John B. Parkin Associates and Albert Kahn Inc.: An Industrial View of Architecture

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The Toronto-based John B. Parkin Associates architectural practice, as it grew from the late 1940s to the 1970s, pursued the perfection of building. The underlying themes were classical; the inspiration came from the towering giants of modernism, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. Parkin, Mies, and Gropius all had roots in the classical tradition, either the neoclassicism of 19th-century Germany or the Beaux-Arts classicism of the North American schools. Perfection of design and execution demanded complete control from inception to completion; for Parkin, the means of acquiring this control was a comprehensive practice that commanded all necessary skills and knowledge. The model to which John B. Parkin Associates aspired was Albert Kahn's Detroit practice; their inspiration was advanced early-20th century North American industry.[1]

The alternative was a model of practice based on craft precedents, where one person or a small group guided a project from its inception to completion. In this model, the architect in his or her own person commanded all requisite knowledge and many of the necessary skills. As an example, the 19th-century English Arts-and-Crafts architect Philip Webb was described by his biographer W. R. Lethaby as able to take the tools from the worker's hand and do the job just as well, or better.[2] The rapid advance of building technology in the late 19th century soon made such a masterful grasp of all aspects of creating a building impossible for one person. By the 20th century, the design and realization of ever more complex and ambitious structures required a wide range of very specialized knowledge in fields such as structural, mechanical, and electrical engineering. The architect had to contract for advice on these specialized matters, while jealously guarding the role of prime consultant and of responsible agent for architecture as the primary, integrative, art.

For architects, one cost of this approach could be the loss of commissions, or control, to others, including engineering firms and building contractors who could claim they were better able to manage costs and building schedules. In such cases, the architect, while still able to offer the necessary architectural skills, could be "demoted" to employee or hired consultant. Nonetheless, the craft model — architect as creative generalist — continued (and continues) to appeal to many practitioners, for its flexibility and for its focus on practice as the work of creative individuals. John B. Parkin Associates, though, chose a different direction.

John B. Parkin (1911-75) had entered practice in the late 1930s, but it was his meeting with John C. Parkin (1922-88; no relation; figure 1) in 1944, and John C.'s return from Harvard to join John B. in practice in 1947, that set the firm on a clear path. Asked in 1975 about models for the Parkin practice, which at its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the largest and most influential in Canada, John C. Parkin rejected the powerful and distinguished contemporary American firm, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, as a source of inspiration. Rather, he said, Albert Kahn's firm was the formative influence. Among the books on his office shelves, John C. identified a copy of George Nelson's 1939 monograph *The Industrial Architecture of Albert Kahn* as a key inspiration.[3] The Kahn concept of a unified and comprehensive design service served as a model that was clarified and refined by the Parkin practice. As their firm grew through the following two decades, the two Parkins and their associates built the largest and most distinguished Canadian firm of the period. The model unravelled in the 1970s, with John B. Parkin's move to Los Angeles, the merger with Smith Carter Searle, John B.'s death in 1975, and the break between John C. and the emergence of a successor firm, Neish Owen Rowland and Roy.

The architectural practice proposed by Albert Kahn (figure 2) was conceived to answer the demands of its major group of clients, the large-scale, technologically advanced manufacturing industries. Kahn's practice was inspired by and to a degree modelled on those same industries, particularly the pioneering operations of the Ford Motor Company. Those operations, as embedded in and shaping 20th-century North American society, have given their name to the "Fordist" stage of capitalist

