

Of Data Sets and Mind Sets — A Critical Review of Recent Writing on Canadian Architectural History

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linguistic interchange and play. Modifying a view of assimilation which makes competing languages seem like Sohrab and Rostum or Othello and Desdemona, murderer and victim, such a change in emphasis should give the whole view of linguistics a different tone.

LEWIS J. POTEET

Of Data Sets and Mind Sets — A Critical Review of Recent Writing on Canadian Architectural History

AMID THE SPATE OF "NEW" HISTORIES that have emerged in recent years has come a heightened interest in our material past and most especially our 'built landscape' or architectural history. The fascination with the past which is part of a new Canadian self-consciousness, disillusionment with contemporary patterns of mass residential design, and a period of unparalleled prosperity expressed in no small part through one's housing, have combined to give older buildings a special value and mystique particularly among large numbers of middle class Canadians.

Accordingly, older houses and historic buildings and even whole neighbourhoods have come to be renovated, restored and reproduced in abundance. Individuals, organizations, institutions and various levels of government have been galvanized into action as advocates of preservation, and a great deal has been done to arrest the deterioration and destruction of older buildings, thereby ensuring that there will be a material legacy to pass on to future generations. These efforts have made our extant architectural past a saleable commodity and have captured the imagination of a broad segment of the public in a way unmatched by most other forms of history. In the process a wide range of writing on historical architecture has been generated to serve this movement and this market.

An examination of the comparative flood of recent works reveals a varied and confusing set of investigative responses to the problem of understanding both the artifact itself and the processes that have produced it. It is evident that practitioners of architectural history have been drawn from several quarters and not surprisingly a great range of research approaches and objectives have been implemented. As yet there is no coherent research methodology, let alone an accepted vocabulary or framework for arriving at a full appreciation of these structures. Nevertheless, it is possible in Canada to identify two separate scholarly traditions now engaged in the study of our building history. Each gives evidence of a distinctive mind set in terms of both the building types judged worthy of study and the intellectual orientation necessary for interpretation.

The first of these traditions arises from academic Art History though, as will

be evident, leadership in this field now lies predominantly with the “public historians” of Parks Canada and related government agencies. The second tradition is more heterogeneous, consisting loosely of folklorists, cultural geographers, historical archaeologists, and social historians. In boldest outline the essential difference between these two camps stems from the art historians’ preoccupation with “high style” — the architecture typically executed by professional architects for wealthy patrons including government and the church, and the second group’s desire to understand the much larger array of common domestic structures erected by and for ordinary people, and more recently by building contractors.

These latter buildings now have come to be known in the literature as either folk or vernacular architectures depending upon their relative place in the transition from simple traditional forms to the more complex architectural responses which incorporated plan and design ideals associated with the modern “popular” culture.¹ During the 19th century and especially in North America, the folk-inspired building traditions gave way to the vernacular as manufacturing methods and materials and new designs mimicking high style housing produced a more homogenized “international” housing product. Here and there these standardized houses might develop a regional idiom or veneer in the hands of local contractors using locally popular materials. But because housing ideals and fashions were increasingly derived from widely circulating builder’s manuals, the dwelling ceased to be an indicator of ethnic or cultural origin but rather became a diagnostic of one’s social class and popular cultural values.

Those who study folk and vernacular buildings have found it intellectually and practically desirable to distance themselves from the terminology and research methods of the other camp. Instead, they have emphasized the connections between the functional requirements of form, the degree of continuity between old world and new in the implementation of cultural patterns (of which buildings are but a part), and the general socio-economic forces that have determined building cycles. For these scholars, the building is studied more as a cultural artifact than as an objet d’art to be judged by the degree of success in the academic performance of design.

Those who follow that art history tradition are well represented in the literature that has emerged recently. Three small monographs from Parks Canada’s series of Studies in Archaeology, Architecture and History published in 1984 are of this genre. They are: Natalie Clerk, *The Palladian Style in Canadian Architecture*, Leslie Maitland, *Neoclassical Architecture in Canada*, and Janet Wright, *Architecture of the Picturesque in Canada*. Three other volumes in the same series are more specialized studies: Margaret Carter, ed., *Early Canadian Court Houses*, Bruce W. Fry, “An appearance of strength” — *The Fortifications of Louisbourg*, 2 vols., and Margaret Archibald, *By Federal*

1 A useful introduction to the approach is Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, *Common Places — Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (Athens, Ga., 1986).

