

A History of Canadian Architecture

Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994). 2 vols, 984 p., illus, refs, biblio, index. ISBN 019541103X. \$95.00 cloth. Review by Gordon Fulton.

Comprehensive histories of Canadian architecture seem to appear no more frequently than once in a generation: Oxford University Press published Alan Gowans' *Looking at Architecture in Canada* in 1958; the University of Toronto Press produced Thomas Ritchie's *Canada Builds, 1867-1967* in 1967; and now, in 1994, Oxford has published Harold Kalman's *A History of Canadian Architecture*, the definitive work for his generation.

A new look at the subject is long overdue. Many have researched and much has been written about aspects of Canadian architecture since 1967, but few have access to the complete body of new scholarship. Kalman has mined, ordered and interpreted this research to create *A History of Canadian Architecture*. In a sense, this book is a collaborative effort, grounded in the efforts of a generation of architectural historians from every corner of the country. Kalman excels at sifting through all the writings on a subject, coalescing them into understandable bites, and placing them into larger Canadian and architectural contexts. But more than a compilation, this is Kalman's book, with his personal interpretation and sensibility presented as an undercurrent to the narrative.

It is on a somewhat quirky, idiosyncratic path that Kalman leads his reader through the history of Canadian architecture. Partly chronological, partly regional, partly thematic, the text marches from 14,000 BP to the 1990s, with frequent lay-bys at appropriate moments in time to look at specific building types, styles, and locales. Volume 1 of the two-volume set covers the pre-Confederation period by regions (Canada, argues Kalman, was at the time no more than a series of regions, each largely with its own distinct architecture), and the early settlement of the Prairies and the West Coast. Kalman also uses this period to analyze the early buildings of communications, defence, and commerce, and the Victorian-era revival styles. Volume 2 begins with the coming of the transcontinental railway, and follows with the young country's public, business, and institutional buildings, domestic architecture, town planning, northern architecture, interwar styles, and, finally, modern architecture.

Chapters are subdivided into sections and subsections which focus on specific aspects. In "Domestic Architecture," for example, can be found a section on the single-family house, with subsections on the high styles in domestic architecture, the cottage and the villa, the Queen Anne Revival and the vernacular house, the Arts and Crafts Movement and the bungalow, and country houses and vacation retreats. The scope is wide, the text precise.

Some of the material will be familiar to scholars of Canadian architecture: those who are conversant with Marion McRae and Anthony Adamson's *The Ancestral Roof* will find comfort in the section on 19th-century domestic architecture in Upper Canada. But much of the source material will be new to all but the most diligent researchers: a case in point is the manuscript research material held by the Historical Services Branch of Parks Canada — notably the reports prepared for the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office and for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada — little of which has seen the light of the published record. Kalman has mined this material with great skill. The truth is, he has pursued *all* research angles, from obscure to well-known (including, I note with some satisfaction, a number of articles published in the *SSAC Bulletin*).

There are two aspects of this study that I feel deserve particular praise: the sections on engineering and related architecture, and the chapter on Modern architecture. Kalman does not restrict his definition of "architecture" to buildings; thus, in chapter 5, "Building for Communications, Defence, and Commerce," he includes canals, roads, bridges, and fortifications. To some, these works of engineering might seem superfluous to a study of architecture, but Kalman's concept of architecture is inclusive. He defines architecture in his preface as "just about everything that people have built: places where they have lived and worked, utilitarian structures, monumental public buildings, engineering, landscapes, neighbourhoods, and cities." It is his broad rather than narrow view, amply demonstrated by his forays into non-conventional architectural topics, that make *A History of Canadian Architecture* an extraordinary study. (Kalman credits Alan Gowans and their Princeton University mentor Donald Drew Egbert for his "big picture" approach to architectural history.)

The value of this approach can be found in the sections on engineering, landscape architecture, urban planning, and conservation.

After reading Kalman's text, one wonders how architectural history can ever again be studied *without* addressing the broader issues. Too-narrowly-focused investigations often miss the fundamental reasons why our built environment is the way it is. Chapter 12, "Town Planning," is an excellent example of how the particular is best explained by first investigating the general. Kalman relates how it was urban reformers, not architects, who first pushed for more healthy, moral, and equitable cities; architects and landscape architects followed, but only after having listened to these visionaries.

