A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles

By Leslie Maitland, Jacqueline Hucker, and Shannon Ricketts (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1992). 320 p., illus, glossary. ISBN 1-55111-004-0 (cloth), $34.95; 1-55111-002-4 (paper), $19.95.

Book Review by Christopher Thomas

The Broadview Press is the kind of firm many Canadians dream of, a tiny national treasure. In recent years it has made useful works like Douglas Fetherling's *Documents in Canadian Art* and Geoffrey Simmins' matching *Documents in Canadian Architecture* available in inexpensive paperbound editions that are long on substance and short on frills. While emphasizing Canadian titles and subjects (at a time when nationalism is in short supply), the company is also quite continentalist and does its marketing well in the United States. The series is a good home for Maitland, Hucker, and Ricketts' *A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles* — which, to be precise, should be called *A Guide to Architectural Styles in Canada* — for, like the others, it aims at a wide audience, has a Canadian subject, is priced low, and is encouraging to look at (the cover has an attractive photo of Vancouver's attractive Marine Building), but is all business inside and bound for hard use.

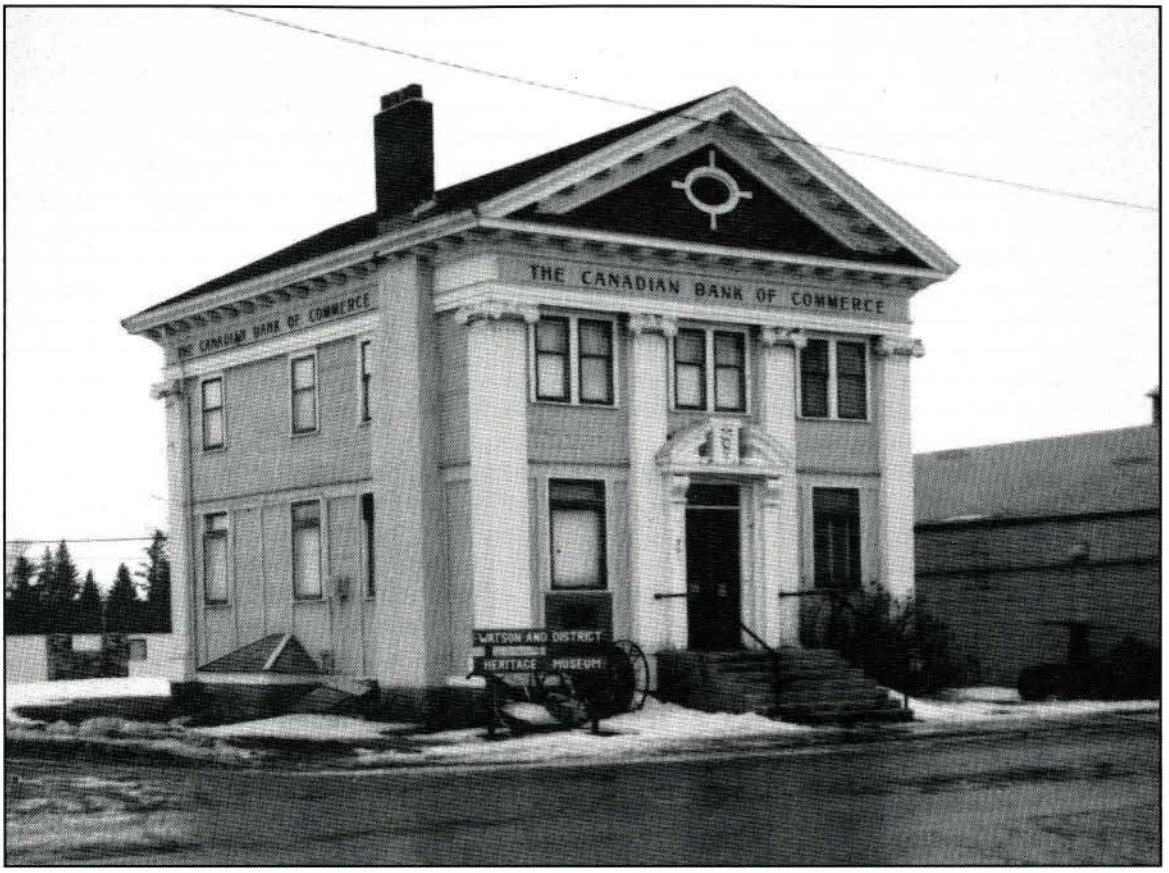
That the authors hope to reach the general public comes clear in the Foreword, whose first line exhorts, "Wherever you are while you are reading these words, look up from this book for a moment." The same populist, unpretentious tone resurfaces elsewhere, in promptings like "Look up!" (page 146) and in a general use of everyday language ("how-to books," "stodgy"). The authors want to communicate a passion for architecture to an audience of non-specialists, including undergraduates in surveys of Canadian architectural history, for which the book could be a supplementary text.

