

Photo by the author.

Figure 1: The facade of the Confederation Life Building.

## **The Architecture of Image and Domination: Winnipeg's Confederation Life Building**

*by Lyle Dick*



Gently curving around the bend of Winnipeg's Main Street the gleaming terra cotta facade of the Confederation Life Building presents an imposing image to pedestrians. The building impresses as much with its strong vertical emphasis as with its clean classical lines. In the centre, pilasters carry the eye up to the lofty cornice, a monumental construction that seems to float in air. The overall impact of the architecture is so powerful that one overlooks the fact that this is an office building, the former regional home of a life insurance company. Since its construction in 1912-13, the building has been associated with fundamental trends in the development of 20th century corporate organization and white collar work, trends that are still in evidence today.

This paper focuses on two aspects of the building's architecture with broad interpretive implications, i.e. the facade, and particularly its style, and the interior design and organization of the work place. Both aspects are intimately related to the ascendancy of large corporate enterprise in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

I will first deal with style. In introducing his well-known book on the Chicago Style, Carl Condit provided both a definition and justification of architectural style. In addition to characteristics of construction, form, ornament, and detail, he stated that style "also stands for those technical and aesthetic qualities of the artistic product that grow directly and organically out of the aspirations and powers of human beings." In Condit's words, buildings of a certain style do not merely "symbolize in their form the realities of man's experience" but are "constituent facts of man's history, and their revelation is a part of truth itself."<sup>1</sup>

Without addressing the more mystical references to "revelation" and "truth", these statements raise important issues in architectural criticism that invite further exploration.

Condit's reference to stylistic representation unwittingly introduces semiology, or the science of forms into the discussion. As formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure and developed further by Roland Barthes, semiology is based on the principle that the world is replete with signs, or forms that represent or are taken as tokens for something other than themselves. It postulates a relation between two terms, a material signifier and a conceptual signified. Barthes uses the example of a photograph on the cover of a French magazine which shows a black soldier in a French uniform, saluting the tricolour. Here the signifier is the black soldier saluting, but what is signified is that France is a great empire, that all its sons, regardless of race, serve it loyally, and even black colonials are serving their so-called oppressors.<sup>2</sup>

Semiology does not merely entail the identification of code and message but also deals with the production of signs, defined as the union of the signifier and signified. In our culture signs are typically arbitrary; that is, they operate as if there were a natural relationship between signifier and signified. Yet signs are also typically ambiguous, the signifier is never completely obscured but is held in suspension, waiting in the wings to be recalled as an alibi for the signified message. Barthes' semiology goes beyond the unmasking or deciphering of the signifier to acknowledge the function of this ambiguity, which is to "naturalize" culture constructs.

For Barthes, myth is a secondary system of signs that incorporates elements within a prior semiological system; these semiological meanings are attached to signs by social convention. It is on this second-order level of signification that the hidden, ideological dimension of myth is constituted. In the case of the black soldier, he is not simply a symbol, or even an alibi, but is "the very presence of French imperialism." Since there are in fact black soldiers in the French army, defenders of the myth can claim innocence, asserting that the photograph is simply what it appears to be—a picture of black soldier—when in fact symbol and alibi are combined in one irresistible image. In Barthes' words:

Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from.<sup>3</sup>

Architectural style, like other areas of visual representation, constitutes a semiological system of form and content, of signifiers and signifieds. But since the field of architectural history, like art history, tends to focus almost exclusively on the style or form as an end in itself, it deprives itself of a complete understanding of the form's significance.

In order to interpret the operative signs in the facade of the Confederation Life Building it is important to place it in its historical context. The building was one of several Winnipeg skyscrapers built in the years before and during World War I. Winnipeg experienced phenomenal growth during the first decade of this century, when its position as the principal financial, commercial and distributional centre for the prairies was confirmed and expanded by the great boom in prairie settlement.<sup>4</sup> As the city's trade increased exponentially in this period, financial and commercial companies commissioned the building of large branch and

head office buildings to accommodate their increased business, while establishing a concrete presence in the city.