Figure 1. John C. Parkin, "A Crisp, Military Efficiency to Serve the Clients," *The Globe Magazine*, 5 July 1969, 7. (Parkin fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary Library, Accession 88A/80.23, reprinted with permission from *The Globe and Mail*)
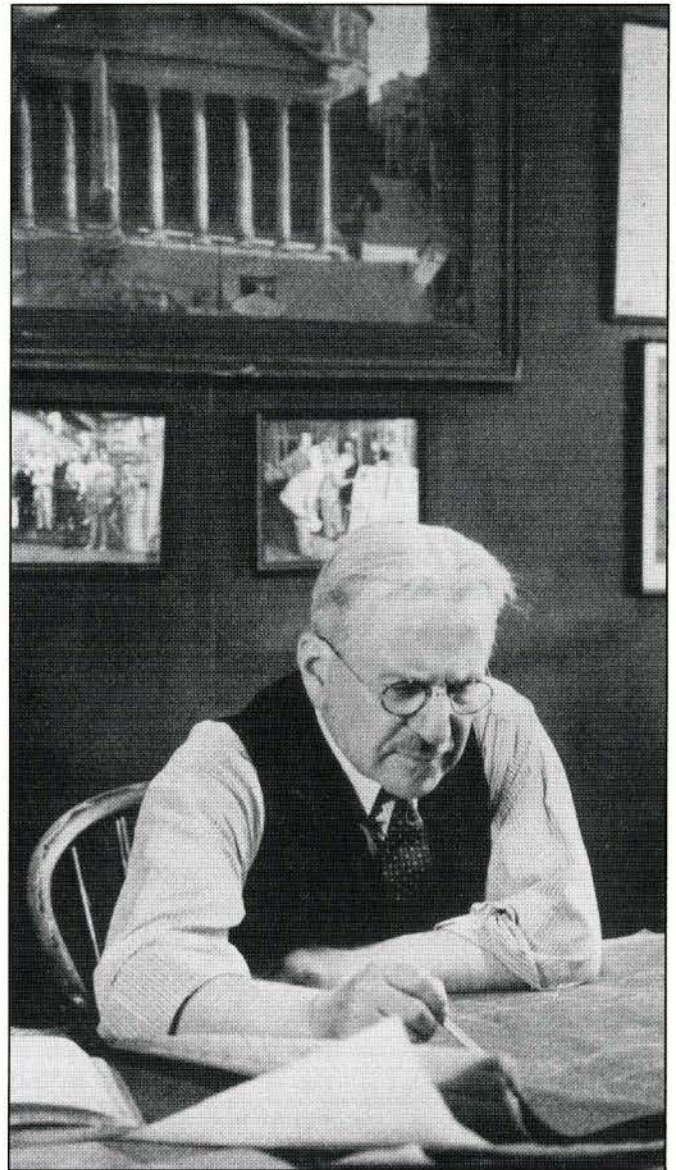

Figure 2. Albert Kahn. (Hedrich-Blessing, in George Nelson, *Industrial Architecture of Albert Kahn, Inc.* [New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1939], 15)

development. The Parkin firm of the 1960s and 1970s may be seen as attempting to implement Fordism in an architectural practice, and their buildings as representing the architectural expression of Fordist capitalism. This is not to argue that the Parkin firm was unique, or that it was typical. Its partners did, however, pursue their objectives with a single-mindedness and success that makes their enterprise a particularly illuminating case for examination.[4]

The most interesting questions about an architectural practice go beyond the analysis of its organization and management to their implications and consequences for design. Did the structure of the practice itself give a shape and limits to what it might achieve in its buildings? Do the buildings themselves reveal a larger social vision, whether intended or not?

What were the ethical and aesthetic results of a "Fordist" practice? Does the architecture reveal the aesthetic and ethical consequences of Fordism? The Parkin firm offers a test case.

In a 1975 interview, John C. Parkin gave this account of the development of the firm:

Most importantly, we became integrated. The idea for that came from a book I had read in 1944. On one occasion since I have reminded the author, George Nelson of New York, of just how important his book was to our practice. The book was, in fact, as George readily admits, a kind of promotional brochure on behalf of Albert Kahn Associated Architects and Engineers of Detroit. However, when I was 21 or 22 years old, it was the first organizational chart of an architectural firm I had seen.[5]

He noted what he considered to be the uneven quality of Kahn's design — the modern work in the factories compromised by the retrospective style of the administrative and public buildings (**figure 3**) — but was reassured by the work of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, which demonstrated "that there was nothing mutually exclusive between good design and good organization."[6]

Albert Kahn's approach was shaped in response to the demands of the automobile industry, and particularly the leading innovator, the Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford and his associates directed the full flowering of a Taylorist enterprise centred on production-line manufacturing, but gave their name not just to "a new model of production and accumulation [but also to] a new system of social and political regulation ... and a new form of international division of labour."[7] That larger social and political system is as relevant to architectural design and practice as the more limited question of office organization.

