



The 1859 Competition for Canada's Parliament Buildings, "The Builder," and Periodical Publicity

The English architectural periodical *The Builder* first reported on the new Canadian Houses of Parliament well after the drama of the design competition had ceased. The issue of 10 December 1859, which announced the winners for the prominent Centre Block as Thomas Fuller and Chilion Jones, was a rare instance of a Canadian building being so substantial as to draw the attention of the architectural profession in London. *The Builder's* full-page engraving of Fuller and Jones's design (**figure 8**) presented a building which in style and scale approached the large public edifices then under construction or recently completed in London. *The Builder's* readers may well have drawn a comparison between the Canadian Houses of Parliament and the British equivalent nearing completion at Westminster some twenty years after its competition had been concluded.

This article investigates the controversy surrounding the competition for the British Houses of Parliament as a point of comparison for the Canadian competition, in which a concerted attempt was made to avoid some of the past mistakes associated with this method of choosing architects for major public edifices. The involvement of *The Builder*, and of a Canadian newspaper column in the absence of a Canadian architectural press, in shaping the Ottawa competition process offers striking proof of the power of the printed media in the mid-19th century.

By David de Witt

A number of severe problems plagued the enormous London project, beginning with the competition itself. *The Builder* had not yet begun publication when the competition was held, so the initial controversies were taken up in, among other venues, John Claudius Loudon's *Architectural Magazine*, which was in the middle of its short life span (1834-39). The London competition caused a great stir, with a heated and protracted debate in the architectural press over how this competitive method of soliciting designs for public buildings was being misapplied.

Even before the formal announcement of a competition had been made, the validity of the process was being questioned. In a letter published in the April 1835 issue of the *Architectural Magazine*, Sir Lionel Cust complained to his friend Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel about competition architecture, laying out some of the reasons for the aesthetic inferiority of competition design and the tendency for construction cost overruns.¹ Cust was able to satisfy some of his own objections, being charged with assembling the committee for the Parliament Buildings. He appointed four other amateur commissioners to join him. Presumably free of biases themselves, they would short-list designs, and also had the potential to monitor the realization of the winning entry. The amateur-run competition proposed and implemented by Cust caught the public's imagination and sparked a revival of the centuries-old practice of contests—which in Cust's improved form eventually reached Canada.²

In response to the appointment of an amateur committee to dispense this coveted commission, the architectural profession in London clamoured for a public exhibition of the entries. Such open scrutiny would allow architects in particular to voice their opinions, ideally before the decisions were made, but if afterwards, then to hold the committee accountable for its selections. In the January 1836 issue of the *Architectural Magazine*, the anonymous writer "Candidus" (identifiable as W.H. Leeds)³ applauded a recent proposal for exhibitions and public opinion-sampling prior to decision-making.⁴ Loudon's magazine likely promoted this kind of exhibition to oppose the presumed incompetence of non-professional committees such as Cust's, and especially their susceptibility to partiality. But favouritism and influence-peddling persisted as long as well-situated contestants (such as the eventual winner of the Westminster competition, Sir Charles Barry) could have their entries recognized, despite the supposedly anonymous numbering system used for entries.

In an inaugural column under the heading "Architectural Competition," the first issue of *The Builder* in 1843 addressed this debate:

Under this head we shall give notices of pending competitions, and shall feel obliged by our friends forwarding us the accounts of what may fall in their way of this character. We shall also be happy to give engravings of the selected designs; we think that by such publicity, the present very defective system of decision may be amended. Publicity is sometimes a remedy when more direct measures have failed.⁵

The Builder's editor at the time, George Hansom, was succeeded by the equally vigilant George Godwin, who would devote many columns to the competition question, especially in 1847 when he wrote a number of editorials on the subject.⁶ He usually targeted specific ills and atrocities; on the relationship between architects and the competition system, however, he clearly had mixed feelings. Less-established practitioners naturally responded to the allure of the competition's promise of a meteoric rise from obscurity.⁷ Occasionally, an overall assessment of the situation appeared in *The Builder*, such as the speech George Morgan gave to a meeting of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1858. Morgan condemned the competition system and called on the profession to abjure it altogether because it was incompatible with the creative aims of architecture.⁸

While this extensive debate in London did not deter Canadians from holding high expectations for the designs of their Parliament Buildings, the threat of controversy did have an effect. The spectre of pitfalls and bad publicity loomed when the federal Department of Public Works announced the competition on 8 May 1859, just after the selection of a site on Barracks Hill on the Ottawa River. The terms set by commissioner John Rose were calculated to reassure architects that the department intended to deal fairly. Substantial premiums, a motto system for preserving anonymity, and the promise of the commission to the winner were intended to address the concerns which had previously been aired in *The Builder*, and thus known to many Canadian architects. The department adopted an encouraging and generous posture in its public announcements to architects and builders.

