Document généré le 11 oct. 2024 23:36

Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

Richardson, Douglas with J.M.S. Careless, G. M. Craig and Peter Heyworth. *A Not Unsightly Building: University College and its History*. Toronto: Mosaic Press for University College, 1990. Pp. ix, 174. Index, notes, black and white and colour photographs, maps, plans, construction drawings. $29.95

Stan Loten

Volume 20, numéro 1, june 1991

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017568ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1017568ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)
1918-5138 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Loten, S. (1991). Compte rendu de [Richardson, Douglas with J.M.S. Careless, G. M. Craig and Peter Heyworth. *A Not Unsightly Building: University College and its History*. Toronto: Mosaic Press for University College, 1990. Pp. ix, 174. Index, notes, black and white and colour photographs, maps, plans, construction drawings. $29.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *20*(1), 52–53. https://doi.org/10.7202/1017568ar

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1991

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

holes. The drill hall was divided by toilets into two squares. A sign in between the toilets said WELCOME TO CANADA in seven languages. I told the nearest standing official that I was a Canadian. He told me, in German, to sit down."

John Bell has, however, succeeded in conveying the social particularity of Halifax, strikingly anticipated in the cover painting, Elizabeth Nutt's streetscape *Winter, George St., Halifax, N.S.* (1935). Welcome to *Halifax: A Literary Portrait.*

Sandra Campbell
Department of English
University of Ottawa

Richardson, Douglas with J.M.S. Careless, G. M. Craig and Peter Heyworth. *A Not Unsightly Building: University College and its History.* Toronto: Mosaic Press for University College, 1990. Pp. ix, 174. Index, notes, black and white and colour photographs, maps, plans, construction drawings. $29.95.

In my first year of Architecture at the University of Toronto I had to write a critique of a building. Rashly, I chose University College and unwisely neglected to condemn it with vigour. In the mid-fifties, eclecticism was not in favour and only the most vivid scholarship could gain a serious hearing. Douglas Richardson et al have not given us the kind of comprehensive critical account that would have commanded respect even in those dark heroic days. With this handsome volume, University College surely is now the most comprehensively treated individual work in the whole corpus of Canadian architecture.

In two short initial chapters, historians J.M.S. Careless and G. M. Craig outline the cultural and political cross-currents in which the proposed non-denominational university evolved from a highly contradictory enterprise of the 1820s to become, in the 1850s, the centrepiece of Toronto's civic pride and accomplishment. The building of University College, as the home for the University of Toronto, somehow overcame deeply entrenched sectarian self-interest, the peculiarly Canadian suspicion of extravagance in public building, and the mine fields of political convenience, to emerge as a symbol of cultural and urban aspirations. By some magic, University College became a temple, the building of which assured the future of the city in much the way Aldo Rossi, in *The Architecture of the City*, insists ancient Greek temples established Attic cities. When it burned in 1890, there was no question of its reconstruction, and scarcely less resolve to maintain the high standards of workmanship, materials and embellishment that had miraculously materialized in the original.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five, by architectural historian and College Archivist, Douglas Richardson, make up the heart of the book. Chapter Three reviews ambitious Neoclassic projects commissioned prior to the 1850s, presenting this work in numerous drawings never previously published. The first of these, Charles Fowler's scheme of 1829, was very conservative, dry and academic in character, planned on a grand scale, but utterly disregarding any consideration of local site conditions. He supplied an alternative, and equally gaunt gothic idiom for the same rigidly symmetrical quadrangles. His pavilion layout echoes Jefferson's earlier University of Virginia, but with none of the latter's muscular body, inventive detail and subtle adjustment to terrain. A later version of Fowler's classically-costumed proposition was developed by Thomas Young in the late 30s, and one residential unit of this scheme was actually built. In archive photos it looks strangely anachronistic, like the later Classical Revival of the 1920s.

Chapter Four deals with the evolution of Cumberland and Storm's design for University College more or less as we know it today. Interestingly, to judge from preliminary schemes discussed in this chapter, decisions regarding materials were side-stepped until the design had reached a high level of resolution. The vigorous Romanesque of this design was greatly influenced by Governor Head, Chancellor Langton, and senior faculty; it was not merely Cumberland's personal project. Nor can it be discounted as mere pastiche. The design was innovative, unprecedented, and demanding. More than thirty sheets of drawings were prepared for the south front alone, and drawing dates show that many details were revised repeatedly up to the last possible minute. In the end, construction began in haste and secrecy to forestall compromising the high standards envisaged.

