

The Past as Prologue: Architectural History and the Sense of Self

Marilyn M. Litvak, *Edward James Lennox, "Builder of Toronto"* (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1995). xviii, 118 p., illus, refs, biblio, index. ISBN 1-55002-204-0, paper; and

Jennifer McKendry, *Our Past Before Us: Nineteenth-Century Architecture in the Kingston Area* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995). x, 242 p., illus, refs, biblio, index. ISBN 0-8020-7474-X, \$29.95 paper.

Book reviews by Angela Carr

Toronto architect Edward James Lennox was in his 50th year in 1904 when he recorded his predictions about how the city would look a hundred years hence. The sea-changes that were to pattern the 20th century had already begun, so it is no surprise that Lennox was able to accurately foresee a "Great Tower Age" in which the urban core would be dominated by commercial skyscrapers. Just a decade before, the conventional five-storey walk-ups had been eclipsed by modern curtain-wall construction, and plans were already afoot in Lennox's day to zone areas of the city according to use, with amenities such as parks and boulevards to ameliorate the increase in urban density. Yet, one wonders if Lennox knew that the death of the old city, as he foretold it, might also portend the destruction of some of the signal works of his own career.

Between 1884 and 1899, 15 years went to build the great Romanesque Revival pile in Toronto we now know as Old City Hall. But when Viljo Revell's new city hall opened in 1965, the old Lennox scheme, soiled with seven decades of pollution, nearly bit the dust in more than figural terms. Only the determined efforts of a small vanguard of preservationists—the Friends of Old City Hall—turned back the tide. The imposing clock tower Lennox designed to anchor the vista on Bay Street is still silhouetted against the sky, but it overlooks a street that is now one of the most densely built-up areas of the city. Likewise, Casa Loma—that bizarre baronial folly conceived to gratify the aristocratic pretensions of stockbroker Sir Henry Pellatt—stood empty for nearly ten years after it was seized for tax arrears, until its metamorphosis as one of the city's premier tourist attractions at the hands of a local service club. The sweep of Lennox's progressive vision still lies at the



Column capital, Toronto City Hall.

heart of our culture, tempered only occasionally and at the eleventh hour by those who have understood that great cities grow not only by enterprise and innovation, but also through reverence for urban texture and respect for the memory of place. As William Langton, one Lennox contemporary, said in 1906, a city must have "character," so that when we leave and come back to it, we experience the sense of belonging that declares "This is my town!"

In general, Canadians have been quite careless on this score—a settler society sprung from the brow of Zeus, as it were—transient and affluent enough to despoil and move on, oblivious to any sense of place. Yet, in the midst of our drive for the new and improved, several buildings by Lennox have been spared. We even know his name, forgive him his flamboyant self-promotion, and laugh at how he got the best of the city fathers by inscribing (against their wishes) his face and name amid the ornaments that decorate Old City Hall. His obvious borrowings from American architect Henry Hobson Richardson are likewise inconsequential—Lennox created buildings upon which we readily bestow adjectives like "robust" and "masterful."

Considering the architect's prominence, it says something about our regard for the past that Marilyn Litvak's slim volume is the first monograph on Lennox to appear, some 60 years after his death. His career was such that his major projects are included by the authors of all the general surveys of Canadian architecture, from Alan Gowans to Hal Kalman. Brief biographies have also appeared in the 1983 limited

publication by Stephen Beszedits, *Eminent Toronto Architects of the Past, Their Lives and Works*, in Stephen Otto's appendix "A" to the third edition of Eric Arthur's *Toronto: No Mean City*, and even more briefly in the architects index of Patricia McHugh's *Toronto Architecture: A City Guide*. Bill Dendy also treated selected buildings by Lennox, both in *Lost Toronto* (1978) and *Toronto Observed* (1986), the latter written with William Kilbourn. Two exhibitions by Douglas Richardson and his students at the University of Toronto—"Romanesque Toronto" and "Beaux-Arts Toronto," in 1971 and 1973 respectively—were consciousness-raising exercises for a city bent on the destruction of both Lennox's Old City Hall and John Lyle's Union Station. By 1986, the climate had changed so much that Richardson and Stephen Otto were able to undertake a further exhibition entitled "Meeting Places: Toronto's City Halls" at the city's own Market Gallery, in cooperation with the city archives. Several efforts at documenting less-known Lennox buildings have since been initiated by Adam Sobolak, whose paper on the Beard Building appeared in the Architectural Conservancy of Toronto's *Newsletter* in November 1988, and by Christine Niarchos-Bourolias, Special Collections reference archivist at the Archives of Ontario, who prepared a research paper in 1990 detailing the former Bank of Toronto on Yonge Street near Queen. Finally, *Toronto's Theatre Block* (1989) and *Terra Cotta* (1990), two issue-oriented studies in which Lennox buildings figure, have been published by the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario.

