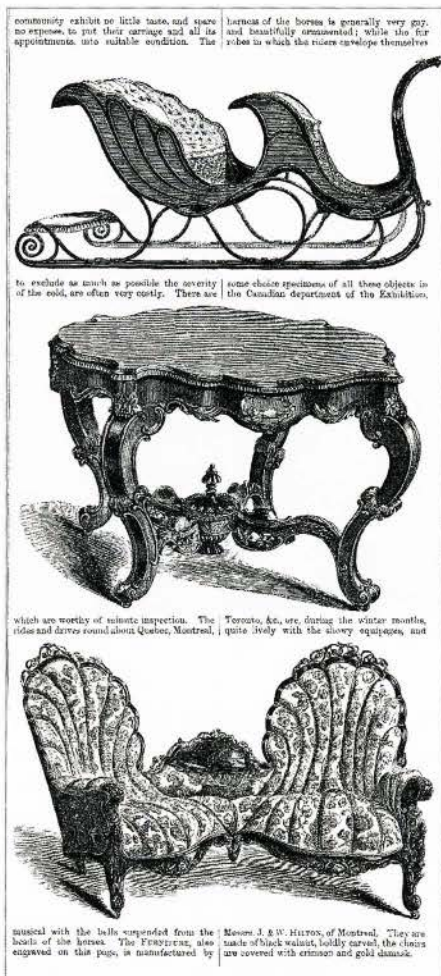


FIG. 8. SLEIGHS AND FURNITURE FROM CANADA, CRYSTAL PALACE EXHIBITION. *ART JOURNAL* SPECIAL ISSUE. LONDON, 1851. | COURTESY OF AVERY LIBRARY.

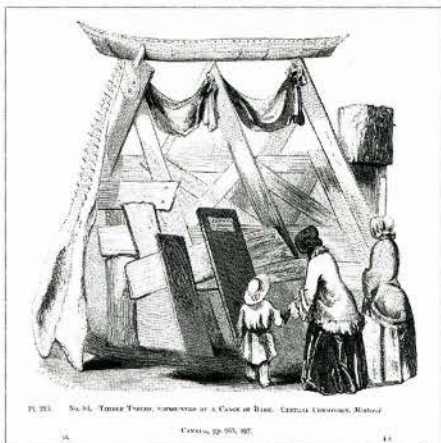


FIG. 9. CANOE TROPHY, AS ILLUSTRATED IN *OFFICIAL DESCRIPTIVE AND ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE*. GREAT BRITAIN, COMMISSIONERS FOR THE EXHIBITION OF 1851. | COURTESY OF AVERY LIBRARY.



FIG. 10. BROCHURE, CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY, 1897. | CANADIAN PACIFIC ARCHIVES, IMAGE NO. A20297.

qualities, and are literally “imagined into existence” through collective institutions such as newspapers, censuses, maps, and museums.¹⁸ For Canada, this was an especially active process in the decades spanning the turn of the century, its “great transformation” from a colony to an independent nation with an industrialized economy and network of national cultural institutions.¹⁹ The development of a distinguishing identity was a particular challenge for a twentieth-century Dominion, which could not construct its identity in opposition to an ex-colonial authority.²⁰ Applying what Ian McKay calls an

“antimodern modernism,” Canada expressed nationalism through intertwined strategies of recuperating “folk” histories, claiming European and First Nations cultures as components of a national heritage, and promoting an ideal of untouched wilderness landscapes as a source of national originality.

Canonical images of Canada’s untamed wilderness were embodied in the paintings and personalities of the Group of Seven during the 1920s (fig. 12). As Lynda Jessup documents, the group positioned themselves as

antimodernists, actively creating a “fiction of the authentic Canadian painter as a premodern man seeking, in the imagined premodern environment of the Canadian wilderness, the physical and emotional intensity identified with authentic experience.” This figure of the “authentic” Canadian artist—as well as their paintings of uninhabited, windswept landscapes—drew on the anti-urban ideals of the popular wilderness holiday, as well as reinforcing a growing association between wilderness and nationalist thought. In so doing, the Group’s work did not reflect inherent qualities in the landscape so much as it invested the landscape with wilderness characteristics.²¹

Through the patronage of the national railways, Art Gallery of Toronto, National Gallery, and National Museum of Canada, the Group’s depictions of Ontario were exhibited through the mid-1920s as speaking for the country as a whole. Their stylized depictions of wilderness were key to this nationalization of a regional landscape: the portrayal of un-peopled, primeval forests and lakes provided a sense of common ground that transcended the ambiguous historical identities of Dominion settlers.