Design: the Chief Architect's Branch of the Department of Public Works, 1881-1914.

The first four studies listed above derive from and depend heavily upon the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings (CIHB). This project, initiated in 1970 and now maintained by the National Historic Parks and Sites Branch of Parks Canada, set out to create a standardized and computerized data set of architectural details for some 189,000 surviving buildings constructed prior to 1914. It was presumed that the inventory would provide an incomparable national base for interpretive studies of architectural development and be a vital resource for preservation efforts. As the first analytical studies to appear for public consumption since the initiation of the project, these volumes might be expected to offer a great deal of new insight. Unfortunately they achieve more modest results.

The three stylistic studies (Clerk, Maitland and Wright) adopt a similar format. In a brief introductory essay, consideration is given to the European origins of the artistic movement, its design canons and practices, and its leading advocates. The authors also trace the arrival of the style in Canada. The remainder of each volume is a compendium of selected examples of the style grouped by functional category, i.e. public and commercial buildings, domestic buildings [houses], and religious buildings. For each example, there is a half-tone photo and a brief entry summarizing the known information about the date of construction and the architect. Significantly, the architectural analysis rests almost exclusively on the exterior appearance of the façade; the plan of the building and interior decoration and structural solutions receive no comment. At best then one is left with volumes that may help the user develop a better eye for these styles — at least from the roadside. They do not take the reader much beyond these superficialities. Moreover, for the careful observer there will be an added frustration; few of the buildings treated in these volumes are to be seen with any frequency on the landscape. Quite simply, the reality of commonly encountered buildings does not accord with what one reads about on these pages. Herein lies a major problem with the approach.

In spite of the enormous array of examples that must rest in the CIHB data set, the selection of buildings finding their way into these “interpretive” studies is very limited. The problem is not simply one of publication constraints. Instead, what results is the inevitable product of the inherent elitism of the art historian’s approach. Exceptional buildings abound — mansions and merchants’ town houses, legislative buildings and cathedrals dominate. Few ordinary buildings, either churches or houses, find a place here and with good reason, for invariably they cannot be connected conveniently or consistently with the style movements in question. Those few prosaic examples that do appear seem out of place, and the commentary becomes noticeably strained. It is evident too that the reason they are included at all is due to the idiosyncracies of the computerized data base. Because the data base is designed to recognize pieces of a building, pieces

classified by their likeness to the high style vocabulary, it follows that the researcher can call forth all buildings showing any element of classicism, for example. Thus in cases where a builder or renovator, at some point in the past, chose to employ a representation of a classical column or cornice, however modestly rendered, and however partial, or ambiguous, or incongruous within the overall design aesthetic of the building, the computer has uncritically thrown these anomalous buildings together with fuller and more pure replications of the style. Given the mind set preoccupied with stylistic analysis, the authors are compelled to respond to these imperfect and hybrid examples. Such are the risks of universal data schemes which lack a discriminating conceptual design.

In retrospect then, it is evident that there have been problems with this data base. The initial collection of data was carried out rather quickly using a large force of short term helpers whose skills and training were frequently limited. Data collection was made to conform to the computer coding imperatives of the project and thus had the effect of disaggregating the artifact into small details without sufficient concern being given to recording or understanding the architectural ensemble or total composition of the building. Nor were structural technique, interior plan, or site parameters detailed in this initial survey. As a consequence of this approach, it has been possible to generate large volumes of data about the numbers and locations of buildings with similar window forms or roof configurations, but it is almost impossible to use the computer print-out to make sense of a single building or achieve the kind of interpretive work that should come from such a source. Too often it seems the promise of a supra-documentation scheme or institutionalized scholarly mega-project falls flat, and one applauds again the achievements of solitary researchers labouring slowly and carefully on their own research agenda.

