

EMPTINESS AND LANDSCAPE: NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CANADA'S CENTENNIAL PROJECTS

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Architecture, of course, has long—perhaps always—had an intimate connection with the notion of identity. Indeed, one could claim that an expression of identity, whether cultural, national, sexual, or other, is one of the primary qualities distinguishing architecture from mere building.

It should be equally obvious that this relationship between architecture and identity can be exploited or made use of for political purposes. Examples of that politicization, in which the relationship is inverted and architecture used not to simply express an autochthonous identity, but rather to impose and maintain a pre-constructed identity, are easy enough to find, from the ancient world (one might think, for example, of the form of Roman colonial towns) to the postmodern world (for example, the embodiment of a politics of transparency in the *Grands Projets* in Paris in the 1990's).

In Canada, the Centennial Projects, a group of Federal Government programs which amounted to a gigantic building campaign leading up to the Centennial of Confederation in 1967, can be understood to fall within that tradition. The Centennial Projects differ from the examples cited above, however, in one crucial way: while the examples mentioned attempted to express, impose, and maintain a specific, well-considered identification, imposing such an identity on an otherwise alien cultural substrate, the Centennial Projects aimed to express a national identity which was at best cloudy, imprecisely understood. Architecture was to be used as a research and production tool, whose role was to uncover and give form to a national identity, which would only become legible during, and as a result of, that process.



FIG. 1. FATHERS OF CONFEDERATION MEMORIAL BUILDING, COMPETITION MODEL PHOTOGRAPH, 1960.
ARCHITECTS: AFFLECK, DESBARATS, DIMAKOPOULOS, LEBENSOLD, AND SISE.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CONFEDERATION CENTRE FOR THE ARTS

THE CENTENNIAL COMMISSION

The Centennial programs we will be discussing in this paper were officially inaugurated by the passing of the National Centennial Act, which received Royal Assent on September 29, 1961. Action on the part of the Federal Government, under Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, had been prodded by the lobbying in the late 1950's of a number of non-governmental groups, such as the YMCA, the YWCA, the Canadian Conference of Christians and Jews, the Canadian Citizenship Council and the Canadian Amateur Sports Federation, which coalesced in 1959-1960 into an umbrella organisation, the Canadian Centenary Council.² That citizen group remained in place through 1967, but was largely subsumed in practice by the National Centennial Administration (later renamed the Centennial Commission).³

Once the Centennial Commission actually got going (the Commissioner was not appointed until January 1963), a number of programs and events were organized and planned. In addition to such mobile events as the Confederation Train and the Confederation Caravan, the minting of Centennial Medals, the promotion of Youth Travel, the production of films, and so on, two major building programs were developed, in addition to one major built project which fell outside of those programs, the National Arts Centre. The most visible event in relation to the 1967 Centennial, Expo '67, was not connected in an official capacity to the Centennial Commission, nor did Expo receive funding from the Commission. In total, the Centennial Commission was responsible for expenditures of approximately \$85 million (\$440 million in today's dollars).

The first of the building programs set up by the Centennial Commission was the Centennial Grants Program, which

provided matching funds to municipalities (through the provinces) to support projects of a lasting nature, preferably related to culture or recreation. That program was to provide one dollar for every resident of every community in Canada, provided that dollar was matched by a second dollar from the province and a third from the community itself for a total amount of three dollars per capita (approximately \$15 per capita in today's dollars). Such a relatively small amount of money funded some 2301 projects across the country, of which some 860 were buildings (including renovations and restorations), and an additional 520 were recreational structures. Projects completed under the program for the city of Toronto, to give just one example, included restoration of the St. Lawrence Hall and the establishment of the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts. Other projects in smaller communities were of course much more modest in scope.

