

Documents in Canadian Architecture

Edited by Geoffrey Simmins (Peterborough, Ont.,: Broadview Press, 1992). x, 293 p., refs. ISBN 0-921149-79-4 (paper), \$17.95.

Is the study of architecture primarily visual, or literary? Ideally, it is a balance of both, yet a balanced presentation is not always what students receive. Many undergraduate programs in art and architectural history stress the development of visual acuity above all else. And to be fair, if an undergraduate program accomplishes this, then something substantial has been achieved. Graduates of such visually-oriented programs learn to look at the world in a way that few others ever do. These fortunate ones come to see the richness and layering of meaning in the physical world around us that the blinkered book-readers do not see. Nevertheless, if visual analysis alone is stressed, then many undergraduates finish their program of studies with a superficial and inaccurate understanding of what constitutes architectural history and criticism. There is more to this discipline than an examination of the work of art itself, even if our understanding is supplemented by gleanings from a few secondary texts.

The fault for this imbalance lies not with the professors of art history, but with the inaccessibility of much of the primary resource material. There are few archives in this country, and the ones that do exist are often understaffed and discourage, if only passively, the undergraduate. And many archives still have not focused on architectural material. Even where architectural material abounds, finding aids and other user tools are often inadequate or completely lacking. Even published material — government reports, articles, books out of print — are difficult to obtain. We have a long way to go to improve the accessibility of the literary and archival material that is so essential to an informed understanding of our built heritage.

Professor Geoffrey Simmins tackles this problem of inaccessible documentary material in his recently published *Documents in Canadian Architecture*. Now, for the first time, students may have in hand a broad selection of documents, printed in a neatly-produced and inexpensive format. The range of documents presented is wide in scope. The book begins with a description of a Haida village, taken from an 1879 issue of the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*; it continues with excerpts from 19th-century books, newspapers, travel journals, government reports, and periodicals such as the *Ecclesiologist*, *Construction*, and the *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal*. For those who research in the field, many of the excerpts will be old friends; others are welcome, new friends. Any student using these documents in a thoughtful manner will come away with a firmer grasp of the process of design and construction in this country at various points in time.

While the documents themselves are useful, just as valuable are Professor Simmins' introductory comments. Preceding each selection, and group of selections, Simmins offers a commentary that sets out the historical context of the material, and explains the wider cultural and aesthetic trends into which the relevant excerpt fits. One example taken at random will here suffice. In the chapter entitled "Instant Towns in Western Canada," Simmins presents two excerpts from the *Catalogue of Patented and Ready-Made Houses* (pages 101-5). On their own, the selections are interesting, but their true significance is highlighted by Simmins' opening comments, where he explains the political decisions that shaped the settlement of western Canada, the socio-economic factors that affected the process, and the technological and aesthetic qualities of pre-fabrication. All of this information is presented in crisp, cogent English, free of jargon or convolution. Simmins explains in his introduction that he wants the documents to serve as discussion points for students, but he is too modest: his essays are in many cases as thought-provoking as the documents themselves. So engaging are the introductory essays that he has turned what at first glance is a straightforward reference work into a very readable book.

Book Review by Leslie Maitland

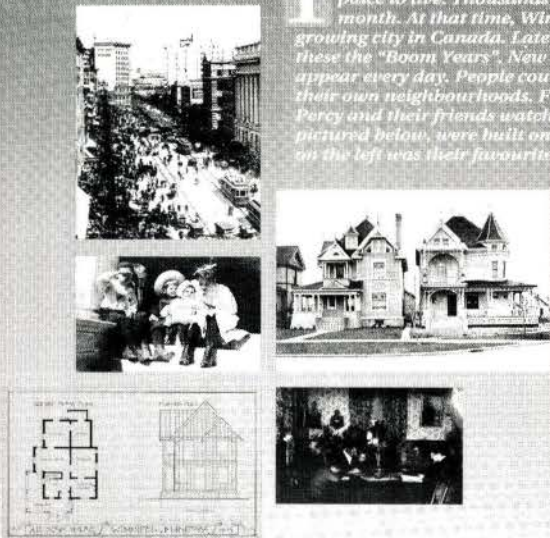
One could quibble about the choice of documents, but that would be pointless. I salute Professor Simmins' decision to be arbitrary. This is a selection to pique the interest of students: it is not a finding aid or an inventory, nor should it be judged as such. For the reader who wants more, short bibliographies follow each chapter.

But, greedy, greedy, one does always want more, and preferably in this handy format. The list of authors not cited is as long as those who were. Percy Erskine Nobbs, Ramsay Traquair, Eric Arthur, and Charles Baillairgé are only a few whose names are absent from this book. But do these omissions matter? Not a bit. If Simmins had made the book more comprehensive, it would not have been the compact, affordable work that it is, and its purpose of accessibility to the student purchaser would have been defeated. I mention these authors in the hope that the author and publisher will feel encouraged to print a supplementary volume.

Perhaps *Documents in Canadian Architecture* could be turned into a series...

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In the early 1900s Manitoba was a very exciting place to live. Thousands of people arrived every month. At that time, Winnipeg was the fastest growing city in Canada. Later, people would call these the "Boom Years". New buildings seemed to appear every day. People could see the changes in their own neighbourhoods. From their porch, Emily, Percy and their friends watched as two houses, pictured below, were built on their street. The house on the left was their favourite.




A MANITOBA HOUSE

Percy and Emily visited when the new family moved into the house. They loved all the richly detailed fabrics, woodwork and wallpaper. One day they saw drawings of the house. One drawing showed the floor plan. The other showed the skeleton of the house.

One day Emily and Percy made a list of some of the parts of the house. Here is their list.

1. verandah
2. column
3. pediment
4. bracket
5. dormer
6. cresting
7. finial
8. chimney
9. stained glass
10. foundation

You can also see these parts in the photograph of the house. Can you name any other parts? Are any of the parts on your own house? Have you seen any like them on other houses?



Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship Specific Resources

For more information, visit www.gov.mb.ca/culture or call 1-800-581-4444. Photography courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba and The University of Winnipeg.

This 22-inch by 36-inch poster is from the recently-produced *Discovering Manitoba Architecture: A Multi-Media Architectural Edukit*, produced by the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship. The Edukit — which in addition to posters includes a teacher's manual, Grade 3 and Grade 6 activity guides, historic building models, slides of Manitoba heritage buildings, and resource materials — is intended to stimulate students' interest in the importance of the built environment and to generate an appreciation of the unique role architecture plays in their community. The Edukit is available for \$38.15 plus tax from The Manitoba Textbook Bureau, 277 Hutchings Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba R2X 2R4 (stock # 51148).