In the late 1920s, the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest were promoted as another national heritage site. During that period, Pacific Northwest Native villages and their totem poles were preserved *in situ*, removed to museums, or painted as part of primeval wilderness landscapes. The landmark 1927 National Gallery show, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern*, combined the work of aboriginal cultures with paintings and sculptures by Canadian artists, including the Group of

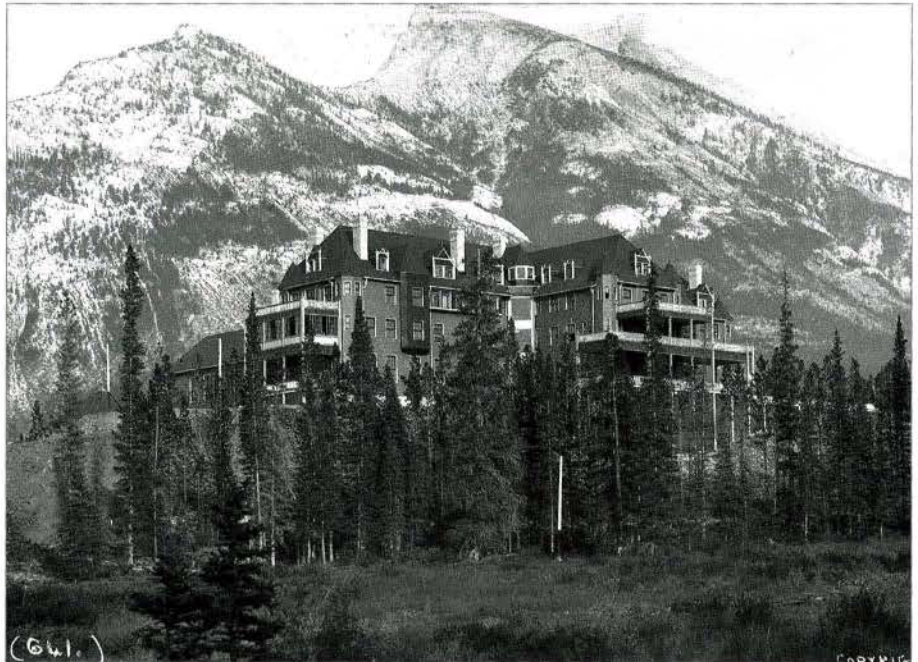


FIG. 11. BANFF SPRINGS HOTEL, BANFF, ALBERTA. BRUCE PRICE, 1886-1888. DESTROYED 1925. | PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, B5957.



FIG. 12. TOM THOMSON, *THE JACK PINE*, 1916-1917. | PHOTO © NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, OTTAWA.