The second building-based program set up by the Commission was the Confederation Memorial Program, which provided matching funds of up to \$2.5 million to each province to support a project, again preferably of a cultural nature, in the provincial capital (lesser amounts were granted to the territories). Unlike the Centennial Grants Program, which found its impetus within the Centennial Commission (and in particular with its Director of Special Projects, Peter Aykroyd), the Confederation Memorial Program arose in response to initiatives which were already happening at a local and, to some extent, unofficial level. By the time the Commissioner was appointed in 1963, plans were already well under way to build a Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building, a large performing arts centre to be located in Charlottetown, P.E.I., to memorialise the first Confederation Conference held in that city in 1864. A national competition had been held in

1962, and a winning scheme by Montreal architects Affleck, Desbarats, Dimakopoulos, Lebensold, and Sise (later ARCOP) selected. A grant of \$2.8 million was made to the project by the Centennial Commission. As Peter Aykroyd tells the story, the awarding of that grant prompted Quebec to request funding for Le Grand Théâtre de Québec, in recognition of the second Confederation Conference, held in Quebec City, also in 1864; a grant of \$2.8 million was made by the Centennial Commission in November 1963. In February 1964, the two grants were incorporated into the Confederation Memorial Program, open to all provinces.⁴ In total, \$20.7 million of federal funds were disbursed as a part of the program. With the exceptions of Nova Scotia, (a medical centre), and New Brunswick, (an administration building), all provinces built major buildings of a cultural nature: six cultural centres or performing arts spaces were constructed, two museums and archives, and the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto.

In addition to the municipal and provincial programs, the Centennial Commission also oversaw and funded a number of projects of national significance. In fact, in terms of expenditures, this category outweighs the other two programs. The majority of the national programs are either travelling exhibitions, such as the Centennial Train and Caravans (the largest single expenditure of the Commission, receiving \$11.4 million), or funding for performances, publications, films, etc. The single sizable building project in that category was the National Arts Centre (NAC) in Ottawa, also designed by Affleck, Desbarats, Dimakopoulos, Lebensold, and Sise, which actually opened two years after the Centennial, in 1969. The NAC received \$2.1 million in grants from the Centennial Commission.