Henry Ford's company grew into an industrial giant through the years immediately following the First World War, realizing a comprehensive vision of a modern corporation, before steady growth was interrupted by the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the Second World War. A key element in the mass production system it implemented was the assembly line, which was first seen in the Chicago meat-packing plants and then introduced to the automobile industry by Ford in 1913-14 at his Highland Park plant.[8] The full vision included not just the technical details of mass production, but the selection, shaping, and supervision of the workforce, including its housing and some oversight over the workers' personal lives. High pay and steady work bound the workers to the company in a relation of mutual obligation and dependence. The Ford Motor Company's Sociology Department was the precursor of the post-Second World War personnel departments, their subject matter now identified in a telling phrase as "human resources." Taylor's Scientific Management was realized through the rational control of *all* resources and processes, including human, and extended to the creation and manipulation of a market for the products of mass production.

While any such comprehensive system was beyond the scope of an architectural firm, Kahn learned from Ford and his management systems as he designed the factories to house the Ford company's operations:

The outstanding fact about the organization of Albert Kahn, Inc. is its completeness. The departments of the Technical Division design the entire construction, including mechanical trades .... All departments start work simultaneously instead of working in successive stages .... plans and specifications for all trades can be submitted for bids at one time .... [the] drawings for a large factory can be completed in a week or ten day's time....

...

a brief outline of the completeness of the Kahn organization[: because the work is so varied and so extensive] its departmental chiefs must be well versed in their respective activities .... its efforts must be systematic .... a standardized procedure must be strictly followed, so that the work in its various stages can flow through the office as smoothly as a product flows through a well-designed factory. Not only have Albert Kahn, Inc. brought architecture to industry, they have also brought industry to architecture.[9]
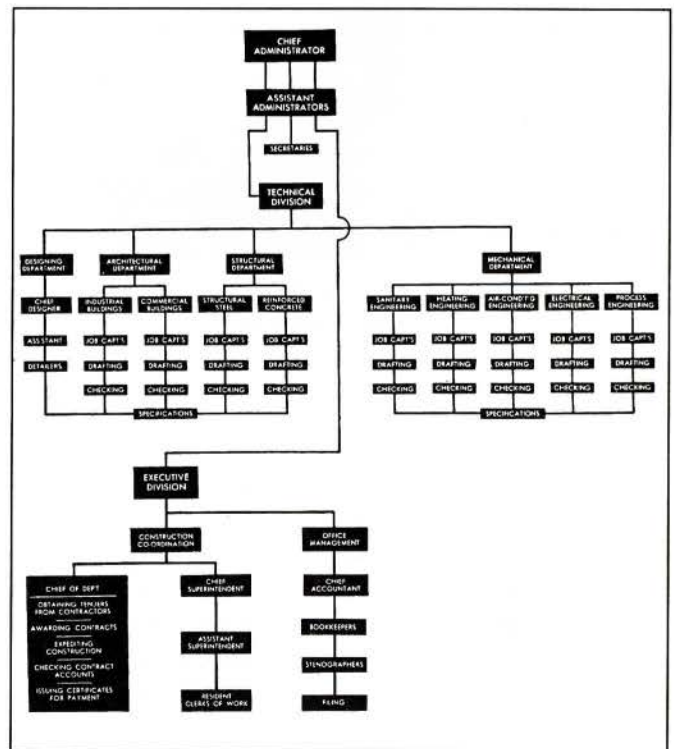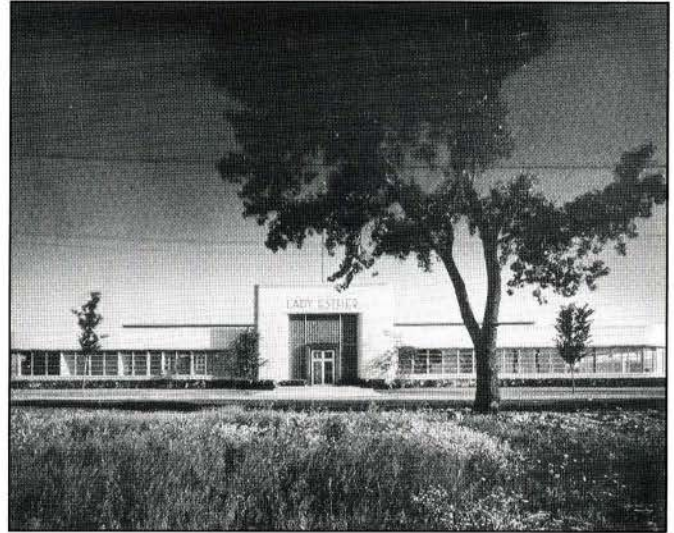