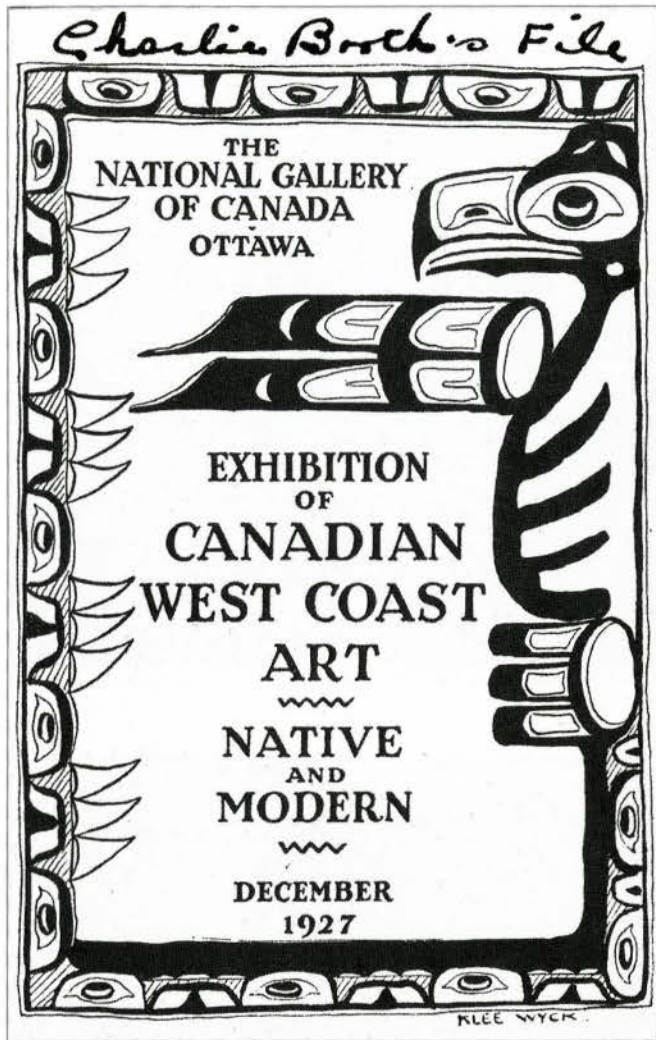


FIG. 13. POSTER BY EMILY CARR FOR EXHIBITION OF CANADIAN WEST COAST ART, NATIVE AND MODERN, 1927. | NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES, OTTAWA.

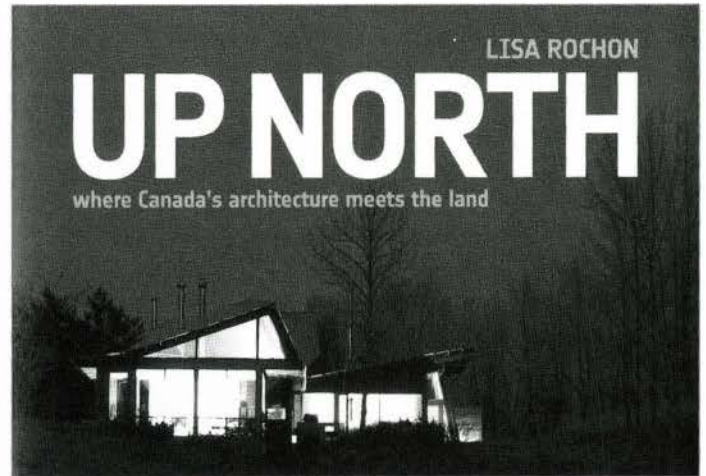


FIG. 14. LISA ROCHON. *UP NORTH*, BOOK COVER. | JACKET DESIGN: OFFICE OF GILBERT LI; PHOTO: MICHAEL AWAD.

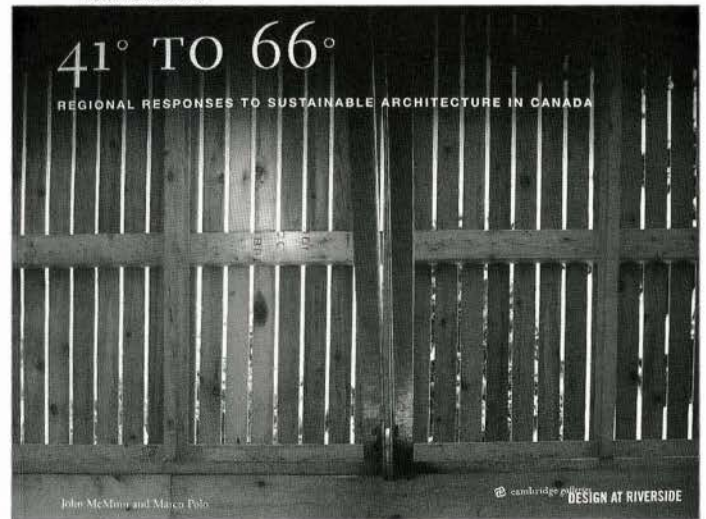


FIG. 15. JOHN MCMINN AND MARCO POLO. EXHIBITION CATALOGUE COVER. | PHOTO: MICHAEL AWAD.

Seven and Emily Carr (fig. 13). Paintings of Native villages and actual Native artefacts were displayed as part of a national artistic heritage, associated with an alluring wilderness setting. As scholar Gerta Moray has pointed out, this becomes scandalous when one realizes that Canadian government policy was at the same time intent on the forcible assimilation of Native peoples and on the eradication of their languages, beliefs, and traditions.²² A combination of primitivist ideals and antimodern

connotations of the wilderness were imposed on Northwest Native landscapes, creating a romanticized image of these cultures as “vanishing races.”

In the paintings of the Group of Seven and Emily Carr, Canada’s pine-bordered lakes and totem-populated forests began to take on iconic status. Similar claims were made for other regions of Canada, through the tropes of wilderness and of “folk” culture. The Arctic assumed an identity as a sublime

setting in the paintings of Lawren Harris, Québec’s vernacular architecture was documented as a living tradition by National Museum anthropologist Marius Barbeau, and later, Atlantic Canada invented its own “folk” culture through the collection of folksongs and the revival of handicrafts.²³ In each case, ideas of traditional culture or primitive wilderness were invoked in an effort to construct sources of regional authenticity, which could in turn ground an image of Canadian national identity.