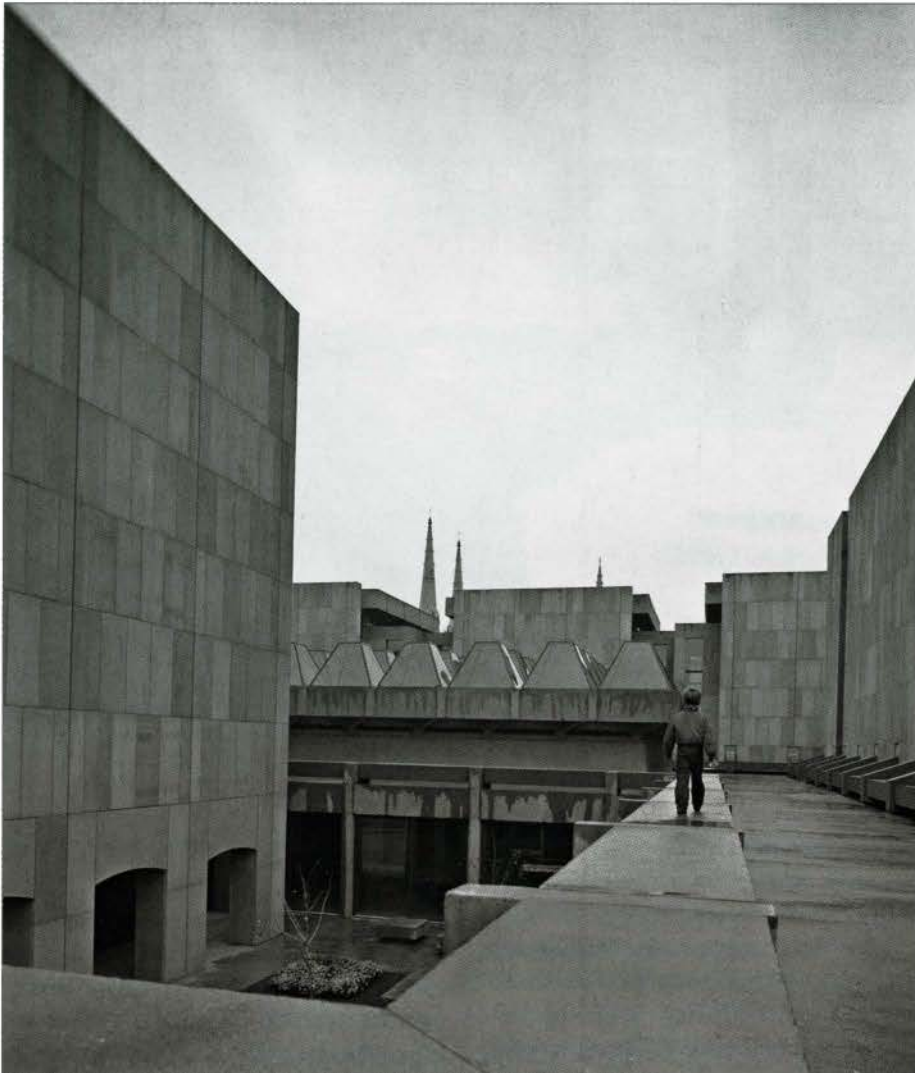


FIG. 2. FATHERS OF CONFEDERATION MEMORIAL BUILDING, EXTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH, 1960.
ARCHITECTS: AFFLECK, DESBARATS, DIMAKOUPoulos, LEBENSOLD, AND SISE.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE

ARCHITECTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

There can be little doubt that a major goal of the Centennial Commission was the development, nurturing and strengthening of a Canadian national identity. Canada in the 1950's and early 1960's was still seen as a young country. Then, as now, a Canadian identity was difficult to pinpoint, given the internal cultural divisions as well as competing external

influences from, on the one hand, England and France and, on the other, the United States. It is no surprise then that Peter Aykroyd ranked identity first on his list of goals not just for that occasion, but for any anniversary celebration.

The notion that architecture would have a major role to play in such exercise of identity construction was made clear in two remarkable addresses given by Canadian Prime Ministers to the Royal Architectural

Institute of Canada (RAIC) annual assembly. The first of these addresses, given by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker to the 53rd Annual Assembly in June 1960,⁵ actually predated by over a year the National Centennial Act. As the transcript of the address in the July 1960 issue of the *RAIC Journal* reinforces, Diefenbaker announced at that early date that “[a]rchitects can play an important part in the planning of Canada’s Centennial.” It is striking that already, before any concrete plans had been made, long before the Commission would be formed, Diefenbaker was already certain of the role that architects—and therefore architecture—would play, although we should note that he likely did not come to that conclusion unprompted. It is likely not coincidence that one of the two founders of the Canadian Centenary Council (and later Director of Planning for the Centennial Commission) was Robbins Elliot, who in 1960 was still the Executive Director of the RAIC. Equally striking, to us, is Diefenbaker’s choice of words: architects are to *play a part* in the centennial planning, that is, take on a role, mount a performance.

Diefenbaker, as one might expect of a politician speaking to a room of architects, begins by making a link on the level of metaphor between architecture and politics, as each profession “deals with building.”⁶ The politician deals with the building of a nation in the world, the architect builds the world of everyday experience. Further, both the politician and the architect must be “able to see and understand what can be done in the future and then to lay those plans which make possible the realities of tomorrow.”⁷ After praising the efforts of the RAIC in the field of historic preservation, Diefenbaker then reinforces the notion that architects must look to the future as well as the past, and he does so in the framework of the

upcoming centennial, for which he asks architects to present

[...] something to touch the hearts of Canadians, something to represent the unity of our country, something to embody that paradox of two great national stocks which joined together to make Confederation possible, something that will well represent the tremendous contributions of persons from all races and creeds who have come to Canada from all parts of the world.⁸

In other words, Diefenbaker explicitly asks for an architecture of identity, and an identity bound up, in the first instance, with *unity*.

The second of the two mentioned addresses was given by Diefenbaker's successor, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, to the 57th Annual Assembly in June 1964.⁹ While similar in many respects to Diefenbaker's address, Pearson makes much less reliance on metaphor. Where Diefenbaker had connected architects and politicians, seeing both as agents engaged in nation-or world-building, Pearson makes the connection between architecture and government, dealing with the issues and mechanisms these two institutions have in common.

The relationship of parts to the whole—the need to bring unity to the whole without interfering with the functional needs and values of the parts—is a problem of government as well as of architecture. [...] Architecture—like government—can get inspiration from the past without prejudicing its contribution, and indeed its obligation, to the future.¹⁰

Architecture and government are two separate realms of expertise, which can and should, however, act together in the pursuit of a single goal—for Pearson, the goal of national unity.