Figure 3. Plant for Lady Esther Ltd., Clearing, Illinois; Albert Kahn Inc., architects. (Hedrich-Blessing, in *The Architectural Forum* 69, no. 2 [August 1938]: 100)

Figure 4. The Kahn organization chart (*The Architectural Forum* 69, no. 2 [August 1938]: 92)
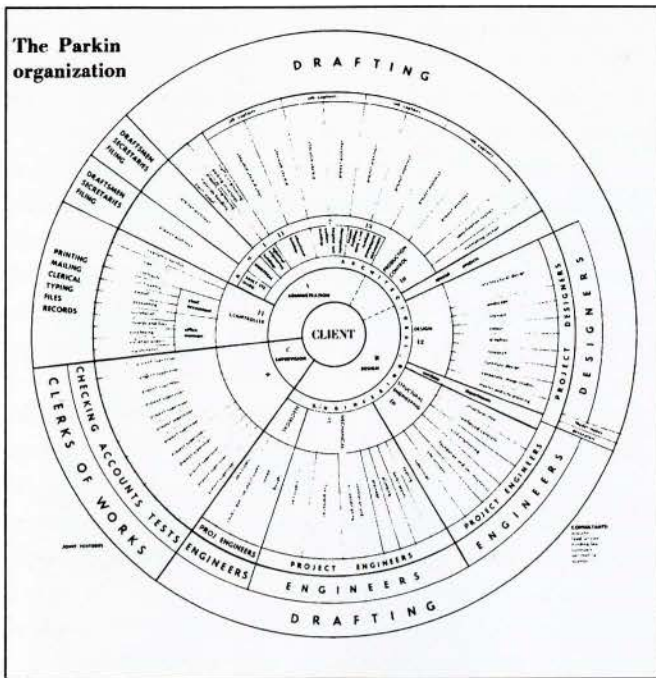
Figure 5. "The Parkin Organization." (*Canadian Builder*, April 1961, 32; Parkin fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary Library, Accession 88A/80.23)

In his book on Kahn, Grant Hildebrand quotes a 1918 description of the new offices occupied by Kahn that year, which includes a note on the way in which actual daily progress was charted against estimated progress. Hildebrand comments that the "entire organization of the work process ... recalls the automobile industry's [system]. Kahn was drawing organizational lessons from the industry he served:"[10]

There was no part of the work for which provision had not been made in the office organization — this staff was capable of dealing with data and determinants for all aspects of building design and seeing it through construction to time of occupancy without the aid of any consultants.[11]

Though John C. Parkin noted that the Kahn model had come to their attention in the mid 1940s, an August 1938 *Architectural Forum* article that included the Kahn organizational chart (**figure 4**) suggests that John B. Parkin may have been exposed to the Kahn model even earlier.[12] Regardless of when they first learned of the model, it proposed an approach to practice which appeared to support their ambition for design of the highest quality produced with both efficiency and economy. The key appears to have been the incorporation of all the requisite skills into the firm. Notably, these included not only the engineering professions (structural, mechanical, and electrical), but also landscape design (under John B. Parkin's brother Edmund), interior design, graphic design, and even industrial design. Specification writing, cost estimating, and site supervision were more routine activities to be carried on

in-house, but there was a particular emphasis on specialization and the division of labour in place of the traditional architectural generalist, who would routinely have be responsible for all these activities.

Despite their elaboration of the Kahn precedent, there was some resistance by the Parkins to chart their firm's structure in the traditional way. In a 1961 letter to the editor of the *Canadian Builder*, John C. wrote that until then they had not "thought it desirable to proceed as far as an organizational chart." A tension between the industrial model and the tradition of the architect as a highly creative individualist seems to lie behind the circular chart they did produce for a *Canadian Builder* article on the firm (**figure 5**). As Parkin noted, "This avoids the usual stratified concept inherent in all vertical organization charts, and which we are most anxious to avoid."[13] It perhaps also reflected a desire to be associated with the sophisticated technology of the day; in the Parkin office files (now at the Canadian Architectural Archives) is an advertisement for the Univac Division of Sperry Rand clipped from *Fortune* magazine (**figure 6**), with the following text selected:

Management is no longer the remote apex of a pyramid but the hub of a wheel. Lines of communication are direct. Every area of activity is monitored on an absolutely current basis. And centralized control of decentralized operations becomes a reality. ["Painlessly. Univac." having been struck out from the text of the advertisement.][14]

Managerial and creator models were both acknowledged in an article by Roy Marshall, partner in charge of production,

Figure 6. Diagram from an advertisement for the "Univac Total Management Information System," Univac Division of Sperry Rand Corporation. (*Fortune*, March 1966, reverse of p. 92; Parkin fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary Library, Accession 88A/80.23)
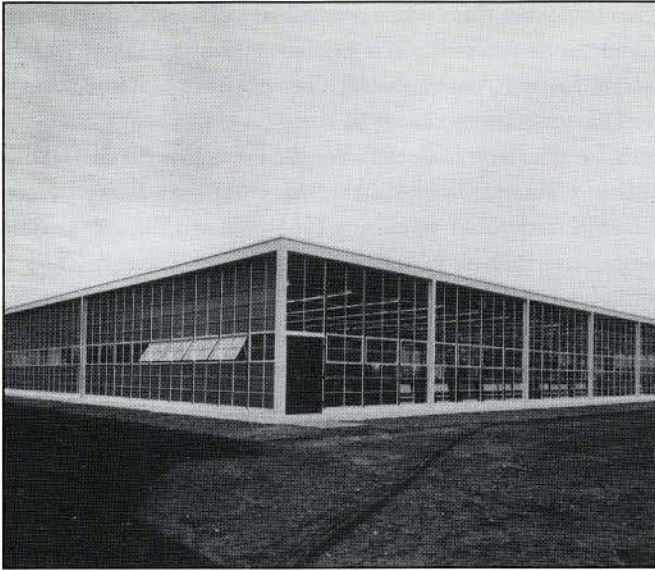
Figure 7. John B. Parkin Associates office building, 1500 Don Mills Road, Don Mills, Ontario; John B. Parkin Associates, architects, 1955. (Panda fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary Library, PAN 55149)

of independent mind." The article's title — "The Creative-Managerial Function of the Modern Architect"[15] — identified the issue: how to turn architects from independent creative artists into corporate managers.

The tension between the architect as manager and the architect as creative individualist led to contradictory views of the Parkin practice. Their office in Don Mills, Ontario, was a manifesto for the Parkins' design principles (**figure 7**). In John C.'s words, "Beauty is built in — by proportion. An extension of function is beauty. We are not fine artists but social artists."

Architecture is a hard, hard process of analysis. It isn't something that comes full-blown in some incredible spiritual insight, but is only the product of a lot of rejection. That is why I come with such hope to the computer. With it we will have a hand a much more substantial body of knowledge from the behavioural scientists, the cultural anthropologists, the ecologists — the people who should really be doing the pure theory which we should be applying. These are the people who really know about how people should live — not architects.[16]

in one of series of articles by Parkin staff for the *Canadian Builder*. He predicted the future importance of the computer, and the tension between manager and artist. "The impact of the computer ... will before long invade the domain of the architect. However, the techniques of creating a building design ... have changed little over the years. The process is complicated by the fact that many highly creative people are

This "scientistic" view belonged to a period when war-time "operational research" and other attempts to apply scientific knowledge and analysis to complex human situations encouraged the belief that architecture could (and should) become an applied science. It's difficult now to know how seriously John C. held this view, which seems to be contradicted by his strongly held aesthetic preferences, nowhere more evident than in his own house.

Figure 8. "Parkin in the Don Mills Brain Factory," *The Globe Magazine*, 5 July 1969 (Parkin fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary Library, Accession 88A/80.23, reprinted with permission from *The Globe and Mail*)

