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JSSAC / JSÉAC 26, n° 3, 4 (2001) ; 64-65.

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**Jacques Lachapelle  
Le fantôme métropolitain :  
l'architecture de Ross et  
Macdonald**

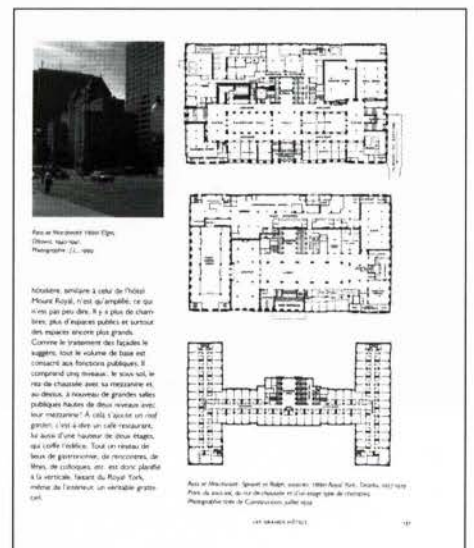
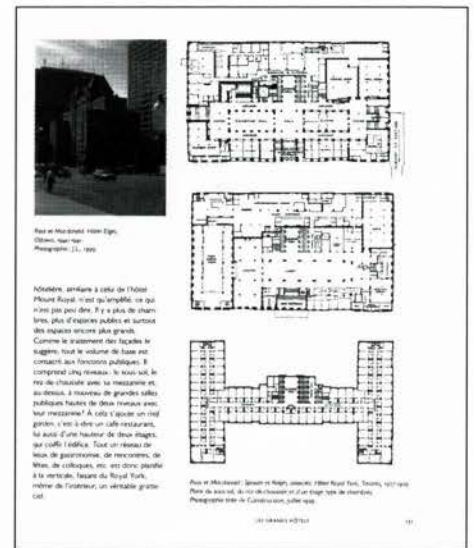
Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal  
(2001), ISBN 2-7606-1754-8, 176 p.,  
39,95 \$

In his autobiography *No Man Alone*, famed brain surgeon Dr. Wilder Penfield describes the planning of the Montreal Neurological Institute, and he notes:

"R.H. Macdonald of the architectural firm of Ross and Macdonald was a creative genius. Without his help, construction could never have been finished without increased cost and with such grace and dignity as it was possible to add in the ... building..."

The year was 1932, by which time Robert Henry Macdonald and George Allan Ross had long secured a reputation for design competence and pragmatic efficiency. Even as Macdonald replaced David H. MacFarlane as Ross' partner in 1913, the firm was utilizing the era's prevalent Beaux-arts academicism within an organization modeled on highly productive American offices. Probably the largest firm in Canada by the late 1920s, Ross & Macdonald excelled at huge, complex projects, making them attractive not only to institutions like Dr. Penfield's, but, most especially, to big business.

It's the buildings for this entrepreneurial clientele that are featured *Le fantôme métropolitain: l'architecture de Ross et Macdonald*, by Jacques Lachapelle, professor of art history and design at the University of Montreal. The Metropolitan Fantasy in the book's title is somewhat ironic, referring to the concepts of progress and modernity that imbued the idea of the "metropolis" during the first four decades of the 20th century. Driven by a hard-nosed business elite, the reverie gave rise to commercial gigantism, and Lachapelle sets out to determine the impact of "economic rationalism" on the evolution of these large buildings, and in turn, how this architecture changed the urban cores of Canadian cities. For this purpose, the architecture of Ross & Macdonald is perfect.



The contextual stage is set before World War I as the civic-minded ideals of urban reformists and the City Beautiful Movement were deemed unattainable, and banished from city centres to the suburbs. To control explosive growth and curtail skyscraper construction, municipalities turned to enacting restrictive height and zoning regulations. These conditions consequently favoured the proliferation of "block buildings" – large commercial structures that began to occupy multiple smaller lots in the city grid. The development of these buildings is traced through separate chapters that examine Ross & Macdonald's vast production of office buildings (including art deco skyscrapers), department stores, and hotels respectively.

Lachapelle's incisive analysis of critical buildings in the process begins with the Transportation Building (actually by New York architects Carrière & Hastings with Ross & MacFarlane as associates) built 1909-12 in Montreal. The building is considered a prototype, important for its unprecedented size and integration of office functions with open public spaces and commercial outlets. These and other crucial elements are then methodically tracked through landmark Ross & Macdonald buildings, such as the Dominion Square Building in Montreal (1928-40) with its elegant shopping concourse, and the Eaton College St. store in Toronto (1928-30) with its staggering, but unrealized original proposal. The chapter on the grand hotels is especially good in its descriptions, from the Grand Trunk Railway luxury palaces to the gargantuan Royal York Hotel in Toronto (1927-1929). The interiors of this "city within a city" skyscraper appears to confirm the premise that the complex of public spaces inside block buildings were appropriating earlier academic and urban planning ideals of order, related scale and architectural harmony.

In this regard, Lachapelle makes a case for pre-1940s block buildings influencing post-war modern architecture. Indeed, the 1960s megatructures that turned their backs on the city, like Place Bonaventure in Montreal, could be seen as the legacy of the earlier buildings aspiration to multi-functional autonomy and commitment to large scale, as well as interior commercial streets, segregated circulation networks, and even glass-enclosed atriums. These elements continue to be realized in today's urban environments.

Many of the themes in *Le fantasme métropolitain* have been covered before, notably in the Canadian Centre for Architecture's 1998 publication *Montreal Metropolis 1880-1930*. Yet this slim volume (155 pages including end notes) succeeds in weaving those theoretical lines around a precise analysis of one architectural firm's work. The only misgiving is the summary of the

architects' achievements in terms of their contributions to commercial gigantism. The assessment is fair as far as it goes, but perhaps misleading for a book subtitled "*The Architecture of Ross & Macdonald*," considering the scope of their output ranged from hospitals to housing projects and just about everything in between.

Finally, the only major quarrel with the book is with the illustrations. Many black and white images are drawn from period architectural magazines, which is fine, but the colour publicity shots of the hotels and photos recently taken by the author do not suit the historical emphasis of the text. Architectural drawings by the firm, there are thousands in the CCA Archives, would have been a better choice to enhance the publication, and to present a more accurate representation of the architectural conceptions..

*Le fantasme métropolitain: l'architecture de Ross et Macdonald* is significant and informative, and deserves an English translation. But the book on Ross, MacFarlane and Macdonald still waits to be written.