Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Cities and Buildings: Perspectives on Architecture and Its Place in Urban History

Margaret Carter

Volume 14, Number 3, February 1986

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018084ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1018084ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)
1918-5138 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this note

Carter, M. (1986). Cities and Buildings: Perspectives on Architecture and Its Place in Urban History. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *14*(3), 267–270. https://doi.org/10.7202/1018084ar

Review Essays/Notes critiques

Cities and Buildings: Perspectives on Architecture and Its Place in Urban History

Margaret Carter

Guimond, Pierre and Brian Sinclair. *Calgary Architecture: The Boom Years*. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1984. Pp. xiii, 309. Illustrations. $23.95 cloth; $14.95 paper.

Stokes, Peter John; Tom Cruikshank; and Robert Heaslip. *Rogues' Hollow: The Story of the Village of Newburgh Ontario Through its Buildings*. Toronto: The Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, 1983. Pp. xvi, 200. Illustrations. $26.00.

McKelvey, Margaret E. and Merilyn McKelvey. *Toronto Carved in Stone*. Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984. Pp. 143. Black & White & Colour Illustrations. $40.00.

Moffat, Ruth and Beverley Bailey Plaxton. *Stone Houses: Stepping Stones from the Past*. Erin, Ont.: The Boston Mills Press, 1984. Pp. 84. Colour Illustrations. $19.95.

Godfrey, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey. *Stones, Bricks and History: The Corner of "Duke & George," 1798-1984*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1984. Pp. 75. Illustrations. $9.95.

All of these books discuss buildings. Since building evidence is not used widely by urban historians, it is pertinent to raise the question of whether building information — either in the form of primary evidence or secondary studies — is relevant to urban history. The core of this question, surely, is whether buildings are an integral part of cities. Can you imagine a city without buildings? Even the most rudimentary and temporary settlement is characterized by forms of shelter that can be generally classed as buildings. Without buildings, a city does not exist.

Is man, then, so divorced from these structures that historians — the students of recorded man — can afford to ignore them as irrelevant or treat them as minor, peripheral entities? When men establish and develop their cities, they build buildings. They live in buildings every day of their lives; they expand their cities, fulfil civic needs, and recognize personal aspirations by building buildings. Buildings should be central to the study of urban history.

Why, then, do urban historians feel so uncomfortable about dealing with buildings? The answer is not a simple one, but it is one that merits exploration. Part of the explanation is certainly unpleasant; a confusing experience. Once an historian decides to explore buildings as part of the urban landscape, he is confronted with a massive body of literature — all of which purports to have "covered the subject," and little of which seems to him to be relevant at all. The problem is that many people have written about buildings — people from interest groups and disciplines whose perspectives and tools are often unfamiliar to the historian.

Architects are one such group. Generally speaking, professional architects have five characteristics that historians must recognize if they wish to consider using architect-authored works as sources of urban information. First, an architect communicates meaningfully through pictures not words. Usually works written by architects contain scant text, but even when the commentary is substantial, the major message is visual not verbal. Second, the architect is entirely pre-occupied with present day concerns — be they design, planning or interpretive — no matter what the generation of building he is addressing. He seldom seeks information about a building's past, and when he does it is invariably to clarify specific observations about its present state. Third, he sees buildings as isolated entities in the loose context of their form (style or similar visual pattern) and function (type of user requirement). The broader questions about buildings and their relationship to society — the questions crucial to an historian's understanding — rarely have any place in his thinking. Fourth, the architect has no comprehension of the rules of evidence: he seldom alludes to the source of an idea or piece of information let alone footnotes it. And finally, an architect works for a client: the concept of unbiased assessment (or responsible contribution to a greater store of knowledge as an historian understands it) is simply not there.

Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine, Vol. XIV, No. 3 [February/février 1986]

Pierre Guimond and Brian Sinclair's *Calgary Architecture: The Boom Years 1972-1982* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1984) is an interesting book because it exhibits all of these characteristics. After a three page background on earlier Calgary architecture, it plunges into today's concerns. The majority of the book is devoted to heavily illustrated design (requirement and resolution) descriptions of individual building projects undertaken in Calgary between 1972 and 1982. Works are sub-divided by functional building type, a primary organizational criteria in architectural thought. The book concludes with a series of indexes including those of architectural and engineering firms, many of whom appear as benefactors, sponsors and patrons of its publication. Unquestionably, the authors regard the work as a record of major change in the development of their city. An historian would recognize it immediately as boosterism. In character this work is identical to the civic promotion literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and as a source it should be treated as such. It will provide historians with invaluable information fifty years from now.

Despite their interest in historic buildings preservation architects are still architects in perspective, although most of them have made some adjustment to the difference in building medium. Sensitive preservation architects are not as egotistical as their modern counterparts. They are less concerned with expressing themselves through a building, and more willing to accept a building as someone else's creation with an integrity that must be respected. Part of respecting this integrity is reflected in a preoccupation with the visual aspects of historic buildings, their materials, forms and details. Good preservation architects also require information — "facts" — about a building's past to enable them to recreate the requirements under which it was built or altered. This increases their sympathetic understanding of the building, and assists them in creating new, harmonious solutions. Historians ought, however, to understand that the "facts" they gather are neither rigorously sought nor rigorously assessed. For the preservation architect, the building itself will always be the major primary source.