1 Cust perceived in architects a natural inclination to extravagance. He pointed to Buckingham Palace as an example of a "waste of a million pounds." See "Letter from Sir Lionel Cust to the Right Honourable Sir Robert Peel," *Architectural Magazine* 2 (April 1835): 160.

2 For a discussion of several major competitions in pre-1859 London, such as that of 1857 for the Foreign Office, see Joan Bassin, "Architectural Competitions in Nineteenth-Century England," thesis, University of Michigan, 1975.

3 Biographical entry by Howard Colvin in *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*, 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1978), 510 (not in subsequent eds.).

4 The proposal had apparently been put forward by a certain "Herder" in the previous December issue, but did not actually appear there. The letter was only cited in the index, on a page numbered higher than that of the index itself, which was at the very back. This printing error suggests that "Candidus" saw the letter separately, courtesy of the editor. See *Architectural Magazine* 3 (January 1836): 9-10, for the letter of Candidus.

5 *The Builder* 1, no. 1 (January 1843): 28.

6 *The Builder* 5, no. 219 (17 April 1847): 177; no. 220 (24 April): 189-90; no. 223 (15 May): 225-26; no. 246 (23 October): 501-2; no. 252 (4 December): 573-74. Hansom sold out in 1843 and was replaced by Alfred Bartholomew, who died in 1844. Godwin then took up the position and held it until 1883. Anthony King, "Architectural Journalism and the Profession: the Early Years of George Godwin," *Architectural History* 19 (1976): 32-53.

7 Bassin, "Architectural Competitions," 95-99.

8 George Morgan, "On Public Competitions for Architectural Designs," *The Builder* 16, no. 798 (22 May 1858): 349-51. Morgan had presented his paper at a meeting of the Royal Institute of British Architects on 17 May.

Pressures of time determined the conditions of the competition, as Carolyn Young points out in her excellent monograph on the Ottawa Parliament Buildings.⁹ The government faced a rising clamour, primarily from Upper Canada, to dissolve the Union; Confederation was already being discussed, although political consensus was yet a distant prospect. The seat of government had been moved every four years since 1842, but majority opinion now favoured a permanent home to establish a unifying presence. The powerful symbolism of a national Parliament Building promised to provide an artistic solution to the political problem.

John Rose and his department allotted ten weeks for designing the Canadian Parliament Building and two flanking departmental buildings. This time frame for so complex a task was unrealistically short, and disregarded the many protests against short contest deadlines voiced by the architectural profession in *The Builder*. Amateur committees in particular would often set improbably short periods out of sheer ignorance of the labour involved in preparing entries. Even the London committee struck by Lionel Cust had done the same, giving Barry and the other competitors only five months to plan their mammoth undertaking.

This practice inevitably forced competing architects into errors of judgement. This could result in lower aesthetic and technical standards, unless the architects resorted to shortcuts such as heavy borrowing—which was not an unusual practice at the time. This is what happened in the case of the Canadian Parliament Buildings: the similarities of Fuller and Jones's elevation of the Centre Block to that of Alfred Waterhouse's Assize Courts in Manchester—a building that had recently been published in *Building News*—have been pointed out by Young.¹⁰ In some respects the architects seized the advantage this way, having a ready-made means to unify a complex array of elements. Fuller and Jones also borrowed liberally from Waterhouse's accompanying statement, as Young makes embarrassingly clear in a comparison of the two texts.¹¹ Their adaptation was persuasive and clear, and seems to have given the architects a decisive edge over their competitors.