The work of the celebrated English landscape architect Thomas H. Mawson, "a persuasive speaker and writer who ably promoted town-planning schemes for a number of Canadian cities," is sketched by Kalman to illustrate the sputtering attempts to implant the City Beautiful concept of civic beautification in Canada during the pre-First World War era. This and other planning concepts, including the more successfully-implanted Garden Suburb, City Efficient (a truly Canadian idea if ever there was one), and resource town concepts, have had an unparalleled influence on the way our nation's urban environment looks and functions.

Perhaps the author's most impressive accomplishment (besides persuading a publisher to tackle a two-volume, 980-page study of Canadian architecture) is his synthesis of modern Canadian architecture. Here, I believe for the first time in print, is a scholarly study of the buildings which, love them or hate them, characterize so much of the Canadian urban landscape. Kalman first sets the stage for modernism in his chapter on architectural styles between the wars, wherein he outlines Canadian architects' first tentative forays into modernism. Kalman uses the life and work of architect John Lyle to illustrate how Canadian architects were searching for ways to achieve modernity within a framework that would still accept tradition. In the end, it was a younger generation who would move Canada to a true modernist architecture.

In his chapter on modern architecture, Kalman masterfully summarizes the formal, precise, technological aspects of the Canadian interpretation of the mature International Style of the 1950s and 1960s. A photograph of the J.A. Russell Building on the University of Manitoba campus (Smith, Carter, Parkin, 1959) beautifully illustrates the International Style's salient architectural characteristics, notably the curtain wall, exposed structural columns and persistent, formal grid. Windows, reduced to slim bands, serve primarily as compositional elements to sustain the carefully-designed visual equilibrium of the Russell Building's facade. (Those of us who attended architecture school here resigned ourselves to lying on the floor or standing on tables to catch a glimpse of the great outdoors.)

The International Style came to be an architecture of "general solutions," used and reused with an oppressively finite variety. Most of us never warmed to the style; as Vancouver author and critic Robin Ward writes, "the cool, intellectual buildings of the period were favoured by corporations and industries, but never struck a popular chord." Kalman submits that Canadian architects, too, were never completely sold on the International Style, choosing instead to express a regional character and a personal vision. Rather than imposing the International Style's "general solution," architects instead responded to the particular nature of a site. Kalman explains that this is why progressive Canadian architects quickly moved away from the mature International Style to a more exaggerated modernist vocabulary — a "Late-Modernism" — where an ornamental use of structural elements and a variety of surface finishes were tolerated.

Nevertheless, Late-Modernism also had a short shelf-life in Canada, from about the mid 1960s through the 1970s. Kalman suggests (with slightly less than his usual clarity) that this phase of modernism should more appropriately be called "Modern Expressionism" than Late-Modernism. An emphasis on regional expressionism became a characteristic of Canadian design during this era: the personal, expressionistic visions of architects Étienne Gaboury, Douglas Cardinal, Radoslav Zuk, Roger D'Astous, Paul-Marie Côté, and the ARCOP Group (all illustrated by Kalman) resulted in what some — including me — would consider to be a golden age of an architecture uniquely of and by Canadians.

While I believe this chapter to be Kalman at his most eloquent, the entire study is a superior piece of research and synthesis. It is much like Canada, a country, in the words of Ottawa writer Jenny Jackson, comfortable in its great distances, geographic or personal. Production values are equally good. The illustrations are large and plentiful; the scaled plans redrafted by David Byrnes are a model of clarity and consistency; the glossary and index are very useful; and, for the serious student of Canadian architecture, the endnotes are windows to a rich source of information. There are a few small mistakes (on p. 811, for example, Jean Wallbridge [1912-67] should read [1912-79] — she died aged 67; on p. 891, note 29, "The Concoridia Railway Hotels Revisited..." should be "The Canadian Railway Hotels Revisited..."), and one or two editing gaffes ("a myriad of tall, unrelieved boxes" [p. 802]), but nothing to diminish the value of this two-volume set.

If Kalman's *A History of Canadian Architecture* can be held as an example of the work of this generation's architectural scholars, it is an example of which we can all be proud. It will no doubt stand as the subject's definitive work for many, many years.