Figure 9. Hebb Building, University of British Columbia, Vancouver; Thompson Berwick Pratt & Partners, architects, 1962-63. (M. McMordie, 1988)
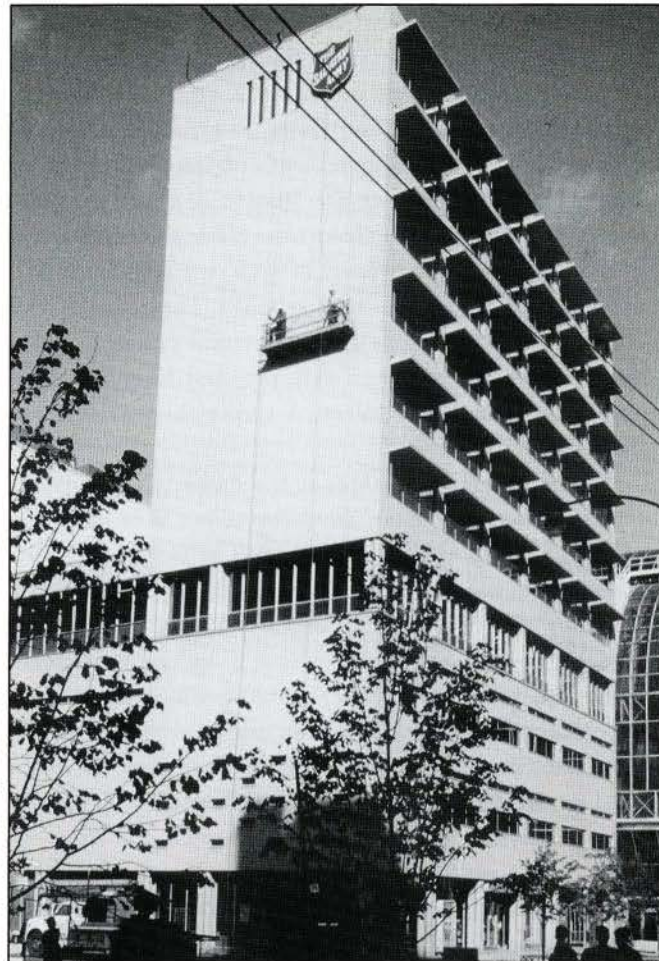

Figure 10. Salvation Army Headquarters, Toronto; John B. Parkin Associates, architects, 1956. (M. McMordie, 1989)

The Parkin office in Don Mills was known familiarly as "the factory" (the "brain factory," to quote Keith Spicer);[17] as illustrations reveal, it looked back to Kahn's long-span, one floor, glazed industrial sheds for the *parti* (whether from Manitoba or Harvard, Beaux-Arts terms enriched the Parkin lexicon) (figures 7, 8). The treatment was Miesian: deceptively simple detail, elegant proportion, and a restricted palette of materials and colours (black) enclosed an orthogonally planned set of offices, the north half of the building given over to a vast drafting room with parallel ranks of drafting tables. The arrangement was both industrial and unexceptional, though ironically it spoke of hierarchy: the Parkins' offices were sequestered at the southeast corner in an administrative enclave, despite John C.'s emphasis on democracy, teamwork, and collaboration.[18]

Social and political issues appear to have been sensitive matters. Commenting on a draft article in a letter to the editor of the *Canadian Builder*, John C. questioned a reference to the senior Parkin's views on appropriate dress:

Too much emphasis has been given in the text to a concern, suggested by others, that we might have to do with the appearance of human beings and their personal habits than we do, in fact, maintain. Our men [sic] are, in fact, trained to conduct themselves as professional men with a continuing bias towards the art of architecture. In other ages architects wore monk's robes or the trappings of rich dilettantes. What Mr. Parkin is suggesting is that the appearance of the individual architect is often a manifestation of his attitude towards his professional practice.[19]

Keith Spicer's article refers to an unnamed senior officer who "confirmed that a man of eccentric dress 'might not get to meet a client,' noting with disdain that in one well-known Toronto architect's office 'they tend to wear wool ties'."[20] It appears that, while there may not have been a formal dress code, there were clear expectations, particularly for employees who hoped to rise to positions of greater responsibility. All this is. not particularly surprising, although it reinforces the distinction between different traditions of practice, and the self-presentation of architects within those traditions.[21]

The experiences of younger architects working for the Parkin firm confirmed the contrasting views and traditions.

Said one young architect, "you won't learn anything creative, but you'll learn to be a good technician .... it's so big and rigid they can't keep up with the latest in design .... What hits you is the hierarchy ... every one is expected to conform completely — a beard is immediately regarded with suspicion." For others, the experience was "terrific ... a very stimulating one .... In five years you cover what some architects spend a lifetime doing .... the diversity of work, the magnitude of the projects and the people themselves"[22] These views reveal contrasting expectations of architectural practice, and the degree to which employees were prepared to enter into the opportunities and constraints of corporate practice on the Parkin model.