For the Parliamentary Library Fuller and Jones successfully synthesized several prototypes. The architects themselves acknowledged the medieval kitchen of Durham Cathedral as a model, especially for its groin-vaulting technique.¹² *The Builder* also pointed out a resemblance between the British Library's round reading room and the Parliamentary Library. The accompanying illustration presented the view from the river, with the library projecting dramatically into the foreground (**figure 8**). This view invites comparison with two other contemporaneous examples: the round laboratory building of Deane and Woodward's Oxford University Museum, which appears prominently in the foreground of the illustration published in the 9 April 1859 issue of *The Builder* (**figure 7**);¹³ and Cumberland and Storm's University College in Toronto, which, as pointed out by Young, features a prominent round laboratory separate from the main building. By remarkable coincidence, illustrations of these two buildings and the Centre Block all appeared in the same issue of *The Illustrated London News* (**figure 9**).¹⁴

The official competition requirements set down for the Ottawa library guided Fuller and Jones to their solution. Parliamentary librarian Alpheus Todd had drafted supplementary requirements, incorporating recent developments in library design culled from Edward Edwards's *Memoirs of Libraries*.¹⁵ Surveillance and fireproofing were Todd's main concerns. He recommended a separate building for reasons of fire safety, and he was proven right in 1916 when flames devoured the Centre Block but spared the structurally independent library. Todd's detailed specifications would have been appreciated by architects, whose common complaint was that competition requirements were typically too vague. Ironically, the department had not consulted Todd in preparing the competition announcement. He added his separate set of requirements after seeing an announcement of the competition in a newspaper, almost certainly the *Toronto Leader*.¹⁶

The winning design adopted a Gothic style in line with the Oxford University Museum and University College. Those slightly earlier designs exemplified the recent trend to "Ruskinian Gothic," a livelier and more vigorous form of Gothic than Barry's version at Westminster. In his design, Barry had carefully emulated original examples of traditional Gothic architecture in England, in order to strongly evoke a national medieval heritage.¹⁷ The shift towards a Continental interpretation of Gothic, especially Italian, was sparked by John Ruskin through his influential books *The Stones of Venice* and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*.¹⁸ It was the new style of

9 Carolyn Young, *The Glory of Ottawa: Canada's First Parliament Buildings* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 26-27. Throughout this article, I am indebted to Young for the archival research she has undertaken and for her analysis of the political implications of the competition conditions.

10 *Building News* 5 (6 May 1859): 425, cited in Young, 34.

11 Young, *Glory of Ottawa*, 134-39 (Fuller & Jones); 140-42 (Waterhouse).

12 The architects mentioned this source to *The Builder*, where it was published. It was not cited in their entry to the committee.

13 *The Builder* 17, no. 843 (9 April 1859): 253. An article also appeared in the 18 June issue (p. 401), explaining that the source for the freestanding laboratory had been the monastic kitchen at Glastonbury Abbey.

14 *The Illustrated London News*, 5 November 1859, 435 (Canadian Parliament Buildings); 438-39 (two-page illustration of the "New Museum, Oxford"); 454 (quarter-page illustration of University College in Toronto). On University College in relation to the Oxford University Museum, see Douglas Richardson, *A Not Unlikely Building: University College and its History* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1990), 61-62.

15 Young, *Glory of Ottawa*, 21-22.

16 *Ibid.*, 19.

17 For a discussion of the nationalistic underpinnings of the Gothic style in English architecture of the 1830s, see Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste*, 3rd ed. (London: John Murray, 1962), 110-11.

18 Eve Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic: The Architecture of Deane and Woodward 1845-1861* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 35-45.

“Italian” Gothic that found favour in the competition for the Ottawa buildings. In Fuller and Jones’s competition design for the Centre Block, rich stonework effects, strong forms of windows punched through walls, and a dramatic slate roof-tile pattern evoked Deane and Woodward’s museum at Oxford, an example which had been given recent publicity in *The Builder*. This periodical made the latest architectural styles in England almost immediately available to architects and their prospective clients.

The Builder did not comment on the Canadian contest; it simply published the outcome.¹⁹ No preliminary announcement of the terms of the competition appeared under the “Architectural Competition” heading that the periodical had inaugurated in its first issue. In Canada there was no platform whatsoever for publicizing the concerns of the architectural profession. *The Canadian Builder and Mechanics Magazine* (1869-71?) had not yet begun its short-lived run, and the more substantial *Canadian Architect and Builder* would not start publication until 1888. Newspaper announcements and commentaries provided the only publicity for the competition.