Technological innovations, such as steel skeletal framing, fireproofing and the elevator, and economic factors including the rise in rents in central business districts, were important preconditions for high rise building. But beyond those factors the skyscraper was made possible—and necessary—by the transition from entrepreneurial to corporate capitalist organization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Corporate concentration and expansion in the Canadian life insurance industry was particularly pronounced in the decades leading up to World War I. By 1914 virtually all major life companies, including Confederation Life, had branches in the United States and the Caribbean, in addition to several in Europe and the Far East.<sup>5</sup> Amount other foreign investments Confederation Life held Mexican and Cuban government bonds. By 1913 Canadian life insurance companies were investing nearly \$2.4 billion in foreign countries apart from their investments in the United States. This massive outflow of capital prompted a Royal Commission's demand for foreign investment regulation of the life insurance industry, and precipitated protests from organized farmers, who had experienced difficulty in securing loan capital. It was an anomalous position for a company that was then erecting its showplace office building in Winnipeg as a symbol of its commitment to Western development.

Apart from the obvious prestige accruing to the builders of such a handsome structure, the company had good reason to wish to convey to policy holders that it was "stage, solid and legitimate." As Gunter Gad and Deryck Holdsworth have pointed out, frequent bank failures and financial difficulties in the life insurance industry by 1900 had undermined confidence in these institutions.<sup>7</sup> The company undoubtedly wished to project a reassuring image to its policy holders.

In this context, the Italian Renaissance classicism of the facade, as was the case with the Beaux-Arts style of the nearby Great West Life Building, was well chosen from the public relations standpoint. Its symmetry and the gracefulness of its curved front suggested refinement, repose, and hence, stability. With its two-story base, middle tiers of stories with accentuated piers and pilasters and attic story entablature, it replicated the image of a classical column. What was signified, via historical referents, was classical tradition, but the mythological message was "classical life insurance." By referring to a second order semiological system that privileged the corporate occupiers of classical building this sign imposed corporate legitimacy on the viewers' consciousness. The building also evoked images of power and dominion represented in the great palaces of Renaissance princes or Greco-Roman temples. But, unlike Roman temples, these monuments to commerce were not for the general use of the public but rather celebrated private ownership and control over the economy. Only employees of the company, its customers and tenants were invited into these private temples. The participation of the public at large was essentially relegated to the role of street observer.

Contrary to Condit's formulation, the building's form is not merely a symbol of attempted mastery of human experience; it is its embodiment. The form constitutes the ideology and objectives of its builders; it is the visual manifestation of their power and hegemony. Moreover,

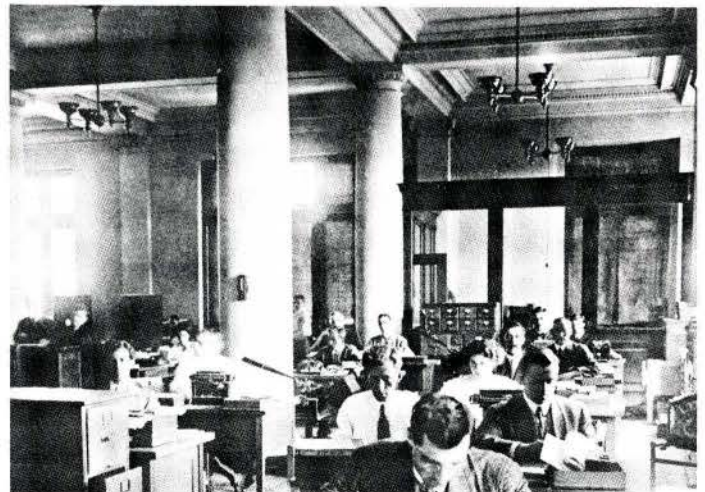


Figure 2: An office interior in the Great West Life Building 177 Lombard Street, Winnipeg, 1913. The photo shows some early features of the rationalized office, including technological innovations of the period. Most of the clerical staff at this point were still male. This photograph appeared in the April 1913 issue of *Construction* magazine and has been reproduced courtesy the Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation.