It seems inescapable that, at the Parkin scale of practice (200 or more employees), the desire to maintain consistency of design together with a high level of technical quality, including control over budgets and schedules, required a strong hierarchy and firm central control of design. Other offices pursued high quality while accepting, indeed encouraging, diverse approaches to design. The British firm Arup Associates, for example, combined advanced engineering and architectural skills to produce more innovative designs, yet felt no need for the rigorous consistency Parkin sought. The contemporary Canadian firm, Thompson, Berwick and Pratt, also tackled large-scale work to international acclaim, but were willing to accept — and capitalize — on the individual talents of its designers rather than impose conformity to a corporate design ideal (**figure 9**). Even the Parkin firm's work did evolve, and strong design personalities found opportunities to extend the limits of acceptable forms and materials. Nonetheless, such individuality was resisted: while a few projects such as the Salvation Army headquarters building (**figure 10**), the Sifto Salt building, and the Simpson's office tower stepped outside the firm's conventional design vocabulary, the most characteristic of the firm's work remained within the bounds defined by such classic projects as the Ortho Pharmaceutical plant (**figure 11**), the Don Mills Shopping Centre, the firm's own Don Mills office, and John C. Parkin's own house.

Design perfected through rigorous control remained an important goal. A critic from an earlier time, John Ruskin, found the same aim in classicism, which he rejected in favour of the accidents and eccentricities of the Gothic, a style that allowed the stone carver to contribute his own creativity to the work.[23] Ruskin, as economist and social critic, saw the nature of work and the quality of life as inseparable: the individual worker's experience should not be sacrificed to the pursuit of abstract perfection. Some of Parkin's employees clearly had similar feelings about their experience in a practice based on an industrial model and dedicated to a kind of modern classicism.

In summary, it seems that John C. Parkin was right to associate the firm's conception of practice with Albert Kahn,

Figure 11. Ortho Pharmaceutical plant and office, Don Mills, Ontario; John B. Parkin Associates, architects, 1955-56. (Panda fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary Library, PAN 56360)

despite his misgivings about some of the Kahn firm's design work. Kahn, in serving Ford and other industrialist of the early 20th century, implemented what we now identify as Fordism in the practice of building design in the first half of this century, as did Parkin in the second half. They created impersonal, ostensibly objective, technocratic designs for an impersonal, objective, technocratic society. Taylor's scientific management, Ford's paternalistic mass production, and the production line provided models for social organization and control; Kahn's and Parkin's buildings offered images of functional efficiency that domesticated the European avant-garde, and made it the emblem of expanding prosperity on the North American model.

Those images embody a vision of life and society that has repeatedly been questioned, from the turbulent 1960s to the disillusioned 1990s. No longer do many see life as perfectible. The Parkin ideal — classical perfection — was the ideal exemplified by the products of modern industry for many pioneers of modern architecture. The airplanes, motorcars, and ships that illustrated Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* in 1923 appeared along with the Parthenon and Michelangelo's St. Peter's Basilica as touchstones of design. Mies, Gropius, and Parkin, however much they differed in other respects, all sought images of perfection in their buildings. For them, modern industry and its products were an inspiration. The Parkins also found inspiration in modern industry's organization and processes. We can celebrate their successes, while recognizing the failures, in their attempt to build more satisfactory places to work and live. The question remains of how *better* to express our view of the human world, now more often seen as deeply flawed, and impossible to perfect.

Endnotes

1   In discussion in April 1997 at the Society of Architectural Historians conference in Baltimore, where this paper was presented, it was suggested that an important precedent for the work of Kahn for Ford was the Central Manufacturing District (CMD) in Chicago. The "first planned industrial district" in the U.S.A., it was inaugurated in 1905 on land north of the Union Stock Yard. Abraham Epstein began under S. Scott Joy, succeeded him as staff architect and engineer, later founding A. Epstein, Structural Engineer, later A. Epstein & Sons, International. While both Ford's innovations and the CMD had their origins in the Chicago stock yards and meat packing industry, in 1903 Kahn had already tackled the architecture of the factory for the Packard Motor Car Co. See Alice Sinkevitch, ed., *AIA Guide to Chicago* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 388, 390ff.; Art Institute of Chicago, "Chicago Architects Oral History Project/Sidney Epstein," www.artic.edu/aic/collections/dept_architecture/epstein.htm; and "The Central Manufacturing District," www.uic.edu/orgs/LockZero/cmd_sketch.htm.