It is interesting to note how the CIHB contrasts in concept and approach with efforts undertaken in other countries. The Americans, for example, have for the past half century evolved a "national register" of historic buildings by means of their Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) programme. Unlike the universal approach taken in Canada, buildings can only be entered into the register through a process of "nomination" requiring a careful and prescribed documentation process by acknowledged scholars. To overcome the seeming bias toward exceptional buildings, or those of great historical personages, the nomination process increasingly has come to recognize the importance of admitting representative types of local and regional folk and vernacular buildings. Structural details, use of building materials, and subsequent alterations are carefully noted, and may in fact be the basis for entry to the register. In addition to the national register, several states have created parallel systems to expand the number of buildings that may be entered into such a file. In all cases the emphasis is on viewing the entire building as a living document that cannot be disassembled into a collection of component parts.

Not surprisingly the CIHB staff have had to return to the field and initiate

other types of recording exercises in fulfilling their mandate of bringing understanding to these pre-1914 structures. The other studies in the series (Carter, Fry, and Archibald) are more focused studies and give some evidence of this alternative analysis. In *Early Canadian Court Houses* six amply illustrated regional essays analyze the history and architecture of the nation's court buildings, including many now destroyed or significantly altered. An important by-product of the work is the helpful overview of the major steps in the evolution of the respective judicial systems. In an appendix the volume provides a complete photo inventory of the surviving buildings along with salient details.

Because court buildings appeared early as necessary structures and important symbols of public order, their erection established a revealing chronological and stylistic gradient which marks out the locus of institutional development. This pattern produced in each colony a recognizable architectural prototype that came to have wide currency within the province whereas there is often little visual likeness between the court architecture of neighbouring provinces or other provinces at the same point in time. For example, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia embraced the neoclassical "temple" style, albeit built simply in wood, while Prince Edward Island opted for a spartan gothic building hardly distinguishable from rural churches. In Ontario, where county government became an important force in the mid-19th century, older court houses were invariably replaced by larger and more pretentious stone or brick buildings that combined under one roof county administrative and judicial functions, and frequently included the gaol facility.

By the latter part of the 19th century the responsibility for the design of many of these and other public buildings, particularly in the western provinces and territories, fell to the Dominion government. Archibald's brief essay *By Federal Design* documents the forces and the actors producing a more standardized institutional style, a process that homogenized several types of public buildings into a few adaptable forms. Thus by 1900 a process was in place that has tended to eliminate regional aesthetic variation to the point where national public architecture in the 20th century is notable principally for its consistent blandness.

Fry's study of Louisbourg is the most ambitious and intensive of the series in that a single architectural feature — the fortification — is studied. In what is really an extended essay (there are no chapters), Volume One traces the impact of gunpowder on European warfare and analyses the development of the bastion fortress system between the 14th and 18th centuries. The rest of the volume is given over to a discussion of the planning and execution of Louisbourg's defenses as understood from the documentary and archeological research generated by the reconstruction. Volume Two contains the more than 250 illustrations referenced in the text of Volume One. Some will find the separation of text and picture an annoyance, but it does allow one to review several illustrations without losing touch with the text. Volume Two can also stand on

its own since each illustration carries an adequate descriptive caption to allow most readers to avoid purchasing the preceding volume.

Fry succeeds admirably in his task but one cannot help but think that he has given us more than we will ever need to know about bastion construction in Canada. Louisbourg's reconstruction has inevitably given rise to a remarkable amount of very detailed research reporting. For a settlement that was a brief, transitory and very atypical phase in the settlement of the region, it has commanded an enviable amount of our scarce collective research attentions and dollars. Moreover, given that Louisbourg's history is more centrally bound up with the fishery, it would seem that an analysis of the architectural and social composition of the town within the walls would have greater relevance to most readers of this literature. One can only hope that Parks Canada will soon follow this study with others that will help us to understand how merchants and more ordinary folk adapted their building practices to the conditions and circumstances of Isle Royale. Only then will we be able to begin to assess whether there are enduring connections between this transient episode and what has transpired since.