Rogue's Hollow: The Story of the Village of Newburgh Ontario Through its Buildings by Peter John Stokes, Tom Cruikshank and Robert Heaslip is the marriage of a preservation architect's point of view with that of the geographer/landscape architect. The work was sponsored by the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario which felt "often there is too little time and effort spent in considering the buildings of a community as an expression of its development, as a vital constituent of its heritage, and as a possible ingredient of new schemes for enhancement and improvement." This study was prepared to serve as a model planning tool, and within the disciplinary perspectives of its authors it is remarkably effective.

Its organization generally follows that of other community planning studies. (Many of these exist, although few have ever been published for wide circulation). It opens with an historical background discussing the village's economy, general characteristics and growth, then moves into a specific district and building by building review, and concludes with a modern plan for preserving the community's heritage elements. The study contains special features that arise from its authors' interests — abundant orientation maps, a regional survey that places the village in relation to its modern hinterland, a pictorial review of architectural details from its heritage buildings, and a glossary of general architectural terms. On the whole the study deals very effectively with visual or design heritage features of the modern landscape.

What it does not do is treat in any meaningful way the cultural heritage features of that same landscape. Some cultural context is provided in the introduction: some basic research has been done (and footnoted) to provide a background for the buildings. The problem is that this information lacks balance, veracity and meaningful integration. There is no sense of historic time — when they are available dates are given but they are not interpreted with any of the contextual understanding that would give them relevance. Settlement groups and economic developments, too, are mentioned in the introduction, but the information given is not related in any way to the building by building commentary that comprises the majority of the text. The specific building commentary consists of design (architectural detail, materials and orientation) interpretation, combined with historical data obtained from standard building research sources (county maps, fire insurance maps, directories, historic photographs and local histories). It is not surprising that two of the most essential and reliable building research sources, land titles and tax rolls, have not been reviewed. They are both time consuming and difficult to interpret.

And so, how useful is this work? It satisfies the need for a weighted visual record, but it lacks adequate tools for the assessment of the cultural significance of the heritage resources of the community. If a heavily altered Loyalist building, or a late nineteenth or early twentieth century example of minority group settlement or commercial or industrial experimentation lies outside the heritage landscape as it is visually defined in this study, it will be lost. Does this meet preservation objectives? The answer is no. Urban historians would do well to consider this issue, because the perspective that is missing is one they can supply.

Can the urban historian use this work as a source of information? The historical building data provided is undoubtedly reliable insofar as it directly reflects the information available in the sources consulted. Before it can be rendered useful, however, the historian must bring his own contextual tools to bear. (A little cross-source verification would not be out of place either). Once this has been done, however, the historian can learn much about the visual (or

physical) manifestations of cultural phenomena through buildings by relating what he has found to the visually interpretive information in this work. It is crucial to make this link if buildings are to contribute their essential perspective to the study of urban history.

But surely, you say, linking visual information to cultural phenomena is the work of an art historian. Art historians, too, comment on buildings but their perspective is different again. The art historian is interested in tracing the aesthetic roots of a building's design to study the conceptual inspiration and specific articulation of its designer. Art historians do work with cultural phenomena, but culture in the sense of the art historian means high art. For example, art historians look exhaustively into the roots of a building form or style to attempt to define its characteristics, then examine individual buildings for their conformity or deviation — their interpretation — of that form. The result is always a stylistic attribution (or a denial that one exists), and an informal judgement on the relative aesthetic merits of the building's design.

If the art historian's investigation has been responsible, his stylistic label and aesthetic interpretation can be employed by the urban historian as an expert opinion. As with the work of architects, it is essential for the urban historian to become familiar with the implications of such labels, for an understanding of stylistic roots and their articulation in Canada can contribute substantially to historical interpretation. Styles, or the concepts of architectural design, are the intellectual ideas that interacted with the political, economic and social factors so familiar to the historian to create special urban environments as we know them today.

As in the case of architects' work, however, the urban historian must provide his own context for the use of the art historian's material. Although he does do research and use the same notation methods as the historian, an art historian has little conversancy with source assessment and his cross-source verification is visual. The art historian's prime primary sources are visual. His concept of time is based on the evolution of visual aesthetic philosophy and not on the social, political, cultural, intellectual and economic factors that provide a context for the historian. As a result, the art historian's building dates are often unreliable for they relate to the origin and general application of the aesthetic design concept not to actual conditions in the time and place the building was constructed. Such a deviation alone should tell the historian something important about the transmission and acceptance of ideas in a particular urban environment.

