Reshaping the Canadian City: The Impact of American Modernism to 1967

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In his study on the impact of America on the development of modernity in Europe, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge 1893-1960*, Jean-Louis Cohen distinguishes between the two dimensions of the American model.[1] He differentiates Americanism, considered as a set of individual and collective attitudes and representations, from Americanization, which is the actual transformation of European and other societies in America's image. Americanism, Cohen underscores, is often equated with modernity, while Americanization is one of the principle modalities of modernization.

It was with these ideas in mind that Michèle Picard and I conceived the session we had been asked to chair on behalf of the SSAC at the 1997 annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians in Baltimore. We were interested in probing the American fact in Canadian modernism, choosing the context of the urban centre as a means of encouraging the widest range of paper topics. The point of the session, however, was not to simply document the influences of particular American architects, planners, or movements, but rather to see the underlying mechanisms at play in Canada's modernization. Moreover, we felt that 1967 was an appropriate end date for the session, for it was both the close of the country's first century, and the year of Montreal's Expo 67, which, as an architectural event, is generally accepted to represent a coming of age in Canadian modern architecture.

Perhaps nowhere is the duality of modernity/Americanization more apparent than in the context of the post-Second World War Canadian city. The impact of American planning models on the established centres of Toronto and Montreal in particular was increasingly evident in their configuration and appearance. In 1953 Metropolitan Toronto was created, and a year later the city opened its subway, the first new system in North America since the Depression. At almost the same time, and in a not completely dissimilar fashion as New York City under the leadership of Robert Moses, the planners of the City of Montreal began to replace the traditional city centre located near the port with a modern financial and commercial hub connected by new freeways and rail lines. In many respects, the infrastructure that was created in both cities during this period is the apparel of their modernity. The establishment of Montreal as an urban locus in the 1960s was recognized by Peter Blake, who declared it to be on the verge of becoming the first 20th-century city in North America.[2] At the same time, younger cities constructed their architectural identities, freely drawing from many sources for their own building images.

Architectural historians have made significant new contributions to the study of Canadian cities in the last few years. Included within these scholarly projects are two exhibitions/publications sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Architecture. The first, *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963*, curated by Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, characterized Vancouver's modernization as a symbiotic relationship between city-building and the city's burgeoning design culture. As Liscombe noted, without a longstanding architectural, cultural, or social establishment, Vancouver looked less to Canadian centres for its models and more to the American west coast, and to Britain, the combined forces of which made Vancouver, in Liscombe's words, "a fascinating example of cultural transfer."[3]

The second, *Montreal Metropolis 1880-1930*, jointly curated by Isabelle Gournay and France Vanlaethem, was an interdisciplinary research project on the evolution of the city into a major urban centre.[4] Contributions to the catalogue by experts in other fields, notably sociology, urban geography, and history, helped to situate the city's architectural developments within its economic, social, and cultural dimensions, all of which felt the impact of Americanization. As Gournay and Vanlaethem wrote, "the United States was an important source of architectural models, new building techniques, and architects ... and its ascendancy was a source of both fascination and anxiety."[5] By exploring the geography of influences, both of these exhibitions forced a reevaluation of national paradigms and experiences.

The questions underlying the SSAC session on the impact of American Modernism are not exclusive to the field of architectural history. Other disciplines, notably literary criticism, cultural studies, urban history, and geography, have also examined how American themes and images have penetrated Canadian urban environment and culture. Of these fields, research over the last twenty years by urban historians and geographers on the processes of urbanization has greatly advanced our understanding of the forces that shaped Canadian cities in the 20th century. In their 1986 comparative analysis of cities on both sides of the border, Michael Goldberg and John Mercer resisted the continentalist concept of the North American city; they argued instead that the markedly different economics, politics, and social and value systems of the two countries lay open the proposition that their cities should evolve the same way.[6] In contrast, in his study of the development of Toronto's suburbs ten years later, Richard Harris challenged the claim that Canadian and American cities are distinct, citing the similar economic determinants of inexpensive land and building materials, large-scale immigration and rapid urban growth, a relatively high standard of living, and the shared labour market of the two countries.[7] For Harris, America denoted "a continental, not a national, experience." These interpretations raise provocative questions about the relative impact of American urban theories and models; however, there is anything but consensus about what the findings reveal about the development of Canadian cities. These works underscore the fact that the process of modernization — modernization equated with Americanization — as a continental or national phenomena is a matter of debate.

