

STARS, IMPORTS AND OTHER PHENOMENA

A Reflection on an Aspect of the Evolution of Architectural Culture in Toronto

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Some recent architectural controversy in Canada has focused on the fact that many of the major architectural projects completed in Toronto in the past decade have been designed by architectural firms based elsewhere. Pessimistic observers have even regarded this as ominous for the ongoing development of architectural culture here. Such projects as Will Alsop's Sharp Centre for the Ontario College of Art and Design, Daniel Libeskind's addition to the Royal Ontario Museum, and Frank Gehry's additions and alterations of the Art Gallery of Ontario are usually cited as cases in point. At a public event in Vancouver some years back, the author of this paper was even challenged by a Vancouver colleague to explain why so many of the important projects from the era in question were designed by out-of-town architects, when the questioner suggested, comparable projects built in Vancouver during the same period had largely been designed by locally-based architects. This short paper will seek to contextualize and historicize the discussion of this sensitive cultural question.

In the first instance, it is important to recognize that architectural firms based outside of Toronto have been designing buildings here for a very long time. For example, the fine 1911 headquarters building for the Bank of Toronto, located on the south-west corner of King and Bay Streets (until its demolition in the 1960s for the creation of the Toronto-Dominion Centre), was designed by the well-known New York firm of Carrere and Hastings (fig. 1).



FIG. 1. BANK OF TORONTO CIRCA 1913, DESIGNED BY CARRERE AND HASTINGS. | IMAGE COURTESY OF PEAKE AND WHITTINGHAM COLLECTION, THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA.



FIG. 2. THE CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN IMPERIAL BANK OF COMMERCE COMPLEX IN DOWNTOWN TORONTO, SHOWING TO THE RIGHT THE ORIGINAL HEADQUARTERS BUILDING OF THE CANADIAN BANK OF COMMERCE FROM 1929-1931, DESIGNED BY YORK & SAWYER FROM NEW YORK, WITH DARLING & PEARSON FROM TORONTO. | IMAGE COURTESY OF ESTATE OF WILLIAM DENDY AND OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.



FIG. 3. THE 1957 ADDITION TO THE PARK PLAZA HOTEL (RECENTLY RENOVATED BEYOND RECOGNITION), DESIGNED BY PETER DICKINSON DURING THE PERIOD WHEN HE WAS THE DESIGN ARCHITECT AT THE FIRM OF PAGE & STEELE. | IMAGE COURTESY OF CANADIAN ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVE, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.



FIG. 4. DESIGN SUBMITTED TO THE 1958 INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION FOR THE DESIGN OF A NEW CITY HALL FOR TORONTO, BY JOHN ANDREWS AND MACY DUBOIS. | IMAGE COURTESY OF HELGA PLUMB.

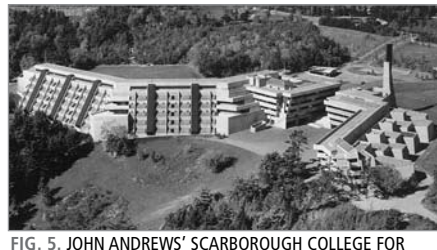


FIG. 5. JOHN ANDREWS' SCARBOROUGH COLLEGE FOR THE SCARBOROUGH CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, 1965. | IMAGE COURTESY OF KEN BELL, UNIVERSITY ADVANCEMENT AND UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS.



FIG. 6. STUDIO ADDITION TO CENTRAL TECHNICAL SCHOOL, TORONTO, BY MACY DUBOIS. | IMAGE COURTESY OF HELGA PLUMB.



FIG. 7. YORK SQUARE SHOPPING COMPLEX, TORONTO, 1968, DESIGNED BY A.J. DIAMOND AND BARTON MYERS. | IMAGE COURTESY OF ESTATE OF WILLIAM DENDY AND OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Similarly, the 1929 head office building of the Canadian Bank of Commerce (still standing today as Commerce Court East), just east of the south-east corner of the same intersection, was designed by the New York firm of York & Sawyer, in collaboration with the Toronto firm of Darling & Pearson (fig. 2).

