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Architect Peter Dickinson and Docomomo

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ARCHITECTURE

MODERNITY IN ARCHITECTURE, ARCHITECT PETER DICKINSON AND DOCOMOMO

“The very word ‘modern’, expresses something continuously shifting, like the shadow of a person who is walking.”

Paolo Portoghesi, 1982

Peter Allgood Dickinson, a relatively unknown architect, was rediscovered a few years ago by Toronto critic, Adele Freedman. Dickinson has emerged as a significant contributor to the Canadian architectural landscape.

To better inform Montrealers of the Dickinson legacy, a public colloquium was held last December, 1995, at Embassy Row Apartments; one of nine architectural projects realized by Dickinson, in Montreal, between 1958-61. It was jointly coordinated by artist and critic, John A. Schweitzer, of the John A. Schweitzer Foundation, as a part of its lecture series on art and architecture, and Docomomo secretary, Michèle Picard; Docomomo, the acronym indicating, the DOcumentation and CONservation of buildings, sites, and neighbourhoods of the MODern MOVement.

The event included three lectures and an accompanying exhibition of photographs by Alain Laforest.

It is very well known by now, that the once proud Modernist Movement was eventually dismissed as “boring”, “mindless”, “inhuman”, at best “impersonal”. It was superseded by the Postmodernists, which, in architectural terms, meant the will to reassign value to the forms of the past. Beauty, truth, even divine origin were esteemed as implicit and self evident virtues, restricted to the Classical form. Postmodernism, in other arts, implied ironic appropriation. In architecture, however, it implied historical quotation and revivalism.

It was the ubiquitous use of arches, domes, Roman pantheons, columns and Gothic spires, that had people speculating if it was just the “pastness of the past that is recalled” rather than genuine reverence for it, with a real understanding of the epoch and its ethos.

Whatever the case, the much maligned Modernist legacy today experiences a renaissance of interest. Docomomo, an international organization with national affiliates, shares the common vision that Modern Movement buildings form and important part of our social and cultural heritage.

The Docomomo mandate is to promote the exchange of ideas in the field of Modern Movement architecture and urban design, to stimulate public interest, to provide documentation and proper management and conservation, where appropriate.

In Quebec, the Docomomo branch has safeguarded the integrity of Mies Van Der Rohe’s Westmount Square, in the face of controversial renovation. Other sites and buildings in Quebec have received attention through lobbying; including the Québec Pavillion for EXPO 67 and Dickinson’s own CIBC tower. There are now exhaustive bibliographic and photographic records.

Dickinson, the subject of Docomomo’s latest publication, was born in Suffolk, England in 1925. In the 1940’s, he studied at the Architectural Association in London. He arrived in Canada to work as chief designer at Page & Steele, a position he retained for 8 years, before establishing his own firm, Peter Dickinson Associates.

Dickinson’s first affirmations of Modernism were first realized in Toronto. In a milieu still dominated by an architectural praxis entrenched in conservatism, he aligned himself with independent developers, who were progressive enough to “go modern”.

His prolific eleven year career produced office towers, institutional and apartment buildings, motels and residences.

Guy Besner, of the School of Architecture at the University of Quebec, traced the history of Modernist architecture in Montreal, thus contextualizing Dickinson’s own contributions. The first Modernist precursors were seen at the turn of the century.

Briefly, the first apartment buildings, like the Linton, built 1906, were massive, monumental structures, modelled after the European *château*. As collective residential buildings, their design was meant to free the bourgeois homeowner of the chores of upkeep, meanwhile providing all the amenities and comforts of a grand hotel.

The apartment tower, which appeared after the first world war, signaled the true great break with the past. The early residential collectives were transformed into the geometric, abstract forms that we know today. They were founded on the revolutionary vision of art and architecture in an industrialized society.

Eventually, the International Style, arose, characterized by its emphasis on volume rather than mass, and by a structural system emphasizing horizontality and/or verticality. Other familiar criteria were the abundant use of glass facades for natural light and the use of standardized building materials such as steel, aluminum, and concrete.

The Modernist temper, relying on innovation and invention, excluded ornamentation and historical reference.