It is gratifying to see a book like this appear by these authors, all professional architectural historians. Nevertheless, style guides have their problems and limits. As is usual in such books, a generally chronological approach is taken, proceeding century by century and style by style in short chunks of text (a few paragraphs to a page or two long). Punctuating the text are groups of four to six photos, with longish titles and captions, which illustrate examples of the styles. The approach is routine enough. It may indeed be too routine, and some readers without specialized knowledge may find it dull. Despite a large number of photographs and a blessedly brief, clear glossary, the book could benefit, I think, from yet more pictures. In each essay on a style a list of characteristic features appears, like this one in the piece on the Palladian Style (page 21):

> In this style we find a symmetrical and neatly ordered façade and interior. Usually there is a prominent basement storey of rusticated stone, and above that a high main storey with smooth walls. The windows on the main level are tall, with handsomely moulded surrounds. Where a third storey exists, it is shorter, with smaller and more plainly treated windows. The roof is usually a gable or a truncated hip, set at a low pitch. On larger structures such as public buildings there is often a projecting frontispiece. Smaller structures are not so grand, but they have a handsomely designed front door, with sidelights and a transom or pediment over the door....

This is a good description, well written and free of jargon, but much of this sort of information could be conveyed in a labelled photograph or line drawing inserted in the body of the text, leaving the words to focus on the origins, background, and spread of the style. The Canadian Parks Service's pamphlet *The Buildings of Canada,* with its short texts, line drawings, and one-page glossary, has this kind of appeal — though it clearly lacks the detail of the *Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles.* A chart or time-line at the beginning or end of the book would also be a valuable supplement. One can never do too much for that slippery character, the average reader.

Some photographs here are old friends, known to us from previously-published guides to individual styles in the Canadian Parks Service's series, Studies in Archaeology, Architecture and History. Unfortunately, not all the photos in this guide have reproduced well, and some may have had their day. In the sections on the International Style and Brutalism, for example, dark passages, especially in areas recessed beneath deep Corbusian overhangs, are as black as pitch, aggravating the unfriendly aspect of those styles (e.g., pages 181, 183, 186, and 188). A double-page spread of Union Station, Toronto, on pages 112-13, which the authors note is "virtually impossible to photograph,"



The pre-fabricated Beaux-Arts Canadian Bank of Commerce in Watson, Saskatchewan; Darling and Pearson, architects, 1906. (Environment Canada, Heritage Recording Services, 1990)

has a foreground full of hoardings and roadwork, much to the detriment of that splendid building. Cropping is idiosyncratic, too, with some photos cut brutally, and others (say, the one on page 187) crying out for the knife. Beautiful pictures abound — those on pages 114 and 189, for instance — but more care might have been exercised to ensure consistent quality.

With three authors, even three who are colleagues, some raggedness and overlap were bound to develop in the text, despite generally good copy-editing. A single author, like John-G. Blumenson in *Ontario Architecture: A Guide to Styles and Building Terms, 1784 to the Present* (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990), has an advantage in this respect (he is also a superb photographer). Here, the authors and the editor have worked hard to make the rough places plain, and by and large they have succeeded. Still, I find the inclusion of essays on the centuries along with others on building styles awkward. None of the century essays is followed immediately by photos, and this creates problems, especially early on. Why not have put the fur warehouse illustrating *pièces-sur-pièces* construction right after the essay on the 17th century, where this type of building is discussed, even though its date (1889) doesn't work? (It doesn't fit in the 18th century, either.) And shouldn't Champlain's *Habitation* appear here too, even though it is a reconstruction? Presumably it and the vitally important Fortress Louisbourg were omitted because they are "fake." But a work for the interested public is no place for preservationist purism. It must be admitted that the 17th and 18th centuries pose unique problems for the presentation of Canadian architecture, as those who teach its history know. Do you teach everything before 1759 as one, or do you break it, and if so, where? At 1660? 1700? 1740? Should Quebec be taught separately from British North America or in tandem, and how should it be taught — in terms of style, craft, types, or within material culture? What happens to Halifax before the Conquest? Do we forget about it, or lump it with everything up to 1783? And how does this relate to what happens once the Loyalists arrive? What to do with Newfoundland: is it in "Canada" before, say, the mid 19th century? Small wonder the authors had trouble here.

By 1800 the sequence of styles is clearer and easier to follow, except in vernacular building, an important exception. But life and architecture in Canada (or what is now Canada) changed so much from 1800 to 1900 — the 19th century represents over half the history of much of the English part of the country — that encapsulating the century in a single essay, even a long one (four pages), is difficult. We are rushed in three pages (29 to 32) from an exquisite Nova Scotia church of 1790 to electric streetcars and civic beautification. For Canada, where entire cities blossomed in fifteen years, this doesn't work, and more "organic" divisions might have served as better first-order organizers.