2   W. R. Lethaby, *Philip Webb and His Work* (London: Milford, 1935).

3   Interview with John C. Parkin at Parkin Architects Planners, 147 Front Street, Toronto, 27-28 February 1975. Tape and transcript (with hand-written additions and alterations by J.C. Parkin and an associate) are in the Canadian Architectural Archives at the University of Calgary (here-after CAA); and George Nelson, *The Industrial Architecture of Albert Kahn* (New York: The Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1939).

4   This fits closely the view that "'The world heyday of Fordism, its prolonged phase of prosperity, began with the end of World War II', under the hegemony of the United States." Tilla Siegel, ed.,"Fordism and Fascism," *International Journal of Political Economy* 18, no.1 (spring 1988): 4, quoting Joachim Hirsch and Roland Roth, *Das neue Geschist das Kapitalismus* (Hamburg, 1986). Siegel takes issue with the narrow limitation of Fordism to the post-Second World War decades, and to the industrialized world.

5   Interview with John C. Parkin, transcript, p. 15.

6   *Ibid.*

7   Siegel, ed., 4.

8   Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge 1915-1933* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 6.

9   Nelson, 119-20. The firm's organization chart is illustrated on p. 21.

10   Grant Hildebrand, *Designing for Industry: The Architecture of Albert Kahn* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1974), 60.

11   *Ibid.*, 154, commenting on Nelson's description of the firm in 1938.

12   Nelson's book expanded material that had appeared as a long article in *The Architectural Forum* 69, no. 2 (August 1938): 87-142. Part of this article (pp. 87-96), evidently extracted from a copy of this issue of *The Architectural Forum*, survives in the Parkin office files in association with other material from the late 1930s to mid 1940s. It may be that John B. Parkin had earlier been attracted by the description of the Kahn firm and brought it to John C. Parkin's attention, despite his account in the inter-view. CAA, Parkin/NORR Collection, accession 1A/75.01, boxes C and D.

13   Letter from John C. Parkin to Eugene O'Keefe, Toronto editor, *Canadian Builder*, 6 April 1961, CAA, Parkin/NORR Collection, accession 88A/80.23.

14   *Fortune*, March 1966, reverse of p. 92. A similar chart appears in one of the articles from *The Architectural Record*, published as *Techniques of Successful Practice* (New York: Architectural Record, [c. 1965]), [21], but with project teams radiating from a central core of principals and centralized services. This chart, developed for the New York architects Eggers and Higgins, appears to date from the late 1950s.

15   *Canadian Builder*, October 1966, 56.

16   Quoted in Keith Spicer,"Parkin's Big and Beautiful," *The Globe Magazine*, 5 July 1969, 7.

17   *Ibid.*

18   See, for example, the letter and attached answers to a questionnaire from John C. Parkin to Reginald Isaacs, [8 April] 1964. CAA, Parkin/NORR Collection.

19   Parkin to O'Keefe, 15 March 1961. CAA, Parkin/NORR Collection.

20   *Ibid.*, [5].

21   The issues are discussed more broadly in Judith R. Blau, *Architects and Firms: A Sociological Perspective on Architectural Practice* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1987). In chapter 5 (p. 89), she considers "the links joining convictions and agendas, the material base and organization of practice, and design quality."

22   Spicer, [5].

23   See chapter 4, "The Nature of Gothic Architecture," in vol. 2 of John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (London, 1851-53). Ruskin's analysis of architecture turns on this issue: Greek architecture and its descendants belong to the first system of architectural ornament, "Servile ornament, in which the execution or power of the inferior workman is entirely subjected to the intellect of the higher"; Gothic belongs to the third, "Revolutionary ornament, in which no executive inferiority is admitted at all" (pp. 188-89). Furthermore, commenting on the modern economic system and the division of labour, he says that it "is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men" (p. 196). His most eloquent passages on this topic can be found in §13 of this chapter. The page references are to vol. 10 of E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1903).