

Recent Studies in Canadian Religious Architecture

By Leslie Maitland

Buildings for religious purposes, more than any one other building type, have been a focus of our interest in and concern for the past. For believers and non-believers alike, the church, synagogue, mosque, temple, and spirit house figure centrally in our image of who we are and from whence we come. These feelings are not limited to those of us in the heritage movement; far from it. Long before the present heritage movement—even long before the still-born heritage movement of the 1930s—the faithful of nearly every religious community have found a focus for their image of their past through the history of their parish or sect. While parish histories have figured centrally, the maintenance and understanding of that most concrete symbol of faith, the building in which worship takes place, have not been forgotten.

Compared to the very many parish histories that have been written over the past one hundred and more years, scholarly and general studies of Canadian religious architecture have been few indeed. Until this past decade, the writings of Traquair, Morisset, Toker, Gowans, MacRae, and Vieillette and White and a few others would not fill a library shelf. But since the beginning of the 1980s, that situation has changed dramatically. We now have a wide selection of studies of religious architecture—guide books, inventories, scholarly studies—to satisfy almost any reader's taste, and to serve as a solid foundation for further study in the field.

The decade opens with Kim Ondaatje's *Small Churches of Canada* (Lester and Orphen Dennys, 1982). This is an impressionistic, highly subjective piece, illustrated with evocative black and white photographs of a limited selection of small churches across the country. The photogenic qualities of the buildings seemed to be the only criteria for their inclusion in this book. The photographs make one want to know more about the buildings, but the texts are thin and tell us more about Ondaatje than the churches.

Regional guide books are a highlight of the decade. *Thy Dwellings Fair: Churches of Nova Scotia, 1750-1830*, by Allan Duffus, Edward MacFarlane, Elizabeth Pacey, and George Rogers, and the companion volume, *More Stately Mansions: Churches of Nova Scotia 1830-1900*, by Elizabeth Pacey, George Rogers, and Allan Duffus (Lancelot Press, 1982 and 1983 respectively), are really superior guide books. Each building is illustrated by several photographs, and a lengthy, meaty text written in an easy style combines parish history with architectural analysis. An appendix lists nearly 600 other buildings for the reader to scout out on Sunday drives, and there is a glossary to help the novice with some of the more arcane architectural terminology. H. M. Scott Smith's *The Historic Churches of Prince Edward Island* (Boston Mills Press, 1986) is of an equally high calibre. It is clearly organized, well written, and lusciously illustrated with excellent colour photographs. While his texts are briefer than those in Pacey, *et al*, his essays on construction and on the architects and builders give the reader a concise and informed vision of church building on the Island. His book also has what no good guide book should be without: a map.

Two scholarly works of this decade deserve particular attention. Madeleine Gobeil Trudeau's *Bâtir une Église au Québec: Saint-Augustin-de-Desmaures, de la Chapelle Primitive à L'Église Actuelle* (Libre Expression, 1981), is one of the best monographs of a single building ever written in Canada, and certainly ranks with Franklin

Toker's *The Church of Notre-Dame de Montréal* (McGill-Queen's, 1970). Trudeau traces the history of the four churches that have served this parish, from the earliest conception of the first chapel to the restorations of the most recent. She amplifies our understanding of a long and complicated history with good profiles of the evolution of this community. Archival photographs, prints, drawings, and plans help the reader trace the particularities of this project, while her text puts Saint-Augustin within the context of church architecture in Quebec in general. While the depth of her research might mark this work as an academic work intended for a small audience, Trudeau's eloquent and economical writing style makes this work accessible to a wider readership. Worth mentioning in particular are the schematic maps and site drawings she uses to help the reader visualize both the community and the building. Such maps are characteristic of Quebec architectural histories, and their inclusion is a practice that English Canadian writers would do well to imitate.

The other noteworthy scholarly work of this decade is one that, unfortunately, few will ever see. Robert Coutts of the Winnipeg office of the Canadian Parks Service has written a significant study of the history of St. Andrew's parish, Red River, 1830-1930. The research into the history of this parish, and of the building which is now a national historic site, is exhaustive. His conclusions are well-written and convincing. This study sheds new light on the history of this parish in particular, and of the role of the clergy in Red River in general, a subject which continues to fuel passionate debate. This report is expected to come out in microfiche form, and anyone with the patience to read the work in this tiresome format will be well-rewarded.