Figure 3: Interior view of an office of the Western Canada Insurance Underwriters' Association, Winnipeg, 1940. While this company's offices were housed in the Paris Building, its organization of the work place reveals the application of "scientific management" principles that were by then prevalent in the life insurance industry. Factory-like alignment of desks and the open area concept facilitated surveillance and control by the supervisors, all male, in the back row. A notable change from the 1913 photograph is the presence of significant numbers of female typists and clerks, positions into which they were channelled in increasing numbers during World War I and after.

style does not reflect man's experience in general, as Condit asserts, but is appropriated by a particular class for its own purposes at a given historical moment. Nor do its aesthetic qualities grow "directly and organically out of the conditions of human existence", to use Condit's words. There is nothing organic about the cloaking of a 20th century skeletal frame building in a classical skin. This form is consciously chosen in a process that is neither natural nor organic but cultural. When we overlook intention in architectural style, we deprive the building of its full significance. It becomes an idealized image, above criticism, existing only for the aesthetic delight of the viewer, an ineffable art object, deprived of all History.

Having provided a context for interpreting the surface imagery of the building, it remains to investigate its interior organization. It is in the interior that function and intention are manifest most concretely. The building of large corporate office buildings coincided with a revolution in office administration after 1900. Corporate concentration and expansion in this period generated enormous increases in the volume of paperwork, necessitating a comparable expansion in the clerical labour force and office space to accommodate them. It was also in this period that the main office quickly developed into the nerve centre of the organization. Its new role was characterized by the replacement of traditional methods of work with systematized programs of procedures, and the amassing to it of greater amounts of power over the firm's activities.<sup>8</sup>

Coincidental with the development of the large centralized office were efforts to rationalize its organization along factory lines. With rapid expansion in the volume of paper work, managers sought ways to reorganize office labour in order to obtain optimal production and efficiency. They found both a justification and a strategy for implementation in the writings of Frederick Winslow Taylor and other proponents of "scientific management" in both the factory and the office.

"Taylorism" emerged in this period in response to demands generated by the recent emergence of large integrated industrial corporations. The new corporations concentrated their resources into huge plants to enable greater centralized control over production. The large investment in plant and equipment required that these resources be utilized at full capacity if they were to be profitable; expanded markets and an imposed control over all aspects of production were conceived as the solutions.<sup>9</sup>

The sociologist Harry Braverman has identified three central features of Taylorism that were incorporated into the management of major companies and government departments in the 1920s and after. These were: i) the dissociation of the labour process from the skills of the workers, ii) the separation of the conception from the execution of labour; and iii) management's use of a monopoly over knowledge to control each step of the labour process and its execution. Taylor contrasted the older system of management, in which each worker was responsible for both the plan and details of his or her work, and the "scientific" method, which involves the establishment of many rules, laws and for-

mulae which replace the judgement of the individual workman . . . " As Braverman has pointed out, this process fundamentally changed not only the labourers' relationship to their work but also the nature of the work itself:

. . . It was to ensure that as craft declined, the worker would sink to the level of general and undifferentiated labour power, adaptable to a large range of tasks, while as science grew, it would be concentrated in the hands of management.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to Taylor's own writings, his apostle W.H. Leffingwell authored numerous treatises on rationalized office organization in this period. Leffingwell's books, *Scientific Office Management*<sup>11</sup> and *Office Management: Principles and Practice*<sup>12</sup> became standard reference works in the field. These weighty manuals reveal an unlimited faith in the capacity of scientific management to rationalize all aspects of office production. An engineer by background, Leffingwell applied engineering principles in an effort to achieve the desired production results. These reached their most extreme limits in the application of time and motion studies, earlier pioneered by Taylor and Frank Gilbreth, to analyze the labour process of office staff. Leffingwell related one such experience:

After several days of patient teaching, a young man persisted in making a large number of useless motions. I walked up to him unexpectedly, grasped his hand and held it for the time usually occupied by his useless motions. Then I pointed out the result. I had interfered with his work. He grasped the point and one or two days thereafter reached the standard.<sup>13</sup>

