

CANADA: MODERN ARCHITECTURES IN HISTORY

By Rhodri Windsor Liscombe and Michelangelo Sabatino, London, Reaktion Books, 2016, 390 pages, 241 illustrations, £20.00. ISBN 978-1-78023-633-9. Distributed in North and South America by The University of Chicago Press Books, US\$35.00.

> HAROLD KALMAN

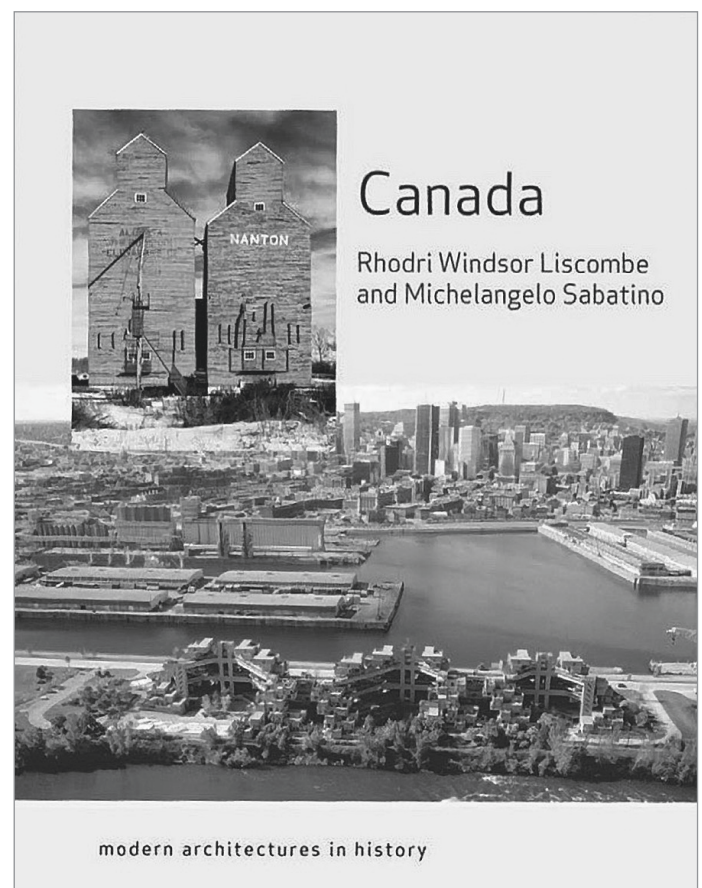
Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, professor emeritus of fine arts at the University of British Columbia, and Michelangelo Sabatino, professor of architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, have collaborated to produce the first academic volume devoted entirely to the history of Canadian modernism. Both have written extensively on Canadian architecture (particularly Liscombe) and on modernism (particularly Sabatino), and so they come highly qualified as authors.

This significant book has been on several wish lists for some time. It includes just about everything one would expect and then more, introducing the reader to many unfamiliar and pertinent projects. The geographical distribution is good. Black-and-white illustrations, generous in number, accompany many descriptions. Endnotes and bibliography provide access to the existing literature. For all these reasons the book will surely be used for some time to come as a reference, a textbook, and a framework for future scholarship.

The authors take the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1886 as the starting point for their discussion of the roots of modernism. This selection certainly has merit, because the rail network united the country in spirit as well as structure, just as the institutional infrastructure was reaching a level of maturity. Older studies (notably by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Peter Collins) chose 1750 as the beginning of modernism, but this would have been far too early to have meaning for Canada. The fine new volume on modernism by Alan Colquhoun, on the other hand, anticipates the present book by taking the years around 1890 (the Chicago School and the beginning of Art Nouveau) as its point of departure.¹

Liscombe and Sabatino's chapters are arranged chronologically, many bearing stimulating titles. They address the various modern architectures (plural) promised in the title. Two chapters embrace the key years 1945-1967. Chapter 3, "Modernism and Reconstruction, 1945-1967," raises and defends the challenging idea that Canada had a period of "reconstruction," a term usually reserved for post-War Europe, perhaps reflecting that both authors are European-born. The text acknowledges that "Canada escaped direct physical damage during the Second World War," but points out that the Government

struck multiple committees on reconstruction between 1943 and 1946 (p. 111). The chapter appropriately discusses large-scale urban planning and housing schemes underwritten by the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), such as a bold proposal of 1949-1950, by Leonard Marsh and Enrico de Pierro, for the redevelopment of Vancouver's Strathcona neighbourhood (p. 142-143), and the Triangle Gardens Housing Project in Winnipeg, by Wolfgang Gerson, Allan Waisman, and Jack Ross, 1955-1957 (p. 149-150). The focus on reconstruction is diluted, however, with the inclusion in the chapter of several buildings, particularly the bold, curvilinear Toronto City Hall (Viljo Revell, 1958-1965; p. 114), which has been described as the epitome of Late Modernism. Both would better have been treated in the following chapter (chap. 4), cleverly named "Modernism with a



Punch, 1945-1967," rather than with post-War reconstruction. This dislocation is symptomatic of the somewhat careless organization and attention to detail that recur throughout the book.