Two studies of Quebec City come closer to answering these kinds of needs. They are: A.J.H. Richardson, Geneviève Bastien, Doris Dubé and Marthe Lacombe, *Quebec City: Architects, Artisans, and Builders* (Ottawa, National Museums of Canada, 1984) and Christina Cameron and Monique Trépanier, *Vieux Québec — son architecture intérieure* (Ottawa, National Museums of Canada, 1986). Both studies also derive from the work of the CIHB. Taking advantage of Quebec's rich notarial records, which preserve the very detailed builders' contracts, the authors of these volumes seek to convey the development of the building craft sector and the form buildings took in this important urban place in the three centuries prior to 1914. However, in spite of brief introductory essays, both volumes are conceived principally as inventory documents. *Quebec City: Architects, Artisans and Builders* reveals the recent trend among architectural historians to identify and write biographies of members of the architectural profession. A number of graduate theses and at least one biographical dictionary project have been launched with this objective in mind in recent years. As a biographical dictionary of the Quebec City building trades, Richardson *et.al.* have created a useful and revealing reference work. Care has been taken to describe and to show graphic illustrations of important architectural achievements for each entry. But equally important, the biographical sketches indicate the business and familial connections between individuals. As the authors note, there appears to be a high degree of occupational continuity over several generations within some families, and marriage connections and a cohesive residential pattern among these people within the city sustained a guild-like social, economic and geographic fabric that recalls the old world more than the new. Indeed, there is reason to believe that many of these people were recruited in Europe to fulfil the building requirements of the colonial

community and that this ensured the transference and continuation of a selection of techniques and stylistic elements. This is tantalizing stuff, and it demands a fuller treatment if we are to understand the process of architectural innovation and change in this setting, and in other communities in eastern North America. The volume by Cameron and Trépanier is less illuminating, being instead a photo documentary of decorative elements. Citations are brief, noting locational information, the originator of the building and its decoration; a brief introductory essay outlines the nature and evolution of the main types of decorative element, eg. balusters, newels, stringers, moldings, rosettes, etc. A truly complete analysis of design is thus not intended and the reader is left to admire the photos without effective guidance.

Another book combining a community focus and a house by house inventory approach is Irene L. Rogers, *Charlottetown — The Life in its Buildings* (Charlottetown; The Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 1983). This book falls into the genre of “popular” historical architectural writing that has become common in recent years.² Rogers takes the reader for a walk through the streets of Charlottetown, stopping before each building and row to recount the history of the building and its occupants. Intended as a popular guide book, its anecdotal entries stress the people and past glories of the city, and in this it succeeds admirably. As an architectural study of Charlottetown it is unsuccessful. There is no attempt to analyze the buildings systematically; indeed, architectural concerns are rarely even broached. Rather the reader is left to assess the building from a vantage point on the sidewalk and must be content with the biographical details of the building. As useful as this approach is at suggesting the social morphology of the community, it tends to elicit more questions than it answers, and many readers will be frustrated by the lack of thematic and analytical rigor.

But what of work illustrating the other cast of mind? One new series produced by the Historic Resources Branch of the Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation demonstrates that it is possible for government agencies to produce innovative interpretive studies while still appealing to a “popular” audience. These are three volumes by David K. Butterfield and Edward M. Ledohowski: *Architectural Heritage — The Brandon and Area Planning District*, (1983), *Architectural Heritage — The Eastern Interlake Planning District* (1983) and *Architectural Heritage — The MSTW Planning District* (1984).

The studies are organized on the basis of regional planning districts, a seemingly arbitrary and artificial geographical basis for architectural and cultural analysis but one that appears to work in this case. However, what is significant is the easy and unashamed appreciation of the folk and vernacular nature of the human imprint on the rural Manitoba landscape. Each of the

² Examples of this work are the “Seasoned Timbers” and related volumes produced by the Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia. Also see: Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Homesteads — Early Buildings and Families from Kingston to Toronto* (Toronto, 1979).

monographs summarizes the results of a detailed field survey and inventory by illuminating representative examples of houses, farm buildings, and public and commercial buildings. Ample attention is paid to structural technique, to plan and interior detail, and to the utilitarian considerations and cultural antecedents inspiring the builder. The ethnic complexities of early Manitoba receive full play in these volumes; what emerges is the cross fertilization that takes place as different cultural strands trade ideas in the course of solving basic sheltering problems. Manitobans wishing to understand and celebrate their architectural heritage can do so without having to extrapolate from singular and isolated high style architectural ideals to the familiar reality they see around them. Evidently Manitoba's Historical Resources Branch feels comfortable with the plain and simple architectural achievements of its early settlers, and the authors of these studies have also avoided romanticizing the people and processes that produced this landscape.