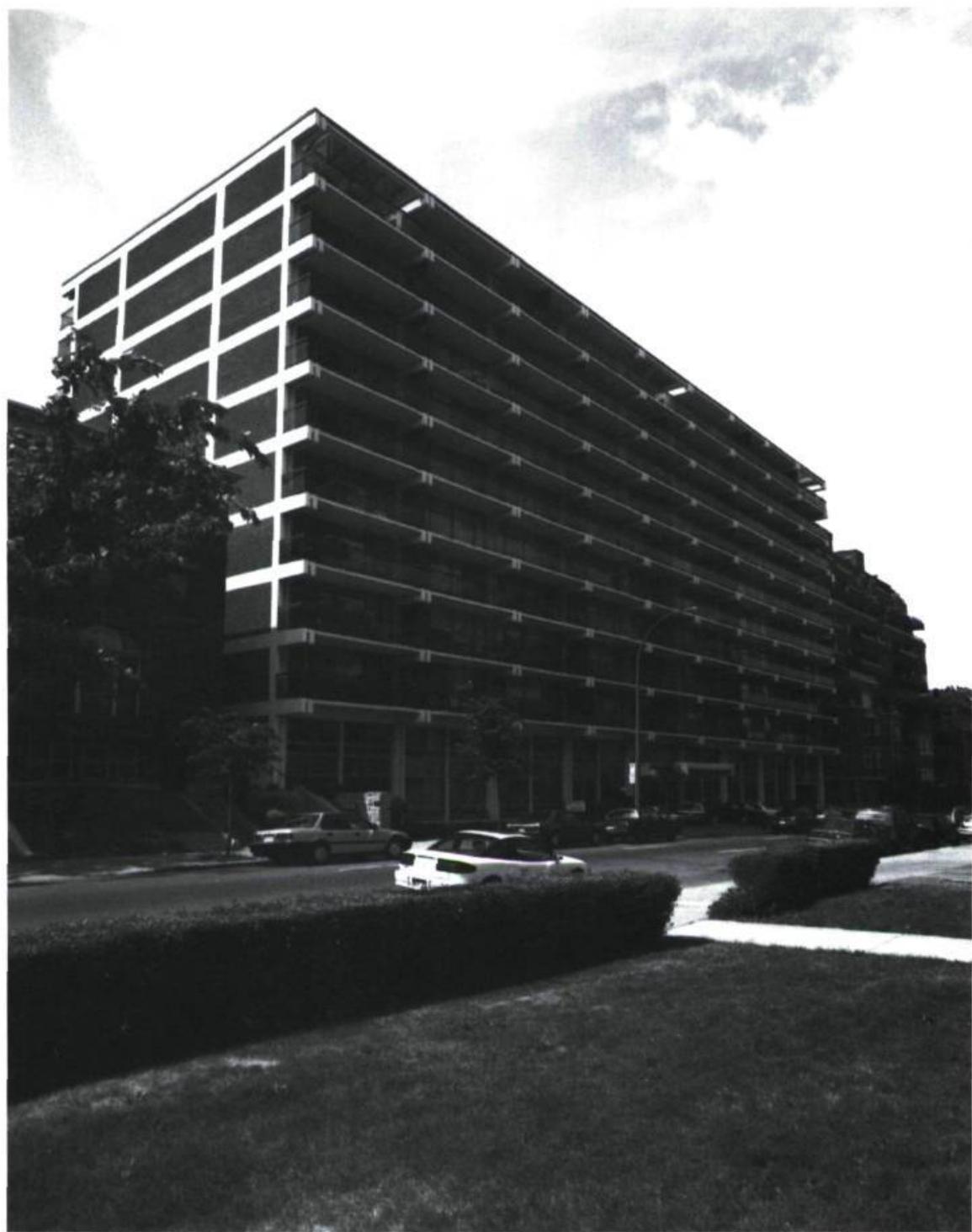


PHOTO: RICHARD-MAX TEMBLAY

Peter Dickinson, *Embassy Row* (façade), 1961-1962. Courtesy Fondation John A. Schweitzer.

Dickinson's Embassy Row Apartments were completed in 1962; a year after his death, at 35.