After praising the RAIC for being an “example of useful collaboration [...] between our English-speaking and French-speaking citizens” and pointing out that “architecture itself is an important

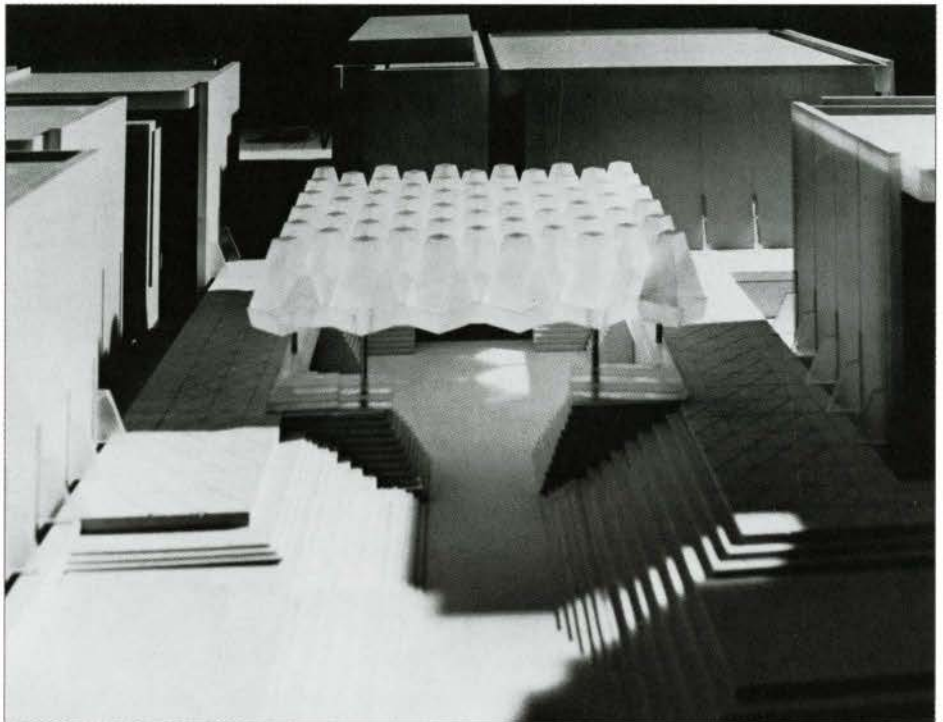


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CONFEDERATION CENTRE FOR THE ARTS

FIG. 3. FATHERS OF CONFEDERATION MEMORIAL BUILDING, COMPETITION MODEL PHOTOGRAPH, 1960. ARCHITECTS: AFFLECK, DESBARATS, DIMAKOPOULOS, LEBENSOLD, AND SISE.

link between our two Canadian cultures” (although he does not pinpoint how architecture forms this link), Pearson discusses a recent report on the state of architecture in Canada which focused on regional disparities and the difficulty of finding common ground for policy. While recognizing that the problem was partly caused by the federal system of government, he goes on to stress the importance of finding that common ground.

If you are to make your art's maximum—and rightful—contribution to our national development, to our national insight, and to our national pride; if you are to remind us of our limitations and enshrine the richness and diversity of our future existence in cities which will have balance and even beauty, you have a right to enjoy the highest national standards and to be concerned over any barrier to your achievement of them.

The responsibility for achieving this is yours [...] This means, among other things, equal opportunities for all our people and provinces

[...] There can be no other foundation for national unity.¹¹

Again, rather than stress the metaphor between nation building and the construction of buildings, Pearson exhorted architects to embrace the reality of the political within their own institution. National unity has to be created in a real sense within the nation's institutions—including architecture—before it could be represented in its buildings.