Finally, two rather different books are especially welcome precursors of what one hopes will be a growing literature. They are: Thomas C. Hubka, *Big House. Little House, Back House, Barn — The Connected Farm Buildings of New England* (Hanover, N.H., University Press of New England, 1984) and Paul-André Linteau (translated by Robert Chodos), *The Promoters' City — Building the Industrial Town of Maisonneuve, 1883-1918* (Toronto, James Lorimer, 1985).

Hubka, himself an architect, is part of a new generation of that profession who have looked to ordinary buildings as a source of design inspiration but also as part of the American architectural landscape to be understood and celebrated. In a sensitive and richly illustrated book, Hubka carefully dissects the buildings making up the typical farmstead of northern New England. The discussion of houseplan, of construction technique and sequence, of environmental adaptations and seasonal rhythms of work, and of the economic and social forces that entered into the development of the farmstead are especially instructive and well done. Moreover with only minor variation, the findings probably describe the pattern and dynamics that apply to the Maritime region as well. Hubka makes vividly clear that much of our rural architecture is organic; additions and deletions were made by each generation in response to changes in the life cycle, in economy and technology, and in social aspiration and individual whim. It is apparent too that there have been important building and re-building cycles in the past. Recently a number of scholars, especially those working in historical archaeology, have identified the period between the 1830s and 1850s as an important time of "renewal" along the eastern seaboard of America. There is much yet to be learned about the reasons for and dimensions of the phase.³

³ One of the leading exponents of this notion is James Deetz, an archeologist presently excavating the Flowerdew Hundred on the James River of Virginia. While results of this work have yet to be published, similar work can be seen in Bernard L. Herman, "Delaware Vernacular: Folk Housing in Three Counties", Camille Wells, ed., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (Annapolis, Md., 1982), pp. 179-194.

Nevertheless Hubka makes a significant contribution by reconstructing the decisions taken by individuals during this period in a series of detailed case studies. This is then an important book with as much to intrigue readers interested in rural economy and society as those concerned with architecture. It might well serve as a model for a broader range of material culture studies.

Linteau's study of Maisonneuve is not explicitly a study of architectural development, indeed buildings are not specifically analyzed at all. Rather the purpose of the study is to understand the process of suburban growth and annexation during the period of industrialization. In 1883, the town of Maisonneuve was in reality a fragmented rural village given spatial definition and municipal status mainly because of its location adjacent to Montreal and because of the economic and political aspirations of a handful of nascent "developers". In the decades that followed, the efforts of these individuals gave form and substance to the community. The processes that the developers used, their political manoeuvres, the climate of boosterism and an unrestrained penchant for building civic monuments are masterfully reconstructed by Linteau. This then is the circumstantial stage on which much of our urban residential, industrial and civic architecture was constructed, and studies of this type are essential to a full appreciation of the built landscape. Architectural historians would do well to pay more attention to the institutional and settlement context in which the creative and building process occurred. Where Linteau succeeds most impressively is in delineating the complexities of motivation — the intertwining of public and private goals, and in bringing to light a class of French Canadian capitalists actively participating in a process assumed to be the preserve of anglophones in Quebec.

It would be easy to make exaggerated claims for the importance of studying objects made in the past. On the one hand, they are a revealing and often very sensitive indicator of a past way of life, especially because of the symbolic and aesthetic values that came to be articulated within the object itself. But on the other hand, they do require a different type of "literacy" if they are to be read accurately and provide purposeful insights. It cannot be assumed that every would-be reader of these artifacts will enjoy the same ability to discern and make sense of the material object. It may be that it takes a certain visual acuity to effectively distinguish the composition and message of the object or complex of objects. As with the investigation of most historical documents, buildings and other material objects demand that the investigator be conscious of the social, economic and cultural context out of which the object arises. After all, the intellectual value of the object is in its capacity to enhance our understanding of this broader canvas; at the same time we cannot begin to fathom the object without some sense of the pattern scribed on that canvas. These links should guide both reader and researcher alike as further work on our architectural past unfolds.

PETER ENNALS