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Christopher Armstrong. *Making Toronto Modern: Architecture and Design, 1895-1975*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. 406 pp. 280 photos, illustrations and maps

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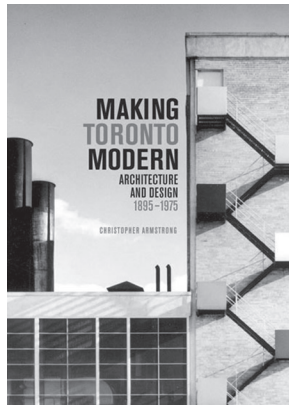
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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Christopher Armstrong. *Making Toronto Modern: Architecture and Design, 1895-1975*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. 406 pp. 280 photos, illustrations and maps.

In this elegant study Christopher Armstrong explores the impact of modern architecture and design on Toronto from the late Victorian era through to the 1970s. He finds a city ambivalent about the flow of new, sometimes radical, ideas from abroad. Tremendous population growth and increasing economic importance were accompanied by a self-conscious desire to be modern; yet for the most part Torontonians remained fiscally and aesthetically conservative, unwilling to commit public funds to ambitious civic improvements or purchase homes built in non-traditional styles. Toronto modernized, but never fully embraced the Modern aesthetic.



Readers interested in exploring the place of architecture in urban modernity, or in evaluating the larger social and cultural effects of apartment towers and shopping malls should look elsewhere. *Making Toronto Modern* is first and foremost a history of changes in architectural style and practice, told through illustrated profiles of more than 100 buildings and developments. That includes landmarks like Viljo Revell's futuristic New City Hall (opened 1965) and Mies van de Rohe's glass and steel Toronto-Dominion Centre (1967), but also lesser-known creations like Ford's Danforth assembly plant (1923), or the thirty system-built public schools constructed across Metro Toronto in the early 1970s. Using newspapers, trade journals, and popular magazines like *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, the author reconstructs the local and national debates over architectural principles that helped shape those projects.

Armstrong argues convincingly that the meaning of modern architecture in Toronto shifted over time, mostly in response to international developments in style and technique. First, there was what he calls "modern," characterized by the adoption of new materials and technologies without the development of a distinctive new aesthetic. As in Chicago and New York, early Toronto skyscrapers resembled huge Greek columns, with a distinct base and capital. But beneath that pseudo-classical garb were steel frames, elevators, and high-pressure water systems. Likewise, the city's first attempts at urban planning, inspired by the American City Beautiful movement of the 1890s,

combined a modern concern for efficiency with a Beaux-Arts style. However, modernization on the public purse proved to be a hard sell for the city's budget-minded ratepayers and politicians.

Following the lead of European designers, in the 1920s Toronto began to experiment with what Armstrong calls "moderne." This had the most impact on exterior ornamentation and interior design. Highly ornate, heavy Victorian and Edwardian décor was eschewed in favour of sharp edges, bright colours, and dynamic shapes. Auto showrooms and cinemas led the trend, but grander structures like Eaton's College Street store (1930) and the Toronto Stock Exchange (1938) also had moderne features, including bright metal detailing and Cubist-style murals and friezes.

Finally, there was "Modern," which began to filter into Toronto architectural circles in the 1930s, but had little impact until the post-1945 building boom. This was the architecture pioneered by Bauhaus and Le Corbusier, with its radical simplicity and liberal use of concrete, glass, and steel. Local champions like John C. Parkin, designer of Don Mills Shopping Centre (1955) and Toronto's international airport (1964), developed their own styles based on the principles that "less is more" and "form follows function." By the 1960s, following an influx of foreign—especially British—architects to Toronto, Modern had become the new normal in institutional and commercial construction. But unlike previous iterations of modernism, it did not have a significant impact on the houses where the majority of Torontonians lived. Home buyers who sought out modern conveniences like air-conditioning and were happy to drive cars with moderne tail fins balked at paying more for the flat-roofed asceticism of classic Modernism.

Toronto's encounter with modern architecture transformed the city's look and feel, although not always in the ways imagined by the most ardent modernizers. *Making Toronto Modern*, with its impressive scope and attractive images, is a good guide to that process. Following one profession over eighty years, it also offers glimpses of the larger changes in work, society, and culture that were part of Toronto becoming modern. The size and international outlook of architectural firms like John B. Parkin Associates, which in the 1950s employed more than one hundred staff—including in-house engineers and interior designers—were scarcely imaginable in 1890s Toronto. But then, so was the city of automobile suburbs and fifty-storey bank towers that they helped to build. This is an important book for Toronto history, and a worthwhile addition to any urban history library.

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