A rare and hitherto unacknowledged instance of criticism appeared in the daily newspaper the *Toronto Leader*. An article in the issue of 10 May 1859 denounced the handling of the competition, remarking that the premiums were too low and insisting that the commission be granted to the winner.²⁰ The anonymous but well-informed author complained that the low premiums and short time for submissions of designs precluded any European architects from competing in the contest, thus depriving it of the highest standards. Indeed, only one American entered, despite the allure of such an important commission. These shortcomings partly explain the meagre publicity afforded the competition in *The Builder*.

Rose and his department were almost certainly aware of the strong protests against amateur committees. Samuel Keefer and Frederick Preston Rubidge, the two Canadian judges appointed by the department to select the winning plans, were knowledgeable and experienced civil servants. Keefer and Rubidge both worked for John Rose in the Department of Public Works, albeit not previously on projects of this scale. Because of their presence and qualifications they represented an important reform to the competition system.²¹ On the London Parliamentary Building committee, Cust may have thought he had enough knowledge to judge architecture, but many other such committees were staffed largely by members of the rising merchant class, who bargained hard. By all appearances, they treated architects like other businessmen, to be engaged with a healthy suspicion and in a sporting, competitive spirit. The two Canadian judges, by contrast, knew the competing architects professionally and therefore dealt with them far less aggressively.

Keefer’s actions as judge betrayed his anxiety to be as fair and impartial as possible. As deputy commissioner he was responsible for carrying out the judging; Rubidge assisted in the task. Neither was a trained architect.²² Keefer may have been responding to this deficiency when he travelled to Toronto to consult with architect John Morris on the procedure for judging, after receiving the entries on the first of August.²³ Morris had a great deal of experience with civil commissions, and recommended a ten-point system for evaluating the designs on a range of ten aspects, for a total of 100 possible points. Keefer had Rubidge apply the method to all 33 entries, while he evaluated only the eight that he favoured. He marked his assessments beside Rubidge’s in red ink, and thus saw Rubidge’s scores before arriving at his own. Young notes that Keefer was flagging here in his zeal for impartiality.²⁴ He concurred with Rubidge as to the winner for the departmental buildings, but arrived at a different result for the Centre Block, favouring Fuller and Jones instead of Thomas Stent and Augustus Laver. Keefer submitted the double set of results not to Rose, but to Governor General Sir Edmund Head, who presided over the establishment of the new Canadian capital. Head immediately rejected the outcome as divided and inconclusive. When Rubidge had to abandon the committee, on 29 August, Keefer simply submitted his own results, which Head accepted.

Before announcing the winners, the Department of Public Works staged an exhibition of the drawings. The value of such openness was lost on the Ottawa *Citizen* columnist who wrote that public scrutiny “would scarcely be doing justice to the competitors.”²⁵ This was a naive comment, given the professional concern for the procedure and judging of competitions that had been aired for decades in the *Architectural Magazine* and *The Builder*. The *Citizen*’s deferential attitude seems to have held for the journalistic press across the nation, which apart from the *Toronto Leader* published no criticism of the entries or the procedure, and so offered no check on the actions of the selection committee.

19 “Proposed Parliament Buildings at Ottawa, Canada West,” *The Builder* 17, no. 879 (10 December 1859): 808-9.

20 *Toronto Leader*, 10 May 1859, 1. The *Leader* article was cited, almost in full, in the *Canadian News*, 8 June 1859, 194. Other major Canadian papers, such as the *Globe* in Toronto and the *Gazette* in Montréal, carried no announcement of the competition.

21 “The Old Grievance,” *The Builder*, 30 October 1858, 733. The writer voiced the common complaint about the general incompetency of competition judges, using some unlikely illustrations to comic effect.

22 Young, *Glory of Ottawa*, 18.

23 Alan Armstrong, “Profile of Parliament Hill,” *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal* 34, no. 9 (September 1957): 329.

24 Young, *Glory of Ottawa*, 66.

25 *Citizen* [Ottawa], 3 September 1859, and repeated in the *Canadian News*, 14 September 1859. Young cited this example of journalistic response as well (mistakenly giving the newspaper’s name as the *Ottawa Tribune*), but only for its applause of the entries, quoting its praise of several designs as worthy to “adorn any city in any country.” See Young, *Glory of Ottawa*, 68.