Reviews often overlook articles in learned journals, which I feel is a great pity; certain articles I will mention in this context. These are: Philip McAleer, "St. Paul's, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and St. Peter's, Vere Street, London, England," *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1984), pp. 113-136; Andre Laberge, "Un nouveau regard sur l'ancienne chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Sacre-Coeur de la Basilique Notre Dame de Montréal," *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1984), pp. 26-88; Andre Laberge, "L'église Saint-Francois-Xavier de Caughnawaga: une contribution au neo-classicism québécois," *Revue d'art canadienne*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1981), pp. 19-31; and Donna McGee, "St. Patrick's Church, Montreal: Sorting Out the Beginnings," *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 1987), pp. 7-9. Each of these studies examines the history of a particular building, not only to sort out its individual chronology, significance, and context, but also to examine the conclusions of earlier studies done, in some cases, many years ago. These re-examinations shed new light on the histories of these buildings, their authorship, and the meaning of their designs and decoration.

Only an historian's heart flutters with anticipation at the sight of a published inventory, but since there are probably historians reading this review, I will tell you about three recent inventories of church buildings. These are: Hélène Bergevin, *Les Églises protestantes* (Montréal: Libre Expression, 1981); Neil Bingham's *A Study of the Church Buildings in Manitoba of the Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian and United Churches of Canada* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage, and Recreation, 1986); and *Architecture Religieuse I: Les Églises* (Montréal: Communauté urbaine de Montréal, 1981). All three are organized in

a similar fashion, with introductory essays preceding short sketch histories of the buildings with a photograph or two. Since these works generally appeal to a more specific audience, one can forgive them their crude photographs. On the other hand, the quality of the research exhibited by all three works is first rate. The inventories all appear to be very thorough; surveys are the necessary prerequisite for further studies, and so volumes such as these are treasured by anyone working in the field of architectural history.

Looking over the excellent works described above, one is struck by a significant lack in Canadian scholarship in this field: all the works discussed above are concerned with the Christian architecture of the two founding nations. Where are the studies of synagogues, spirit houses, Sikh temples, Greek Orthodox churches, and others? Monographs on these subjects do not yet exist, even though these building types are long-established in our cultural landscape. A few articles fill the gap. Diana Thomas Kordan has written "Tradition in a New World: Ukrainian-Canadian Churches in Alberta," (*Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (March 1988), pp. 3-7). In this article, the author begins with some welcome comments on the misuse of the word vernacular: it is a word that is sloppily and thoughtlessly used. In the context of Prairie architecture, it has been used to categorize architectural traditions that fall outside those of the two founding nations. The author then outlines the historic origins of Ukrainian church architecture, explains which features were transferred to Canada, and why. Kordan balances successfully a description of general characteristics of an architecture that is centuries old, with examination of details and particularities of design. I certainly hope this article is the foundation for a future book.

In the same issue of the SSAC *Bulletin* as Kordan's article is Radomir B. Bilash's article entitled "Peter Lipinski, Prairie Church Artist." Bilash explains the stylistic origins of Ukrainian church decoration, its transfer to Canada, and the ways in which Lipinski interpreted these traditions. Bilash and Kordan have contributed significantly to our knowledge of an aspect of Canadian architectural history that has been too long ignored.

Robert Hunter of the Canadian Parks Service adds an important profile of Father Ruh to this trio of studies on Ukrainian church architecture ("Ukrainian Canadian Folk Architecture: The Churches of Father Philip Ruh," *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Selected Papers*, Vol. 5 (1982), pp. 24-29). A Belgian Oblate, Father Ruh served first in the Ukraine and then in Canada, leaving a significant mark upon our architectural heritage. Hunter's article examines Ruh's origins, the nature of his designs, and his attention to the decorative programmes as well as the architecture of the buildings he helped erect.

Malcolm Thurlby writes an ambitious stylistic analysis in "Nineteenth-Century Churches in Ontario: A Study in the Meaning of Style" (*Historic Kingston*, Vol. 35 (January 1987), pp. 96-110). He picks certain high points in Ontario church architecture, such as St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and uses these examples to illustrate the stylistic trends to which they belong. Thurlby's article reads like a good draft of a future book, which I sincerely hope it is.

