

MODERN LANGUAGES: ARCHITECTURE SPEAKING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

> STEVEN MANNELL

STEVEN MANNELL, NSAA, FRAIC, is a professor in the School of Architecture and director of the College of Sustainability at Dalhousie University, principal of Steven Mannell Architect in Halifax, and founding chair of Docomomo Canada - Atlantic. His research and publications include studies of regional modern heritage in Canada; spatial improvisation in lightweight construction techniques; and the architecture and engineering of twentieth-century public works.

Do modern buildings speak to the public? Do they murmur only to their creators, and to a select group of initiates who can decode a secret language of abstract forms with ever-shifting meanings? Are they mute robots, accommodating uses while expressing nothing through their forms but the functions they contain?

This session invites papers and case studies that examine specific 20th century modern buildings around these questions. What were their designers trying to say? How did the buildings speak it? And how have they been heard, by other architects and by the public, both at the time of construction and at present.

- Call for papers, 2012 SEAC-SSAC Annual Conference

This special issue of *Architecture in/au Canada* is rooted in the papers presented in the “Modern Languages” session at the 2012 conference held at Carleton University in Ottawa. The Modern Languages session unfolded over the better part of a full day, with nine diverse papers and considerable time for discussion on the questions of how and what modern buildings speak to their public. The conference theme, “Architecture That Speaks / Architecture Parlante,” provided the broad context for discussion of architecture and language, while other conference events nicely complemented the consideration of Modern Languages. A very exhaustive bus tour of Modern Ottawa, organized by Andrew Waldron, took the participants through several finely-wrought modern houses on their way to the masterful former City Hall; the detailed tour of Place du Portage, organized by Nicolas Miquelon and led by Susan Ross, provided substantial first-person exposure to modern expression at a scale simultaneously intimate and vast, along with a discussion of the challenges of stewardship; and the closing banquet immersed us in the Diefenbunker, a most peculiar expression of the nuclear anxiety that underscored the years of high modern expression in Canada from the 1950s through the mid-1970s. Altogether, this provided a rich immersion in the milieu of modernity, and the present special issue of the *Journal* is offered as a means of both marking the event, and extending the conversations.

Some of these articles were presented as papers at the Modern Languages session: Bernard Flaman’s insightful and provocative overview of early linguistic debates; John Leroux’s documentation

of the use of stained glass as an element of modern vocabulary; Mitchell May's analysis of the attempt to embody a self-consciously Canadian and national rhetoric in the National Arts Centre; and Sharon Vattay's foundational synopsis of the life and career of Stanley M. Roscoe, an important but now little-known figure in regional Canadian modernity. The remaining articles were drawn from other conferences and sources, in order to fill out the discussion. Alessandra Mariani's careful exposure of the intertwined architecture and exhibition design of the pavillon du Québec at Expo 67 was presented at the Lunenburg conference in 2010. James Ashby's overview of the impulses and characteristics of the Canadian megastructures complements the discussions held on site at Place du Portage, while the article by Nicole Valois and Jonathan Cha draws the landscape design of Expo 67 into the overall question of modern expression. Finally, Rebecca Lemire's 2013 Martin Eli Weil prize essay, exploring the relationship between Frank Lloyd Wright's notions of organic architecture, certain First Nations approaches to land and space, and the designs and writing of Douglas Cardinal, connects the consideration of "Modern Languages" in architecture to the expression of cultures often seen as "other" and "traditional" by Western modernity.

I have been gratified by the rewarding experience of working with all the authors in bringing the articles together, and I wish to thank each for her or his timely responsiveness. I would like to express my appreciation to the presenters at the conference session; to the conference co-chairs, Peter Coffman and Nicolas Miquelon, for creating the space for the original conversation; and to Luc Noppen for his hospitality in accommodating this special issue of the *Journal*.