Cultural geographers have also written extensively about buildings. The underlying perspective of their work will not be discussed here for the simple reason that no book considered in this review makes substantial use of its principles. No specific work by an art historian is being reviewed here either; however, two of the general preservationist works under review owe a considerable motivational debt to the works of both art historians and architects. If the urban historian is going to consider using these works, it is important he understand the distinction between the characteristic practices of each discipline and the work of the general preservationist.

The general preservationist relates to the architect or art historian in exactly the same way that the local historian relates to the urban historian. Margaret and Merilyn McKelvey's *Toronto Carved in Stone* does not discuss the aesthetic purity and artistic merits of stone carving in Toronto, instead its authors "cherish . . . the exuberance and visual delight of decoration as expressed in stone carving." In an informal and undocumented way, the McKelveys enthusiastically touch on all broad questions related to stone carving in Toronto: they explore the use of stone carving on buildings, gravestones and relics; they probe the origin, properties and use of many types of stone; they discuss the importation of craftsmen and the general composition of the stone cutting industry; and they comment on techniques for working stone over the ages. Their work is extremely interesting as a general background to the use of stone as a decorative material in Toronto and central Canada. *Toronto Carved in Stone* is abundantly illustrated and has an interesting, informative text. While this book is well worth the time for a perusal, it is difficult to see how its contents could fill any specific need for the urban historian that could not be better met elsewhere.

Ruth Moffat and Beverley Bailey Plaxton's *Stone Houses: Stepping Stones from the Past* is yet another work by interested preservationists. It is a modern photographic collection of old stone houses across Ontario containing brief comments on each building culled from secondary materials. While the authors do attempt to provide some general background to the use of stone, the questions they ask are neither as extensive nor as responsibly explored as those addressed in *Toronto Carved in Stone*. This book is of little interest to the urban historian.

Stones, Bricks and History, the final book in this review, was also written by preservationists. It is the story of three buildings on the historic corner of Duke and George Streets in Toronto — the Bank of Upper Canada Building (site of Upper Canada's major financial institution), Toronto's first post office (which together with the Bank of Upper Canada played an important role in the 1837 Rebellion), and the De La Salle Institute (a school run by the Christian Brothers for the education of the sons of Toronto's Catholic elite). This book constitutes a study of these buildings in isolation from their urban context.

Stones, Bricks and History is of particular interest to historians because one of its authors, Sheldon Godfrey, has an M.A. in history, and the thoroughness with which the book has been researched reflects his training. In writing this work

Godfrey was faced with the same dilemma that confronts most historians when they discuss buildings. When he has fascinating political and social subjects during the nineteenth century, Godfrey handles them with great adroitness evoking maximum interest. All through this early section, he conscientiously includes building evidence which dangles without an interpretive context. Unfortunately, as the buildings' histories become more mundane, these bits loom larger and larger until Godfrey's text loses its historical stance in the final preservation section, and lapses into what is obviously an architect's explanation.

This book is essentially a building study. Unlike the thousands of similar studies that are buried in the files of government departments, this one has been published because it was privately executed. While *Stones, Bricks and History* is of general interest to the historian because of its subject matter, it is unfortunately of less relevance to the urban historian than the majority of its government counterparts. Most government prepared studies are better prepared — more aware of architectural implications, more cognisant of preservation issues, more current in relating to historical trends. While they too are limited to the perspective of a single building, they offer the urban historian considerable reliably researched, in-context material upon which to build.

The historians who investigate buildings for government agencies have long recognized that building evidence is a rich source for urban historical study. Unfortunately, their contribution to research in this field has been circumscribed by the fact they must often restrict their investigations to individual buildings, and always to existing ones. They have, nevertheless, tested the historical veracity of some of the "truths" espoused by other building disciplines. They have also identified and assessed a variety of historical methods and sources useful in the investigation of buildings (some of which are already familiar to urban historians). In addition, they have developed an awareness of the nature and significance of particular types of building evidence that could be usefully employed in the study of urban history.

Building evidence generally relates to one of eleven different aspects of a building's historical record — the building's owners, its occupants, its function (or use), the deployment of its interior space, the building's relationship to the property upon which it is located (or site), its relationship to the urban area or zone in which it is situated, the date of its construction, the time and nature of its alteration, the materials used in its composition (their origin, properties, working requirements and application), the technology used to build it, the people involved in its creation and alteration (its architects, builders and craftsmen), and its design (style and ornamentation). Interpreted knowledgeably, evidence from each of these areas can provide information that is important to the urban historian.

The use of standard plans rather than local design for the construction of a commercial building in an established area, for example, speaks of cultural importation and absentee control as well as providing a contemporary opinion on the character and prospects of the building's location. The appearance of prefabricated building parts may have fatal implications for local industry, or may conversely provide an example of the conditions and means which permit a city to expand its hinterland. The degree of traditionalism and conformity in the design an ethnic group chooses when it constructs a building for its association vividly summarizes the ease with which it has integrated into the community.

It is time building evidence — both primary and secondary — played a major role in the interpretation of urban history. Because buildings are such a central part of the urban concept, building evidence contributes essential perspective to the understanding of the urban ethos. Its potential as a source has barely been touched.