It can be seen that many principles of the rationalized office were reflected in the interior organization of the Confederation Life Building, at least on the ground and second floors that were occupied by the company's district office. One of the most obvious aspects of the interior organization of space was the separation of the office into three district divisions: the life insurance branch, the mortgage division and the sales agency. Each of these divisions operated according to its own internal dynamics, but each consisted of a hierarchy of administrative, professional or sales staff supported by a base of clerical workers. A second principle followed in the interior organization was the implementation of an open area concept, particularly for file clerks, secretaries and book keepers in the insurance division, but also to accommodate a typing pool for the sales representatives.<sup>14</sup>

The company located its life insurance office in the front wing on the second floor. First hand accounts of the spatial organization of this area in the 1930s to 1950s confirm a degree of adherence to the principles elucidated by Leffingwell. In one corner the district manager's office was separated by a wainscott and glass partition from the general office. Outside his office was the office manager's desk, and a row of secretaries' and file clerks' desks facing away from the manager.<sup>15</sup> Some male employees, usually supervisors, had their desks arranged perpendicular to the row of secretaries. In this way both they and the office manager could keep an eye on the work of their employees.



Leffingwell justified what he termed the "standardization of physical conditions", meaning essentially the elimination of privacy for most employees, on several grounds. He claimed that "granting privacy to individuals who do not need it is not only a wasteful practice in office arrangement but actually lowers the general effectiveness of such individuals."<sup>16</sup> Among other disadvantages, he noted that private offices wasted space, interfered with the flow of work and traffic, and made supervision more difficult.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, "for the executive who must have privacy to concentrate and develop the thinking that is vital to the interests of the business, the private office is a necessity."

Other innovations in structuring the work environment related to the arrangement of departments, desks, and functions to permit the most efficient interrelationships. Leffingwell and others provided precise instructions and diagrams to show arrangement considered conducive to optimal production and paper flow.<sup>18</sup> The labour process itself was structured through the standardization of forms<sup>19</sup> and work routines, particularly for stenographers, and increasing reliance on technological innovations, including the Hollerith machine, the precursor to the modern computer.<sup>20</sup>

Canadian insurance companies were leaders in the rationalization of the modern office in the 1920s. A key element in the movement to systematize office production in this period was the creation of personnel departments. In 1920 the Sun Life Insurance Company appointed a personnel manager, who immediately announced his intention to "introduce scientific methods for the selection of the staff, and to promote the competence of its members." More precisely the objectives were to obtain maximum productive output from clerical staff and to recruit and train managers to bring about the desired results. To these ends Sun Life developed classification levels for head office female clerks.<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to note that Sun Life and other insurance companies were slow to introduce comparable classification schedules for male-dominated professional and managerial positions. Most significantly, even male clerical positions were similarly not constrained by the imposition of classification levels. This fact underlined the function of classification procedures, to channel women into dead-end low-paying clerical positions, while placing male clerical recruits into career-path positions.<sup>22</sup>

An important consequence of the design regimen and systematized labour process was that individual workers were further alienated from their labour and atomized in terms of awareness of their shared class interest. This was the paradox of the open area concept: while it removed physical partitions between workers, it imposed a regime of controls over production that served to segregate persons operating in this paper assembly line. By lining up the desks in rows, and setting production standards, managers were, in effect, erecting invisible barriers around each atomized space, wherein the only interaction was between the individual and her or his own work. At the same time the absence of real partitions or privacy, and the lack of a sense of control over one's own labour and work place contributed to the clerical workers' inordinate acceptance of authority.

In his studies of the dissemination of power in various institutions of Western society, including prisons, asylums, schools and factories, Michel Foucault has described the central role of architecture in controlling the masses:

... A whole problematic then develops: that of an architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen (as with the ostentation of palaces), or to observe the external space (cf of the geometry of fortresses), but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control—to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them ...<sup>23</sup>

Insidiously the new regime takes over; once established, the clerk, compartmentalized in her or his exposed cell, rarely questions how or why the work place has been designed in this way. As with the building's facade, the interior space is mythologized as part of nature, the original significations and significance of the open area structure having long since vanished. It is this resilient quality of power, that is its transformation of human-produced structures into "the natural way of doing things" that at once proves so awesome yet so elusive. The masses internalized its structures; from its formerly overt victims, they are transformed into its most ardent policemen.