AN EMPTY LANDSCAPE: TWO CENTENNIAL PROJECTS

Such an overt program of national identity / construction should, arguably, make itself evident in the form of the buildings constructed under the aegis of the Centennial Commission. In order to test that hypothesis, we propose to take a somewhat closer look at two projects already mentioned:



FIG. 4. FATHERS OF CONFEDERATION MEMORIAL BUILDING, EXTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH, 1960.
ARCHITECTS: AFFLECK, DESBARATS, DIMAKOUPoulos, LEBENSOLD, AND SISE.

the Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building, in Charlottetown and the National Arts Centre, in Ottawa. These two projects have been chosen for a number of reasons. First of all, they are among the most significant projects in terms of scale to come out of the Centennial programs. Second, they are probably the most widely published of the Centennial Projects. Third, they “bookend” the program, with the Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building being the first major Centennial Project completed, and the National Arts Centre among the last. Fourth, as mentioned above, they share an architect. Finally, they are both built on or around sites that are national in significance—the Provincial Building in Charlottetown and the National Capital, Ottawa.

Formally, the Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building is made up of a set of cubic volumes disposed on the rectangular

site in some relationship to the Provincial Building. The model of the project shows a complex of four buildings: a library, a theatre, an art gallery, and a museum. These are grouped around a fifth space, which functions as an entry: the Memorial Hall (fig. 1). In the competition entry, that Memorial Hall was literally an exterior plaza, although provided with a glass roof. In the final scheme, the roof remains, but the hall has become an interior space, although sunken to a level lower than the plaza. On the other side of the site from this assembly of volumes sits the original artefact, the Provincial Building, surrounded by a plaza. The plan thus shows two distinct sides of the site, as though mirrored in a line drawn down the middle: where one is an empty space with a solid building at its centre, the other is a filled space with an empty hall at its centre.

The two squares, the two portions of the design, the historical monument, and the shrine to cement the future unity, have an odd relationship to each other. Not only are the two portions kept on their separate squares, but the new project only addresses the existing building laterally. It is striking that, in contemporary photos of the project, the existing Provincial Building rarely shows up (fig. 2). Furthermore, to quote Walter P. de Silva’s review of the building in *The Canadian Architect*, “the important view of the Provincial Building from the inner part of Memorial Hall is only partial.”¹²

If the relationship between the past and the present is ambiguous and uncertain, even more tenuous is the relationship between the local and the national in the project. Even rarer than images of the Provincial Building are images of the surrounding context, of the City of Charlottetown. When such images do appear, the shops on the street behind are just glimpsed through slits between the cubic forms of the project. Thus, although *Architectural Record* in its review praised the project for maintaining the “modest scale” of the town¹³ or, let us say mirroring that scale, Norbert Schoenauer, the urban design consultant, pointed out that the uniform height of the building—arguably one of the elements which gives it its modest scale—was designed to contrast the project with foreseen future unregulated development.¹⁴ The ambiguity of that relationship was already evident in the competition brief, which made clear that the building was to be conceived as a “national shrine to which Canadians will forever pay homage as the birthplace of their nation.” A third relationship which is not really developed in the project, between the rather static form of the building and the required flexibility of programming, was noted already in his 1964 appraisal by Douglas Shadbolt.¹⁵

Caught within this web of conflicting agendas—past / present, local / national, formal / programmatic—within what we might call, taking some liberties, a web of reflected identities, and protected by its surrounded layer of representations and performances (that is, galleries, museums, theatres), is the Memorial Hall itself, surely the symbolic as well as physical centre of the project, and the one place in which

identity, if it is anywhere, must be seen to reside. And that symbolic centre, that locus of identity, is, of course, empty. Looking back at the model photographs from the competition entry, one can easily be struck by the fact that this entry—again, the symbolic heart of the project—is in a sense explicitly a void, sunk as it is to the a level lower than the surrounding plaza (fig. 3). Indeed, on looking again at

contemporary published photographs of the project, one might come to the conclusion that emptiness is in fact a core concept for the project as a whole. Although it is not uncommon for architectural photographs to show empty buildings, it is uncommon for the photographs to be shot on a grey, rainy day, as the first published photos of the Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building were, with the emptiness made more tangible by the inclusion in the photos a solitary figure—a young child in a raincoat and galoshes (fig. 4)—or a group of figures huddled on the floor in the centre of the otherwise empty Memorial Hall (fig. 5). Perhaps the story told by the project is just that Canadian national identity is in itself empty, a constitutive void, made up solely of the representations we make around it—the stories we tell, the images we make, perhaps even the buildings we build, a void that is delicate and in need of nurturing and protection, not so much caught in its conflicts as made up of them.