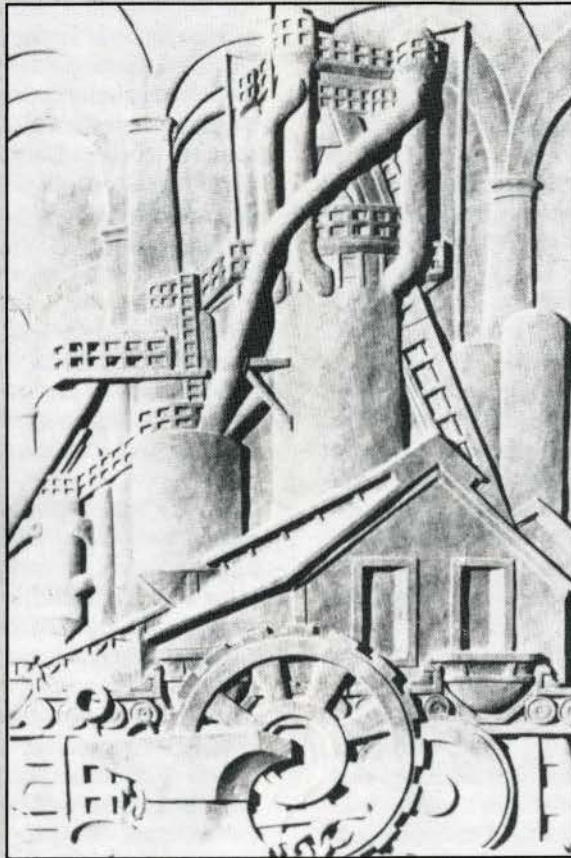
Three other SSAC *Bulletin* articles chart new ground, this time into the twentieth century religious architecture of the two founding nations. Claude Bergeron's "L'Architecture religieuse contemporaine

des Cantons de l'est: caractères et rayonnement," (Vol. 12, No. 1 (June 1987), pp. 3-8) draws our attention to the much-neglected church architecture of our own times. These buildings wrestle with the problems of liturgical requirements, traditional conceptions of what a church should be like (Gothic), and the new possibilities of expression made possible by the introduction of new techniques of construction. Bergeron's article assesses how successfully the churches of the Eastern Townships deal with these conflicting demands. In "Le Modernisme venu du Nord: les églises du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean," (Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 1988), pp. 9-21) Bergeron traces the economic, social, and cultural underpinnings of the radical church architecture developed between 1955 and 1967 in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region of northern Quebec. Christopher Thomas describes the work of a Toronto architect in "A Thoroughly Traditional Architect: A. W. Holmes and the Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto, 1890-1940" (Vol. 10, No. 1 (March 1985), pp. 3-9). Holmes was an architect who felt no need to face the expressive challenges of modern construction by re-interpreting the accepted style; he continued the historical revivalism of the nineteenth century well into the twentieth. It is well to remember that the history of twentieth century architecture is perhaps not as it has been interpreted, as an age of revolutionary changes. Certain historical forms continued to be built well into our times, for the simple reason that they continued to satisfy.

At the 1987 ICOMOS Conference held in Ottawa, Mr. Thomas Grant Browne drew attention to our serious lack of knowledge of religious stained glass work; I would add to that our lack of knowledge of the work of muralists, engravers, sculptors, carvers, and other artists who have also enriched these most evocative of our structures. These works are still considered "minor" arts. Ginette Laroche has recently completed an inventory of memorial windows in Quebec City churches, and one hopes that other, similar inventories are underway elsewhere ("Les Memorial Windows: une memoire de verre," *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1986), pp. 97-141). Janet Wright's *Our Lady of Good Hope, Fort Good Hope* (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1987) illustrates the remarkable cycle of paintings that ornament this chapel, which few will ever be fortunate enough ever to see. The decorative carving of Quebec church architecture has long been recognized for its artistic merit, but many significant works of art lie unacknowledged (or at least, not widely known) in our churches: the wood carving of St. Paul's, in Hamilton; Robert Harris' murals in All Souls', Charlottetown, the Indian carvings in Holy Cross, Skookumchuck, to name a few.

What do these works say about our present level of architectural historical scholarship? We seem to have come into an age of consolidation, at least insofar as our understanding of religious architecture is concerned. The period of initial enthusiasm generated at the beginning of the heritage movement is gone, replaced, as these works testify, by a willingness to work slowly and steadily at inventories and case studies, which are the nuts and bolts of our understanding. It may be years before a work appears that achieves some kind of synthesis of understanding. But if the intervening years are filled with works of a comparable nature to those cited above, the wait will have been worthwhile.

(The 1988 ICOMOS conference, held in Ottawa in late November, has taken "Sacred Heritage" as its theme. The topics included historic gardens and landscapes, archaeology, the vernacular, cultural tourism, wood, and other areas of interest. These topics and more are outlined in the 1988 theme issue of ICOMOS' newsletter *Momentum*.)



*A decorative panel from the Bank of Nova Scotia head office,
Halifax, Nova Scotia, John M. Lyle, architect, 1930 (see page 14).*

THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF ARCHITECTURE IN CANADA
SOCIÉTÉ POUR L'ÉTUDE DE L'ARCHITECTURE AU CANADA
P.O. BOX 2302, STATION D.C.P. 2302, SUCC. D
OTTAWA, ONTARIO K1P 5W5

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