Litvak's contribution to the scholarship on Lennox is 118 well-illustrated pages long, with 133 black-and-white photographs, most of them archival, some contemporary, and a few surviving drawings from the Horwood collection at the Archives of Ontario. After a short introductory biography, the text catalogues the major works of the architect's career in chronological order, based on information gleaned from Kent Rawson's collected tender calls from local newspapers and from collections in the Toronto City Hall Archives, the Toronto Historical Board, the Archives of Ontario, the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library (which I take to include both the Baldwin Room collections and the Archidont Index prepared by the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario), as well as the Ontario Hydro Archives, the Niagara Parks Commission, the National Archives of Canada, and Parks Canada's National Historic Sites Directorate in Hull, Québec.

Five chapters review the major Lennox commissions, from his short-lived partnership with William Frederick McGaw during the mid-1870s to the closure of the Lennox firm in 1917. His production included public and commercial buildings, churches, hotels, banks, and residential structures, all laid out here in sequence under

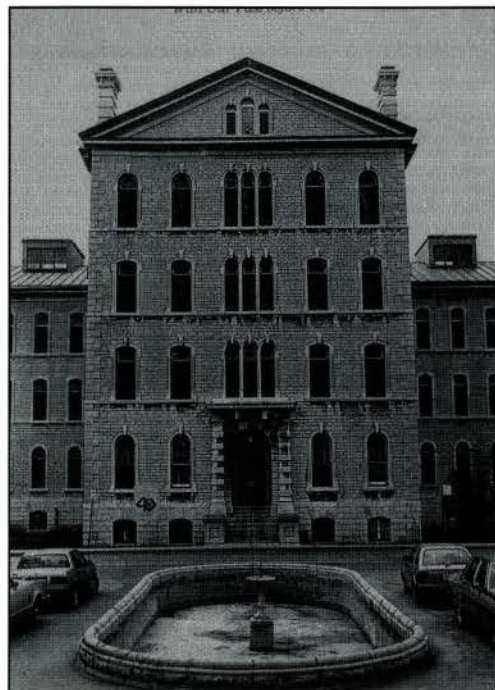
individual headings. Best known among the buildings still extant (apart from those already mentioned) are the King Edward Hotel in Toronto (1900-02), designed with Henry Ives Cobb of Chicago, the Electrical Development Company of Ontario Powerhouse in Niagara Falls (1904-12), and the architect's last major work, the Excelsior Life Building on the corner of Toronto and Adelaide streets in Toronto (1914). His Toronto Athletic Club (1890), on College Street west of University, now forms part of the Ontario College of Art, while the Massey Mausoleum in Mount Pleasant Cemetery (1892) remains one of the architect's most forceful personal expressions.

Litvak elaborates briefly upon the similarities between Lennox's Old City Hall and Henry Hobson Richardson's Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh (1884-88). The photographs, overlapped on a single page, make the Lennox borrowings explicit. Likewise, the entry on the King Edward Hotel is careful to alert the reader to the fact that Lennox modelled his Beaux-Arts project on a scheme prepared by Henry Ives Cobb. Lennox, like so many of his contemporaries, turned his sights to the United States for new sources of inspiration. He had spent five years of training with local architect William Irving, who offered expertise imparted a generation earlier by his own father-in-law, Joseph Sheard, a carpenter turned builder and finally architect, who came to Toronto from England in 1833.

Canadian architectural history is such that the very existence of a monograph on the career of a prominent Canadian architect is an important beginning, as is the commitment by Dundurn Press to a "Canadian Master Architects Series." In an academic world where the new art history seeks to replace "masters" with "mistresses" and style with sociology, Canadians have yet to lay even the most fundamental groundwork of their own architectural history. There is a great deal more to be said, and many new frontiers to be challenged.