In the summer of 1964, as the Fathers of Confederation Building was finishing construction, as Prime Minister Pearson was delivering his address to the RAIC, design work was underway for the new National Arts Centre in Ottawa. The search for a symbolic centre, a locus of identity, at the National Art Centre in Ottawa is not so straightforward. This project on first analysis presents a similar type of site planning to the new portion of the Fathers of Confederation Memorial project, with the cubic volumes in Charlottetown replaced by hexagonal ones (perhaps in deference to the diagonal positioning of the Parliament Buildings, which could be understood to take the position in the overall scheme that the Provincial Building played in Charlottetown). A case could be made for the Salon, a relatively small room intended for receptions and chamber recitals, as the symbolic centre



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CANADIAN ARCHITECT MAGAZINE

FIG. 5. FATHERS OF CONFEDERATION MEMORIAL BUILDING, INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH SHOWING MEMORIAL HALL, 1960. ARCHITECTS: AFFLECK, DESBARATS, DIMAKOPOULOS, LEBENSOLD, AND SISE.

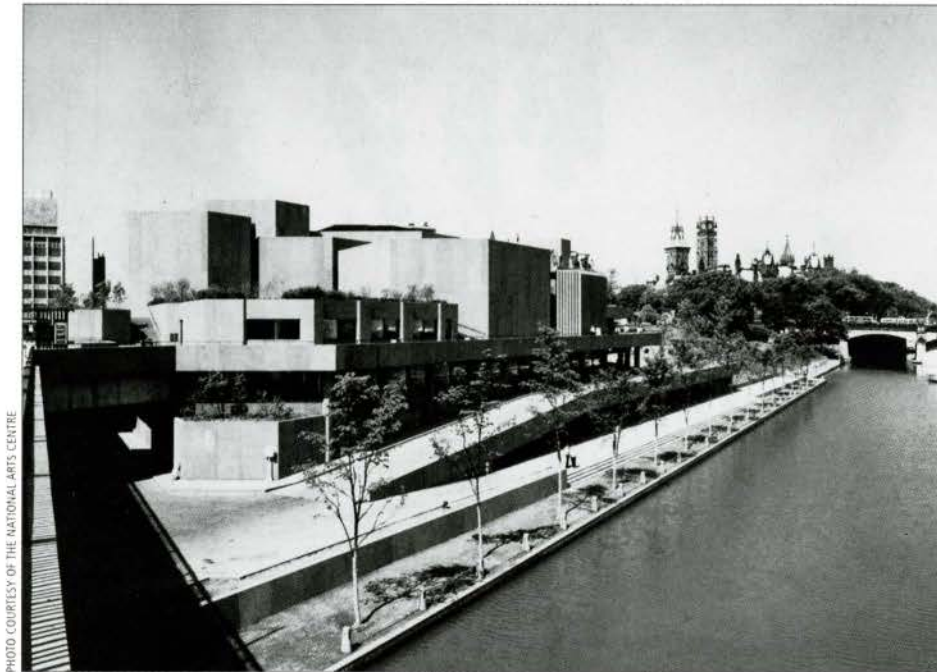


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE

FIG. 6. NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE, EXTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH OF BUILDING AND CANAL, CA. 1970.
ARCHITECTS: AFFLECK, DESBARATS, DIMAKOPOULOS, LEBENSOLD, AND SISE.

of the project, but while that room does project upward through the terrace above in the form of a skylight, echoing the Memorial Hall, it remains too small in scale in relation to the rest of the project to really command the centre. Nor does that room act as an entry to the complex, nor does it face an important precedent.

In fact, unlike Charlottetown where the entrance faces the Provincial Building, the entrance to the NAC is from the side of the Rideau Canal—away from the Parliament Buildings, and arguably away from the city, on the side of a (albeit artificial) river. We would like to suggest that this positioning of the entrance in fact repeats the situation in Charlottetown, in which the entrance faces the symbolically most important existing component, except that now, that most important feature is not an existing building, but an existing landscape. In a September 1964 pre-construction review of the project, *The Canadian Architect* magazine commented

that the “buildings for this project have been conceived as a series of terraces” with the main performance rooms “protruding almost as great stones.”¹⁶ A review in *Architecture Canada 1970-1971* states that the “architectural concept envisages the total site as a focal outdoor area.”¹⁷ Macy Dubois, in his July 1969 review in *Canadian Architect*, referred to the project as “a very skilfully massed series of forms in which it is a pleasure to move through and around,”¹⁸ praising the connection to the river, but noting the cost to the city-side elevations. Putting all the various comments together amounts to a description which could almost be that of a natural landscape: a building which is a grouping of large rocks along the banks of a river, perhaps somewhere in the Canadian Shield (fig. 6).