Subtitled "A Manly, Noble Structure," Chapter Five provides a critical account of architectural substance, ideas and issues active in the design. These include such things as the unprecedented richness and variety of detailing, the lavish use of brilliant colour in windows and floor tiles. These respond to late 19th century Ruskinian ideals, and were contentious issues at the time, not so inevitably part and parcel of a Romanesque stylistic option as we frequently assume. Elaboration in Storm's design was driven by the Ruskinian command that "even the smallest detail should have a meaning or serve a purpose." Ironically, this ideal underlay mid-20th-century modernism which completely rejected these very

same details as both meaningless and useless, and caused me so much grief in my first year.

When completed, University College was received by the public of Toronto with an enthusiasm that no modern work has come anywhere near equalling. Not even Revell's City Hall gained quite the same level of public adulation. University College was declared "perfect," "the finest structure in Canada," and "the finest ... in the New World." Today, we long for such acceptance of innovative work, but rarely get it. Yet Storm ardently followed the Puginian theory that "every building that is treated naturally, without disguise or concealment, cannot fail to look well"—another mainstay of orthodox modernism. Somehow, 20th-century pursuit of this ideal has taken serious architecture so far away from cultural norms that the most ambitious work appeals to a small minority.

I rather suspect that both our rejection of eclecticism and our superficial return to it in Postmodernism are strongly influenced by a general lack of appreciation for the professionalism, dedication, and competence of the best nineteenth century architects. Richardson's account of University College well exemplifies the task of the critic: he provides access to the substance of the architecture, ideas and issues at levels not accessible to most observers. Reading Chapter Five, one can not see how the best 20th-century architects are clearly superior to Cumberland and Storm, either in the handling of technical details or in the understanding of and dedication to architectural ideals.

Richardson's treatment of University College enables us to understand this well loved building much better, both as an outstanding contribution to our discipline, and as a major event in the urban history of Toronto; certainly not as merely the work of an "easy going pasticheur." The book is a handsome, well-designed volume, profusely illustrated in colour as well as black and white, and a real bargain. University College, as it stands today, comes through in many fine photographs by John C. Wilson. Richardson's craftsman-like prose reads smoothly, like a well-told tale, or a fond reminiscence. After all, it is the content that counts, in writing as in building.

Stan Loten
Department of Architecture
Carleton University

Pearce, David. *Conservation Today*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. Pp. x, 245. Illustrations.

Conservation Today accompanied a major exhibition of the same name, launched in the spring of 1989 by the Royal Fine Art Commission at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. The author (and Deputy Director of the exhibition), David Pearce, had played a significant role in the conservation of Britain's architectural heritage as a co-founder and Vice Chairman of SAVE Britain's Heritage and as Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

The book is primarily a collection of case studies of the projects illustrated in the exhibition, but it is prefaced by a discussion of their legal, political and historical context. Together, this constitutes a thorough and well-documented history of heritage conservation in Britain since 1975.

In his introduction, Pearce identifies the mid-1970s as a time of fundamental change in attitude toward architectural conservation and cites 1975, European Architectural Heritage Year (EAHY), as a milestone in this early development. EAHY caught the imagination of a public disappointed with the results of post-war planning and housing policies, and it showed "a gentler way forward" which incorporated the preservation of historic buildings, conservation and adaptive reuse. Since that time, groups such as SAVE Britain's Heritage have campaigned to change legislation as well as attitudes. There is increasing awareness that monies spent on heritage more than pay for themselves in terms of tourism, job creation and other stimulae to the economy. There has been a shift in emphasis away from high style to "the charm of the nearly ordinary," and a corresponding fashion for nostalgia has evolved. There is also an increasing interest in conservation as a means of preserving and documenting social history. Changes in public opinion have been reflected in changing governmental and corporate attitudes, and the results—some successful and some not—are illustrated in the case studies which comprise the main body of the book.

Conservation Today is quite pointedly *not* addressed to a specifically professional audience but, according to the author, to any and all who have an interest in protecting and maintaining the built environment. His stated aim is to reinforce the current general approval of the retention and reuse of old buildings and to "remove ... the remaining sense of mystery about the shaping and reshaping of the familiar environment." His audience, while broadly based, is nonetheless geographically quite specific. Pearce details the history of architectural conservation and adaptive reuse in Britain and illustrates it with home-grown examples. There is no attempt to place this information in an international context, yet it can easily be appreciated for the context it provides the Canadian reader who is involved