In the future, perhaps, someone will see fit to examine the implications of Lennox's borrowings in the context of Canada's late-19th century struggles for professionalism and nationalism, which have been so articulately recounted by Kelly Crossman in his 1987 book *Architecture in Transition*. Even today, Canada's collective consciousness is framed within the same dilemmas that pit Lennox's flair for texture and form against his obvious appropriations from American models. Then as now, the question is "What is Canadian?" Or does it matter? In the late 19th century, American models helped Canadian architects extend their creative reach, but at the same time they instilled a sense of cultural colonization. Apart from the 1904 article mentioned above (which Litvak conveniently

reproduces in an appendix), Lennox did not write about his views on these issues. The testimony is in his buildings—the ecclesiastical amphitheatres borrowed from American evangelicalism, like those of his contemporary Edmund Burke, who first introduced the form to Toronto in 1874, and the later liturgical neo-Gothic designs inspired by the writings of American theorist Ralph Adams Cram. Likewise, in the commercial field, Lennox was quick to employ the fashionable Romanesque idiom, but recoiled from the implications of contemporary technological advances. His Freehold Loan and Savings Company Building of 1889-90, with its weighty, “moveable” partitions, was overbuilt, and the Beard Building of 1892 made do with wooden beams and joists while being heralded as the very latest in skyscraper technology. It was a confusing time—a time of appropriation and resistance, a time of colonized consciousness and rabid nationalism, a time still inscribed all too clearly upon Canada’s contemporary consciousness.



By contrast, Jennifer McKendry’s book, *Our Past Before Us: Nineteenth-Century Architecture in the Kingston Area*, deals predominantly with the pre-Confederation period. In the first half of the 19th century the issues were different. Architects counted themselves fortunate if craftsmen could be found to render a classical portico in stone rather than wood. The crises of nationhood and 20th-century technology were still very much in the future. Kingston was settled by United Empire Loyalists, displaced from comfortable homes by the upheaval of the American Revolution. Lands thickly grown with bush were surveyed in the late 18th century to order a “trackless wilderness” into a Jeffersonian middle landscape within two

generations. The early wooden houses, so vulnerable to fire, were succeeded by stone buildings once the master masons and builders arrived. Kingston for three years became the capital of the United Province of Canada, and architects—notably George Browne, William Coverdale, and Edward Horsey—planned buildings commensurate with the city’s new-found status. Fashioned of local limestone, these structures owed all to a set of conventions forged thousands of miles away. Kingston’s demise as the capital in 1844, prompted by fears of American invasion, left intact a time capsule of elite 19th-century architecture that today contributes to the city’s character as a tourist mecca.

In 209 pages of text McKendry synthesizes her many years of heritage work in Kingston. More than a dozen articles in journals such as *Queen’s Quarterly*, *RACAR*, *Canadian Geographic*, *Historic Kingston*, and the *SSAC Bulletin* (for which the author received the first Martin Eli Weil Award in 1989) testify to her knowledge of the field. Her 1984 Master of Arts thesis from Queen’s University, which detailed aspects of the domestic architecture of southeastern Ontario, and her dissertations at the University of Toronto, which dealt with the drawings of John and Joseph Power and with the career of William Coverdale, who completed Kingston City Hall after George Browne’s departure in March 1844, add to her credentials. As McKendry herself observes, the book is a successor to the pioneering work of Margaret Angus, who published *The Old Stones of Kingston* in 1966, after some thirty years residence in the city. McKendry’s involvement is equally well grounded: her name appears as early as 1973 among those (including Angus) who served as members of the Committee of Architectural Review set up under provincial legislation enacted in 1970 to empower Kingston city council to designate buildings or structures of historic or architectural value. In all, five volumes under the title *Buildings of Historic and Architectural Significance* were produced by the committee between 1971 and 1985.

As is often the case for smaller centres, scholarship about Kingston tends to be published not in general surveys so much as in local histories. The name of George Browne of Belfast is enshrined in Gowan’s *Building Canada* of 1966, and survives in the recent two-volume *History of Canadian Architecture* by Kalman, alongside architects John and Joseph Power. But Coverdale seems never to have been accorded “canonical” recognition, perhaps because the psychiatric hospital and the penitentiary served purposes that lacked the cachet of Kingston City Hall. Indeed, the latter building was one of the major starting points for Angus in 1966, whereas the former buildings were not even discussed. A decade later, Dana Johnson and C.J. Taylor documented a range of smaller buildings

Rockwood Lunatic Asylum, Kingston.