Two landmarks that announced the arrival of modernism in Canada were the Toronto, Hamilton, and Buffalo Railway Station in Hamilton (1931-1933; misnamed and mis-located on p. 101) and the Canada Packers plant in Edmonton (1936; p. 105). The important link between Eric Arthur's Canada Packers and the Dutch modernism of Willem Dudok is made. Some less familiar but noteworthy early bloomers in the text include Mackenzie Waters's Deck House on Lake Joseph, Muskoka (1938; p. 102), and the diminutive University of Toronto Bookshop (James Murray, 1948; p. 190). The early work of John B. Parkin, such as his Sunnylea School in Etobicoke (1942), might also have been cited.

Chapter 5 has another fine, provocative title, "Questioning Modernism, 1967-1986." Its poster child is the enigmatic, post-modern Mississauga City Hall (Jones and Kirkland, 1987; p. 230, 236-238). Subsections aptly dwell on memory: "Media and memory" includes two bold juxtapositions of old and new: the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal (Peter Rose with Phyllis Lambert and Erol Argun, 1985-1989; p. 238-239), and the 1970s additions to the Bank of Canada, Ottawa (Arthur Erickson with Marani, Rounthwaite and Dick; p. 238-239). "Dwelling and memory" includes Sherbourne Lanes Housing in Toronto (Diamond and Myers, 1976; p. 251-252), curiously called "a-contextualism." It is an infill and densification project prophetic of—and more sensitive to context than—much work of today.

In the following chapter, "Regenerative Modernism, 1986 to the Present," the authors creditably find coherence in the architecture of the last generation. Several projects once again combine old and new—hence "regenerative." They include the Galleria at BCE Place in Toronto (Santiago Calatrava, 1992; p. 296) and the Woodward's redevelopment in Vancouver (Henriquez Partners Architects, 2004-2010; p. 307-308).

The disorganization mentioned above is particularly evident in the index, whose accuracy and ease of use are so essential to a reference book. Buildings are indexed by location, but the locators are inconsistent, particularly in the breakdown among cities and provinces. In Greater Toronto, for example, why does Mississauga deserve a separate entry while North York and Don Mills are listed with Toronto? Why does Fredericton, with only two buildings, merit an entry while a third project in that city,

the University of New Brunswick, is listed under the province? Some buildings are indexed by the wrong name, such as the main branch of the Vancouver Public Library, which is indexed under "Vancouver: Library" and cited in the text as "Vancouver Main Library."

The book's Achilles' heel is the writing. The text is often unnecessarily verbose, which confuses the messages and the reader. One encounters muddy meanings, big ideas buried in too many words, unclear antecedents, and paragraphs peppered with arcane references that have no follow-up. One gasps for air when reading, in the Introduction:

"Canadian" architects and designers are territorially unbounded, much as their response to original modernist praxis is undogmatic: regenerative rather than repetitive. Whether it is the Iranian-born architect Fariborz Sahba, best known for his Baha'i House of Worship (Lotus Temple), completed in 1986 in New Delhi, or Todd Saunders, who was born and raised in Canada but is now based in Norway, multiplicity is the new normal. (p. 24)

Neither the confusing organization nor the turgid prose—major flaws in what otherwise is a very good book—need to have happened. Both could, and should, have been corrected by a strong editor. Unfortunately, the manuscript underwent little more than copy-editing. This reflects an unhappy fact of book production in these difficult days of reduced publication budgets: inadequate editorial intervention. This industry practice could, in the long term, prove to be self-destructive. As for the present book, we can hope that the distracting production flaws will be improved in a second edition.

NOTE

1. Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, 1977 [2nd ed.], *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Baltimore, Penguin; Collins, Peter, 1965, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture 1750-1950*, Montreal, McGill University Press; Colquhoun, Alan, 2002, *Modern Architecture, Oxford History of Art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.