In his speech at the sod-turning ceremony for the buildings on 21 December 1859, John Rose reminded the public about the persistent cries for dissolution of the Union.²⁶ Under these strained circumstances, when it became clear that completion of the Parliament Buildings would take longer than expected, the government's generosity towards its architects turned into antagonism. A review of the progress took place in June 1862, and the following year Stent, Laver, and Jones were dismissed. However, the department failed to notify Stent and Laver, and they stayed on the job without pay.²⁷ Québec architect Charles Baillairgé was taken on at this time, and payment by commission was replaced by fixed salaries for both him and the remaining architect, Thomas Fuller.

The move to fixed salaries reflected a suspicion that the architects were not earnestly trying to keep costs down. The habit of cost overruns on large public projects was due in part to the competition practice of underestimation. Architects who submitted costly, highly decorative designs in order to enhance appeal typically would not suffer repercussions if estimates were not met, and often profited from the commission that applied to the overrun.²⁸ On reflection, it would seem that estimates submitted with designs for such competitions were rarely sincere. Architect Baillairgé, however, had raised himself above this corrupt practice, perhaps even showing excessive zeal for cost control—hence his summons to the Ottawa site.²⁹

In her monograph on Charles Baillairgé, Christina Cameron asserts that the builders presented a serious obstacle for the architects of the Parliament Buildings. The construction firms clashed with Baillairgé over speed, competence, mensuration, and estimates, all of which affected the amount of payment. It appears that Fuller's approach had been to give in to the builders in order to get on with the job, which yielded the construction firms great rewards.³⁰ In England building practices differed; architects were spared from mensuration and pressure from builders over costs—or at least the issue rarely surfaced in *The Builder*.³¹ In Canada the consequences of overruns fell chiefly to the architects, who suffered dismissal and loss of commission. The government effectively turned its back on the concerns about the treatment of architects that had been publicized in the English architectural press. Its actions were unfair, but perhaps to be expected, given the absence of virtually any public input or response from the architectural profession in Canada.

By the criteria of time and cost, the project met with tangible failure: government, architects, and builders proved unable to muster resources to complete the project efficiently, so the work dragged on, incurring staggering cost overruns.³² The initial remedial steps taken by the Department of Public Works appear timid, but the Canadian government eventually became more aggressive when faced with the dilemmas of delay and expense. As the architects and their government overseer confronted cost overruns and delays entailed by the flamboyant design, they discovered to their chagrin that, as a London contributor to *The Builder* declared in 1858, "the competition monster is a very hydra."³³

IN THE END, ONLY THE LONE VOICE OF the *Toronto Leader* was raised against the Ottawa competition, and then only lightly. The government eventually relinquished the role of benevolent patron of architecture, a role that had been defined by the debate over competitions in English professional magazines such as *The Builder*. Possible foreign influence on the organizational side has not been taken into consideration by Young and others when assessing this great moment in our architectural heritage, nor has the importance of the "publicity" mentioned in *The Builder's* first competition column. Moreover, architectural periodicals of the mid 19th century, particularly *The Builder*, had made illustrations of the fashionable Ruskinian Gothic style available to Canadian architects and the selection committee. Richly varied, it was a style not easily executed in Ottawa with its limited local capabilities, and so delays and very high costs occurred. Such subsequent mis-steps were not averted by the article in the *Leader*. Its unnamed writer brought to attention the need for scrutiny that would eventually be filled by periodicals representing to the public the views of the Canadian architectural profession.

26 *Citizen* [Ottawa], 23 December 1859.

27 Christina Cameron, *Charles Baillairgé: Architect & Engineer* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 101.

28 *Ibid.*, 95.

29 Baillairgé had recently attempted to enforce unrealistic cost projections for the Québec Jail. See Cameron, *Baillairgé*, 87-93.

30 *Ibid.*, 106-7.

31 Young, *Glory of Ottawa*, 86-87.

32 Cameron, *Baillairgé*, 106-7.

33 "On Speculation and Competition: Their Effects on the Buildings of the Present Day," *The Builder* 16, no. 788 (13 March 1858): 177.

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