It is beyond the scope of the paper to draw connections between the office of the early 20th century and its counterparts in large corporations and government departments today. However the continued presence of hierarchical chains of authority, significant inequalities among staff in income and status, the concentration in managers of knowledge and control over the whole of the labour process, and the preponderance of women in low-paying secretarial and clerical posi-

tions pointed to the persistence of power structures that emerged earlier in the context of the scientific management movement. Architectural design provided the physical basis for this transformation of the work place, just as "scientific managers" inaugurated a regime of managing office staff in the manner that their engineering counterparts harnessed natural resources. One is not surprised to note that the personnel function in my own government department is now designated as Human Resources Management.

The practice of architectural history, like the practice of architectural design, has tended to celebrate uncritically aesthetic and technical design solutions while being oblivious to their social implications. As Carl Condit applauded the ascendancy of steel skeletal framing and the aesthetic possibilities it opened for building facades, so Rayner Banham has lauded innovations in mechanical engineering and their impact on interior environments and aesthetics.<sup>24</sup> In neither of these standard texts is there a real critique of the social implications of architectural modernism, apart from such environmental factors as air and light quality.

Yet interdisciplinary approaches to architectural history, including the perspectives of semiology, sociology, and related disciplines offer the potential for expanding our understanding of the dialectic of social and technological change. The alternative is to treat architecture in abstraction from its social and cultural contexts, in effect, a surrender to sign.□

## NOTE

1. Carl Condit, **The Chicago School of Architecture** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) p. 79.
2. Roland Barthes, **Mythologies** (London: Paladin Books, 1984) p. 116.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
4. See Alan F.J. Artibise, **Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914** (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975).
5. R.T. Naylor, **The History of Canadian Business**, Vol. 2 (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co., 1975) p. 256.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
7. Gunter Gad and Deryck Holdsworth, "Building for City, Region and Nation" in Victor K. Russell (ed.), **Forging a Consensus: Historical Essays on Toronto** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 300.
8. Graham S. Lowe, "The Administrative Revolution in the Canadian Office: An Overview," in Tom Traves (ed.) **Essays in Canadian Business History** (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), pp. 125-27.
9. David J. Noble, **America By Design: Science, Technology, and The Rise of Corporate Capitalism** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 260-1.
10. Harry Braverman, **Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century** (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974), pp. 114-15.
11. W.H. Leffingwell, **Scientific Office Management** (Chicago and New York: A.W. Shaw Company, 1917).
12. W.H. Leffingwell, **Office Management: Principles and Practice** (Chicago and New York: A.W. Shaw Company, 1927).
13. Quoted in Margery W. Davies, **Women's Place is at the Typewriter: Office Workers, 1870-1930** (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1982) p. 116.
14. Interview with Margaret Norrie by Lyle Dick, Winnipeg, 28 November 1985. Ms. Norrie was a secretary with the Confederation Life Association in Winnipeg for a total of 37 years, beginning in 1931.
15. *Ibid.*
16. W.H. Leffingwell, **Office Management: Principles and Practices**, p. 293.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-58.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 469.
20. Graham S. Lowe, "The Administrative Revolution: The Growth of Clerical Occupations and the Development of the Modern Office in Canada 1911-31" Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1979, p. 368.
21. Graham S. Lowe "The Enormous File: The Evolution of the Modern Office in Early Twentieth Century Canada" **Archivaria**, No. 19 (Winter 1984-85) p. 149.
22. Graham S. Lowe, "The Administrative Revolution: The Growth of Clerical Occupations and the Development of the Modern Office in Canada, 1911-31", p. 368.
23. Michel Foucault, **Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison** (Trans. Alan Sheridan) (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 172.
24. Rayner Banham, **The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment** (London and Chicago: The Architectural Press and University of Chicago Press, 1969).