Then too, Toronto has been welcoming architects as immigrants to this city for almost as long as it has had architects from elsewhere designing buildings here. Notable examples of such immigrants are Peter Dickinson (from Britain) in the early 1950s, John Andrews and Macy Dubois (from the United States) in the late 1950s, and A.J. Diamond and Barton Myers (also from the United States) in the late 1960s. First as a lead designer at Page & Steele Architects, and later in his own firm, Dickinson designed such major Toronto projects as the Benvenuto Place Apartments, the addition to the Park Plaza Hotel (fig. 3), and the Ontario Teachers College. John Andrews and Macy Dubois submitted a joint entry to the 1958 competition for a design for a new Toronto City Hall while they were students at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, and on the strength of their having placed as finalists in the competition at such a young age, moved from Boston to Toronto (Andrews being an Australian who was studying there) to launch their professional careers (fig. 4). Andrews went on to design such celebrated projects as the original Scarborough College for the University of Toronto (fig. 5), and Dubois, the studio addition to Central Technical School (fig. 6), as well as a new building for George Brown College's Casa Loma campus. For their part, Diamond and Myers, while in partnership, designed such unprecedented projects as the Dundas-Sherbourne housing project for the City Housing Department created during the David Crombie mayoralty, the

York Square retail complex in Yorkville (fig. 7), and a new headquarters building for the Ontario Medical Association. After the breakup of their partnership, A.J. Diamond went on to create numerous projects in Toronto, such as the city's downtown YMCA (fig. 8). For his part, Barton Myers designed—among many other projects—two much admired steel houses in Toronto (one of them for himself and his family, fig. 9) and the King James Place infill office complex on King Street East in Toronto.

Of this set of five distinguished immigrant architects in Toronto, two (Peter Dickinson and Macy Dubois) lived out the remainder of their lives in Toronto, two (John Andrews from Australia and Barton Myers from the United States) eventually returned to their home countries, and one (A.J. Diamond) continues to practice here (now in his late seventies). But each and every one of them made a profound contribution to architectural culture in the city. Dickinson remains to this day one of the two most admired pioneers of modernism in architecture in the city—competing for the top position in this regard only with one other contender, that being John B. Parkin Associates.

For his part, John Andrews not only designed canonical buildings such as Scarborough College in Toronto, as well as the new building for the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University (from which he had himself graduated in 1958), he also agreed in 1967 to take on the important academic responsibility of the chairmanship of the Department of Architecture at the University of Toronto, and launched a controversial pedagogical experiment that is much discussed to this day. Macy Dubois went on to design a whole series of admired buildings, including the Ontario Pavilion at Expo '67, as well as the much-loved

Scaramouche restaurant that continues to be housed in Peter Dickinson's Benvenuto Apartments building.

For their parts, A.J. Diamond and Barton Myers made what are among the most important contributions ever to the state of architectural and urban design culture in the city of Toronto, through their deeply engaged participation in the activities of the so-called "reform council" launched under the leadership of Mayor David Crombie in 1972. Myers's contribution to the culture is probably best summarized in the special issue of *Design Quarterly* from 1978 (edited jointly by Myers and myself, and entitled "Vacant Lottery"), focusing on the shifts in design culture in the city introduced during the Crombie era.¹ For his part, Diamond has gone on for many years to argue against the so-called "international star system" in architecture, and in favour of a commitment by architectural professionals in Toronto to a strongly local sense of responsibility to the public design issues in the city.

The obvious difference between the "stars" enumerated in the first paragraph of this text, and the "imports" discussed subsequently, in regard to the evolution of architectural culture in Toronto, is that the "imports" in question became, over time, deeply embedded in that culture and, in turn, subsequently contributed deeply to it, in ways that the "stars" in question could not, and did not do. There are probably a handful of historical cases of architects "from away"—as the Newfoundlanders would put it—who have contributed to the evolution of a local architectural culture anywhere in the world—I think for example of Philip Johnson who, on account of an ongoing series of commissions for residences in Houston and Dallas (TX) in the 1950s and 1960s, seems to have engendered



FIG. 8. THE DOWNTOWN TORONTO YMCA, 1985, DESIGNED BY A.J. DIAMOND. | IMAGE COURTESY OF DIAMOND & SCHMITT ARCHITECTS INTERNATIONAL.