VENICE BIENNALE, 2008

The legacy of a national preoccupation with wilderness continues to the present. One recent attempt at positing a national architecture, Lisa Rochon's *Up North*,²⁴ focuses on the architectural legacy of the 1960s and 1970s, a period concerned with issues of ecology and Canadian nationalism. Rochon's manifesto opens by declaring: "In this country, architecture grows out of the landscape. And the Canadian landscape is mythic, Herculean in its scale and power. It is omnipresent and noble, given to moments of tenderness and terrible rages. Up north, architecture digs into the side of a hill or a mountain. Or it rises up to match the temper of the land, attaining heights of ecstasy." In Rochon's assessment, grand landscape settings called up heroic architectural responses that would come to exemplify Canadian construction. Her vision recalls the pioneer landscapes of Susanna Moodie and Margaret Atwood, which demanded that civilization gathers in defensive response (fig. 14).

Today, contentions that Canadian architecture is linked to nature perhaps stem from the problem of creating a national architectural identity in a global, commodified marketplace. One recurring trope is the idea that Canadians build "green" architecture, uniquely equipped to contend with issues of local and global sustainability.

In this regard, John McMinn and Marco Polo's *41° to 66°* exhibition, which traveled to the Venice biennale in the fall of 2008, assigns landscape a fundamental role in shaping Canadian architecture (fig. 15). The exhibition invokes Kenneth Frampton's argument about critical regionalism, contending that regional attempts at place-making

inspired by vernacular building traditions boast both environmental and cultural sustainability.²⁵ In contrast to Rochon's hostile landscapes, nature is a more benign background—a set of climactic conditions and environmental challenges that shape social customs and local building strategies. Their references, particularly their use of native structures as grounding points, recall the characterization of regional landscapes and valuation of First Nations artefacts led by 1920s projects of cultural nationalism.

Although wilderness landscapes are central to the way we think about Canada, the concept of wilderness has itself been a slippery one, embedded with cultural values. As Roderick Nash points out, "although wilderness has a deceptive concreteness at first glance [...] [t]here is, [in the final account], no specific material object that is wilderness." As an idea, Canadian wilderness has been repeatedly constructed and reconstructed over the past two centuries. Our latest enchantment with a national, natural architectural identity may be a productive myth. But it must be recognized as such, lest we forget the other landscapes in Canada that do not have iconographic status: the clear-cut and replanted Pacific coast forests, the Alberta oil fields, the hydroelectric landscapes of Northern Québec, the vast suburbs of Ontario. As architects, urbanists, and historians, we are challenged to contend with architecture in wilderness settings in a way that acknowledges how profoundly the idea of wilderness nature is itself shaped by cultural values. Doing so might create a starting point to help us make sense of architecture that lands in the more prosaic landscapes of Canada, more obviously—but no less—products of civilization.

NOTES

1. This paper was prepared for the 2008 SSAC conference in Yellowknife, Canada, on the theme of "Regionalism in Canadian Architecture." The author would like to acknowledge the Columbia University School of Architecture for its support of the research and presentation of this paper. While the author has made every attempt to contact copyright holders for permission to reproduce the images in this article, she has in some cases been unsuccessful and would be pleased to receive further information from copyright holders. Anyone who can help in this regard is asked to please contact her at: ehl2106@columbia.edu.
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3. Sisters, respectively born Susanna Strickland and Catharine Parr Strickland.
4. Atwood, Margaret, 1972, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Toronto, Anansi, p. 33 and 41.
5. See chap. 2 in D.M.R. Bentley's in-process project, « Canadian Architexts: Essays on Literature and Architecture in Canada, 1759-2005 », (2005), n.p. These essays are available online at [www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/architexts/index.htm].
6. Strickland Moodie, Susanna, 1852, *Roughing It in the Bush, or, Life in Canada*, New York, George P. Putnam, p. 119.
7. Commissioners for the exhibition of 1851, 1851, *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*, London, Spicer Brothers, p. 956-971.
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22. Moray, Gerta, 2001, « Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images », In Jessup, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
23. For more on the Folk cultures of Atlantic Canada, see McKay, Ian, 1994, *The Quest of the Folk : Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press.
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