A new portrait seems to emerge from these recent studies, one that highlights the specificity of the Canadian situation. This specificity resists somewhat the interpretive model developed by Cohen, who revealed a dialogue between Europe and America. While modern architecture and planning principles in both locations evolved through a series of exchanges between the Old and the New World, the introduction and development of modernism in Canada, despite continuing links with Britain and France, was largely filtered through the American example. It can be argued that Canada was not sufficiently autonomous to be transformed from one image to the other. At the same time, it can also be said that Canadian perceptions of America were not the same, Canada being part of the New World. And yet the adoption of American models played a key role in the development of modernism in Canada. What remains to be done is to evaluate the respective impact(s) of Americanization and Americanism on the Canadian city in the many forms and levels of architectural culture that they manifested.

The three papers in this issue of the *Journal* examine the processes of modernization and advent of modernity from different perspectives and spheres of architectural culture. (A fourth paper, on Prairie modernism, was presented by Kelly Crossman.) They focus on the developments of the profession and on the importation and transformation of models for building and for the practice of architecture.

Isabelle Gournay and France Vanlaethem argue that modernity and Americanization were already virtually synonymous with Montreal's development as a metropolis in the early part of this century. They chronicle the 19th-century tall building and superblock antecedents to the large-scale building projects of the 1950s and 1960s. As they show, there exists perhaps no better example of the wholesale application of the American urban vision on a Canadian city than William Zeckendorf's development of Place Ville-Marie on three city blocks of what would become part of Montreal's new city centre.

Michael McMordie examines how the adoption of capitalist organizational frameworks shaped the Toronto-based firm of John B. Parkin Associates. Following the model of Albert Kahn Associated Architects, who had applied Fordist and Taylorist organizational theories to architectural practice, John B. and John C. Parkin established a "comprehensive" design service that responded to their joint goals of efficient business management and design excellence. As McMordie demonstrates, the buildings that resulted from this particularly modern merger of practical and aesthetic ideals were emblematic of the "functional efficiency" of the North American production model.

And finally, Yves Deschamp assesses the transformation of Montreal's urban landscape in the post-Second World War era, showing how the interpretations of its successes and/or failures have been used by architects and historians alike in framing discourses on Quebec modernity. He considers the ways in which Montreal's Americanness has been defined to support different visions of the city's identity. His final question centres, provocativley, on what constitutes "America."[8]

Endnotes

1 Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge 1893-1960* (Paris and Montreal: Flammarion and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1995), 14-17.

2 Peter Blake, "Downtown in 3-D," *Architectural Forum* 125, no. 2 (September 1966): 31.

3 Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963* (Montreal and Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Architecture and Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), 26.

4 Isabelle Gournay and France Vanlaethem, eds., *Montreal Metropolis 1880-1930* (Montreal and Toronto: Canadian Centre for Architecture and Stoddart Publishing, 1998).

5 *Ibid.*, 11.

6 Michael A. Goldberg and John Mercer, *The Myth of the North American City: Continentalism Challenged* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1986), 3.

7 Richard Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto's American Tragedy, 1900-1950* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5.

8 This ties into the issues underlying another session at the Baltimore conference, "Pan-American Connections: Imaging the City in the Americas circa 1910." This session further developed Cohen's picture of Old and New World exchange to reveal a larger image of Inter-American cross-fertilization, pointing to other dynamics of cultural transfer and axes of communication.