as well as some public structures in two volumes entitled *Reports on Selected Buildings in Kingston*, which they prepared for Parks Canada. The same year, Gerald Finley published a tribute to Kingston's classical and Gothic Revival heritage under the title *In Praise of Older Buildings* to complement an exhibition by the Frontenac Historical Society on the "Decline and Fall of the Architecture in Kingston and Frontenac County." Then, after a lapse of six years, Parks Canada issued *Architecture of the Picturesque in Canada* by Janet Wright and *Neoclassical Architecture in Canada* by Leslie Maitland, the covers of which pictured well-known Kingston buildings. These were followed in 1986 by Joan Mattie's catalogue of architectural drawings in the Power collection at the National Archives of Canada, *100 Years of Architecture in Kingston: John Power to Drever & Smith*.

For the most part, writings about Kingston buildings have by necessity been task-oriented, focusing on style, date, and architect—all important aspects of archival practice when little firm documentation is available. In the next stage, though, one expects evaluative and contextual approaches. McKendry (like Finley before her) looked at travel logs and contemporary literature to fill in the dramatic impressions of the moment, witnessed in Kingston by visitors such as Charles Dickens, who saw the town two years after a disastrous fire, and reported "one half of it appears to be burnt down, and the other half not to be built up." Within 50 years, another traveller (of Lennox's generation) found the city to be "stately and antiquated" with blue-grey stone buildings that lent an air of solidity and melancholy. Inscribed in the interval between these two statements is the entire economic, political, and cultural history of a nation on the brink of the future.

Kingston stood outside the tidal wave of change that engulfed major business centres such as Toronto and Montreal. Yet, its urban fabric is not static. As this book documents in five major chapters, the earliest buildings were either residential or domestic in scale, because this was all that necessity, materials, and expertise permitted. In a text clearly illustrated by 107 black-and-white photographs, McKendry examines the choices made by the early builders, based on the all-controlling survey grid and the exigencies of the site. She then considers the impact of pattern books, which were the only source of architectural advice at the time. Her familiarity with heritage interiors leads to a discussion of heating and cooking techniques, as well as chimney design. Finally, she analyses house plans and their relationship to the stylistic appliques of the exterior.

In later chapters the author discusses churches, commercial structures, civic buildings, and institutions, contributing refinements of

attribution, including who was responsible for the design of the Tuscan portico on City Hall. From the classically inspired St. George's Cathedral, to the Gothic Revival, Richardsonian Romanesque, and neo-Gothic houses of worship of the late 19th century, the ecclesiastical lineage traces out a familiar pattern directed by Pugin and the Ecclesiologists, by Henry Hobson Richardson and evangelicalism in the closing decades of the century, and by the ever-present liturgical movement, which came into its own again with the writings of Cram. In the secular sphere, commercial architecture grew in scale to rival that of civic structures as capital and mercantilism fuelled the country's economy.

For three decades, between 1835 and 1865, Kingston articulated pride of place through a series of public buildings, from the city hall to the post office and the custom house. The Crystal Palace signalled the city's prominence as one of the regular venues for the annual agricultural exhibitions, which were the chief social and cultural events of the year. Progressive educational buildings were conceived to discipline young minds and shape the aspirations of the next generation. But as social structures grew and population increased, McKendry remarks upon the process by which class order was maintained through institutional settings like prisons and asylums, which Foucault so graphically equated with the censorious, ever-watchful eye of the panopticon. In the final chapter, from which was drawn her prize-winning essay, the author details the conditions and theories that shaped Kingston Penitentiary and the Rockwood Asylum for the Criminally Insane, in an age when criminals were made to build their own cells and mental disorders were scarcely understood to be illnesses. The nuances are both negative and positive, and pervaded by a dissonance for past times with which we can no longer share either sympathy or understanding.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE NEVER QUITE GETS US BACK to what it was really like. We see only from our own vantage point in the late 20th century. But we can still discern the different layers—how Kingston seemed to each set of eyes that regarded it, how much changed between first settlement and the end of the 19th century, what we nearly lost of that heritage, save for the interventions of individuals and historical societies who cared enough to secure what was left. We allow ourselves to assume in the certainty of hindsight that everything was always safe, that the edge we experience in present time is not real. We become complacent. But our past, like our ancestry, lives only through memory and caring. What we are now has so much to do with where we have been. We need to remember that our future is being written in the present.

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Published to commemorate the 25th anniversary of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention coming into force. Includes Canada's 12 World Heritage Sites.

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