FIG. 9. HOUSE AT 19 BERRYMAN STREET, TORONTO, DESIGNED BY BARTON MYERS FOR HIMSELF AND HIS FAMILY. | IMAGE COURTESY OF ESTATE OF WILLIAM DENDY AND OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

a local, Johnsonian architectural sub-culture, despite his being so definitively located in New York City himself. But such examples are, as far as I know, extremely rare. It certainly cannot be said that Alsop, Libeskind, or Gehry have made a sustained contribution to architectural culture here. Their episodes of recurring participation in such a culture to date have simply not been frequent enough, or extensive enough, for "embeddedness" to set firmly in.

Yet the fact that none of this group has contributed significantly to the culture of architecture in this city does not mean that that culture has not continued to evolve and mature. I want to conclude

this brief text with a few remarks on the question of the emergence of a “Toronto school,” or a “Toronto style” in architecture, such as has been discussed by Professor Rodolphe el-Khoury of the University of Toronto, in a conversation with the partners in the firm Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg, in a monograph on the work of that now very prominent Toronto firm. Interestingly enough, this is a firm whose partners are the four senior associates from the Toronto version of Barton Myers Associates; the four having decided to launch their own firm in the wake of Myers’s decision to relocate his practice to Los Angeles at the end of the 1980s. Avowedly deeply in debt to Myers’s architectural ideas, Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg have gone on to become a major firm in Toronto and in Canada in their own right, and it is not surprising that the term “Toronto style”—if it is considered to be applicable to any firm of architects—would be considered to be applicable to KPMB. At a minimum, it is clear that el-Khoury makes an interesting argument for the consequential development over time of the distinctive and consistent design production of the firm, not only in terms of its characteristic formal approaches to architecture and urban design, but also in its typical systems of fabrication, and its employment of a consistent stable of local suppliers of specialized building components.²

It is true, of course, that other commentators have expressed skepticism in regard to the perceptibility of this so-called Toronto style; hence it cannot be considered to be an accepted historical reality at the present time. Yet, that having been said, it is also true that a jury assembled for a recent annual Canadian Architect Magazine awards programme—a jury that happened

to include no representatives from Toronto—took it upon itself to shut Toronto almost entirely out of that particular annual round of awards, on the rumoured grounds that the designs submitted from Toronto that year were too alike, too familiar, and too predictable. A rumour such as this lends credence to the hypothesis that like earlier previous art-historical epithets such as “mannerist” and “impressionist,” the term “Toronto style”—if it ever does so definitively—will accrue its eventual historical status as much as a term of scorn as one of admiration. And whether their views are positive ones or negative ones, future interpreters of this debate will find themselves forced to ponder the extant state of architectural culture here, in order to justify their own position in the matter of any putative “Toronto style.”

Finally, a short—but I hope thought-provoking—commentary on the editorial policy of a very fine “local” architectural publication from Barcelona in the 1970s and 1980s: *Arquitecturas Bis*. Its editors made it their usual practice, when publishing a project or a book by a “local” figure, always to have the project or book in question commented upon by a notable “international” figure from outside the local Barcelona architectural scene. By the same token, projects and books discussed in the magazine that were from outside Barcelona were usually discussed by figures from that local scene. It has always seemed to me that this simple, yet ingenious editorial policy constituted a major contribution to the evolution of an influential—if indisputably “local” architectural culture in that important regional city. It seems to me that it is an example that we Torontonians might still be able to learn from—even a quarter of a century later.

NOTES

1. Myers, Barton and George Baird, 1978, “Vacant Lottery,” *Design Quarterly*, no. 108 (published by the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, Minnesota).
2. Kuwabara, Bruce, Tom Payne, Marianne McKenna, and Shirley Blumberg, 2004, “A Conversation with Rodolphe el-Khoury,” in Phyllis Lambert, Detlef Mertins, Bruce Mau, and Rodolphe el-Khoury, “The Architecture of Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg,” Birkhauser, Basel Berlin Boston, p. 211-215.