An exposed concrete frame, clearly outlines both the north and south facades of the building. The concrete beams have been left visible, as a result of economic consideration; it was cheaper to build a frame by pouring the concrete on site rather than use precast concrete. And the required simplicity of formwork for economical poured concrete influenced the final design. The final effect was at once simple yet expressive, elegant yet monumental. This new structural system was one that defined the building's volume, and into which, all other building details, like the cantilevered concrete balconies, were incorporated.

Uninterrupted bays of windows line the full length of north and south facades, to allow a maximum of natural light.

Wooden balustade railings and continuous balconies accentuate horizontality. They presented a feature not permitted by existing by-laws. Twenty-five percent of the surface area of a facade was the maximum permitted coverage. The control was lifted, allowing the present design.

Many new apartment structures have been erected, few of which respect the older standards of a sophisticated neighbourhood known for its patrician residences, mansions, and consulates. To preserve the character of the neighbourhood, new by-laws were enacted to control development in terms of floor-index ratios, land coverage, and location of buildings.

The interior plan is organized around a central corridor on the long axis of the building. Individual apartments are oriented on the north and south sides of the corridor. Fulfilling the Modernist strategy towards rational and func-



PHOTO: RICHARD-MAX TREMBLAY

Peter Dickinson, *Embassy Row* (lobby), 1961-1962. Courtesy Fondation John A. Schweitzer.

tional design, service areas, like kitchen and bathroom face the corridor, while spacious living areas line up along front and back facades with large window treatments, allowing maximum light. Design is smooth, regular, and modular.

Curtain walls of glass and rosewood, two storeys high, create a piano mobile effect. The central hallway connects the front of the building to the rear outdoor courtyard, elevated pool, and terraced gardens. The overall effect is one of lightness, expansiveness, and smooth spatial continuity.

And as Ricardo L. Castro, Associate Professor of Architecture at McGill University asserts, "In its strictest sense, the International Style offers a reductive approach to design, excluding as many materials as possible. Dickinson took a more inclusive path, using a variety of materials, such as various woods, slate, glazed brick, and fieldstone".

"He always mixed imaginatively to create unexpected yet subtle effects".

Since the late 1980s, architectural lectures, publications, design exhibitions, and newer building commissions have indicated a reversal in trend, and confirm new speculations about the potential of the nascent Neomodernist voice.

There may be valid reasons for the decline of the Postmodernist temper in the 1990's.

The principle of antiquity was that architecture serve a deity and the state.

The classical ideal was meant to reflect the traditional conception of an art that celebrated the given consensus, in politics, religion, and culture. The historical referencing of Postmodernist architecture was the attempt to reinvest the past with value.

And there is always the suggestion, that only in the past do we find authentic meaning. It is this absolutist claim to signification that shapes the overarching rhetoric of conservative agency.

This appeal to and legitimization of "a higher authority", becomes suspect in a contemporary society, with

social and economic patterns that neither resemble those of, nor could possibly be anticipated by, the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Given that a hierarchical, class-conscious past in no way resembles the polyvalent, mobilized democracies of today, the call to nostalgia becomes a rather less credible, more transparent, and ultimately questionable option.

Modernism, by its very nature, is at once innovative and disruptive. Historical chauvinism may very well be reluctant to reveal its true interventionist intent; its resistance to any and all disjunction and innovation.

Within a short span, we have seen our society transform itself from an industrial into an informational culture. Its population has carved out for itself, and still continues to do so, living and working modes that allow endless options. Revivalism may offer a certain sense of connection and security along the way, but are the classical notions of closure, certainty, and Platonic absolutes emblematic of this Postindustrial transformation?

It could be argued that the Modernist paradigm, itself a response to a century with an open, limitless field in art, architecture and science, would be eminently more suited to match the exponential proportions of the present moment. Claiming no finality, its very subscription to doubt and positive skepticism, permit the evolution of a new heterodoxy. Its modality allows us to choose, not to simply accept and endure.

Modernist reductionism can also be a most appropriate tool. Fiercely ironic reduction, deceptively paradoxical reduction, and serenely minimalist reduction, are exemplary of the rich and diverse parameters of Modernism that best express the complexity and contradiction of the 1990's. This vernacular, beyond style, is the best we have yet to express this openness, which surely must be part of any future agenda.

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