We believe that such reading of the building is strengthened by the first published photos of the project. The view of the Arts Centre from the river, for example, clearly

shows the project as an “outcropping.” The inclusion in the photo of the Parliament Buildings does not serve here to connect the two buildings—the formal variance is just too great—, but rather to connect the Arts Centre to the rise of trees in the middle distance and, perhaps, to the formation of Parliament Hill. The view of the project from the city side, on the other hand, clearly articulates the Centre as an extension of a foregrounded green landscape. Unlike the Charlottetown photographs, this photo is far from empty, showing a large number of people using both the foregrounded landscape and the terrace of the Arts Centre for recreational purposes (fig. 7).

That idea of Architecture as landscape was certainly in the air in the summer of 1964. Looking back at Pearson’s address to the RAIC, we see that before moving on to his own announcement of what must already have been well known to his audience, the Centennial Programs, Pearson reiterates Montesquieu’s dictum that national character derives first of all from climate and geography. However, Pearson reminds his listeners that “today, as our population moves more and more to urban centres, it is buildings which make up our geography.”¹⁹ In other words, in the modern world, architecture plays the role of geography and climate, becoming responsible not simply for representing, but for creating, forming, a national identity.

It is almost as though that project, which would have been in the throes of design at the time of Pearson’s speech to the RAIC, takes Pearson’s link literally, but in a sense turns the schema around: if buildings are to be our total environment, our urban landscape, this project builds that urban landscape as an image, a reflection, or perhaps a memory of the natural landscape. The symbolic centre of the project, then, is located not within the NAC (unless perhaps it is the central



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE

FIG. 7. NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE, EXTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH OF BUILDING IN LANDSCAPE, CA. 1970. ARCHITECTS: AFFLECK, DESBARATS, DIMAKOPOULOS, LEBENSOLD, AND SISE.

terrace), but rather is external to it, in the natural landscape of Canada. The implication, of course, is that Montesquieu's comment still holds: the kernel, the centre, of Canadian identity is simply located in the Canadian landscape.

Which, of course, is just another kind of empty centre.

EPILOGUE: DRESSING UP

The July 1964 issue of the *RAIC Journal* contains a transcript of the speech that Prime Minister Pearson made to the RAIC Assembly—the speech which, as we have seen, linked national identity to architecture, reinforced the importance of the unity visible in that identity, tied national identity to architecture, and probably, in a direct manner, influenced the design of the National Arts Centre.

Two pages previous to that transcript are images from another event held at that same assembly: the receiving line. The first photo of the receiving line shows the wives of some of the architects at the convention, posing like movie stars for the camera. The second photo shows, in the same glamorous poses, their husbands—in drag.²⁰ Of course, the drag show is just for fun, a spoof, a stunt. Still, seeing these two images side by side—the drag show, and Pearson at his speech—makes us wonder if there is not something deeper connecting the two images, if the very idea of self-consciously constructing an identity through architecture is not, in a way, like dressing up, like wearing a costume to the big party that was 1967. And it makes us wonder, too, what happens when the fancy dress comes off.

On October 15, 1970, having been informed that the City of Montreal had requested the army sent in to restore order, Pearson's successor, Prime Minister Trudeau, went off to spend the evening at the National Arts Centre, at the debut gala of the NAC Orchestra, before returning home to invoke the war measures act...

NOTES

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4. Aykroyd : 82-83.
5. Diefenbaker, John, 1960, « A Task for the Profession », *Journal RAIC*, serial number 418, vol. 37, no. 7, p. 286-288.
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19. *Ibid.*
20. Bowker, Walter B. (ed.), 1964, « The 57th Assembly », *RAIC/L'IRAC*, serial number 466, vol. 41, no. 7, p. 34, author of article not credited.