The order in which styles are introduced is

more or less what one expects, but there are a few surprises. It is odd, for instance, to meet French Gothic Revival, a mode used mainly for Catholic churches, before rather than after High Victorian Gothic, of which it was a specialized variant. As a result, High Victorian Gothic has to be mentioned (on page 72) before it has been introduced; and St. Andrew's R.C. Cathedral in Victoria, of the late 1880s — a very French building in a remarkably French diocese — appears as an example of High Victorian Gothic, not French Gothic Revival, where in my view it belongs.

The problem of sequence becomes more acute towards 1900 and into the 20th century, when styles succeed one another rapidly. The authors squeeze all neo-Romanesque design from 1840 to after 1900 into a single pigeonhole. The Romanesque before H.H. Richardson, which was generally applied to programs connected with science and learning (as in University College, Toronto, and the Smithsonian "castle" in Washington, D.C.), was altogether different from the Romanesque as it was reshaped by Richardson in the 1870s and 80s into a flexible, modernizing mode, with particular application to commercial and institutional design (Windsor Station in Montreal, the arch-example of that type in Canada, justifiably gets a double-page spread on pages 88-89). We are told more than once (on pages 33 and 64, for example) that architecture generally became more eclectic and decorative near the end of the 19th century, but this is wrong: purer, more unified effects were being sought in Canada by the Eighties (earlier elsewhere), accounting for the appeal that the rigorous Beaux-Arts system of analysis and assembly had to the *fin-de-siècle.*

The role of the American "Shingle Style" within the broad Queen Anne Revival movement in Canada is downplayed and even distorted — the American houses are said to be clapboarded (page 99) — continuing the usual Canadian conspiracy of silence about American influence, which was decisive by the Eighties. Richard Norman Shaw is not mentioned in connection with the Queen Anne (though he is, with less reason, with the Georgian Revival).

We do not get a sustained discussion of Arts and Crafts architecture until we reach the inter-war period on page 164 — fully sixty pages late, in my view — and Voysey and Lutyens are said to be its architectural pioneers. To my mind, Lutyens has more claim to be cited *in re* the Georgian Revival and Modern Classicism than here. Of the earlier, revolutionary phase of Arts and Crafts and of Webb and Morris almost nothing is said, effectively relegating the movement to the status of a rearguard period revival of the 1920s. This has the secondary effect of pushing gifted earlier figures like Samuel Maclure of Victoria and Eden Smith of Toronto virtually out of the book: Maclure's partner Cecil Croker Fox gets a house on page 157, but the marvellous Smith is ignored.

Coming closer to the present, I have reservations about the treatment of the so-called Post-Modern Style, architecture since 1970. "There are ... no rules in Post-Modernism," we are told on page 198, meaning, I suppose, that contemporary architecture is unusually eclectic. But this is an over-simplification and far from the truth, for the first young rebels who broke with modernist orthodoxy — actually, by the Sixties anything but orthodox — did so because they did not think it orderly enough and wanted to recover the civility of the Western classical tradition. Given the current bias against "Eurocentrism," classical design or design with overt classical references has sunk like a stone (it is not, however, dead); but in the beginning, Venturi, Moore, and company revisited classicism to revive a canonical order they did not find in what they saw as the chaos and inchoate primitivism into which modernism had fallen. The result was the picturesque traditionalism here called the Post-Modern Style. But contemporary architecture is much too complex and variegated to be treated under that rubric. Venturi, Gehry, and "Robert" (meaning Michael) Graves are mentioned together on page 198, but should not be, being poles apart. Differences between them and others turn on complicated theoretical questions of how post-modernism (if it exists) is related to modernism and the whole Western cultural enterprise beginning at the Enlightenment. These questions are moot, and, accordingly, contemporary architecture is quite fragmented. The ordinary reader does not need to know all this, but why not adopt a few Jencks-like categories to summarize the activity? Say, Late Modernism, Post-Modernism, and Deconstructivism, especially since a pioneer of the last, Johnson & Burgee's Broadcast Centre in Toronto, is in Canada.

A problem of approaching architecture principally as style (and one reason this approach has become less popular of late) is that it attends mainly to visual surfaces and largely overlooks such considerations as context, history, typology, social purpose, and sign-value. The problem can be overcome with skill and nuance, since style *is* an actor, if not an independent one, on the stage of history. But more than style is usually at work. The high quality of residential design in the period 1880 to 1920, for example, involved more than the use of a range of styles (some new, some revived); in answering questions of type and program it effectively responded to new ways of life. Small wonder Europeans marvelled at English and American domestic design of the period, and that some of the best architects (Wright, conspicuously) made their names here. Yet much of this slips between the boards of a style guide. To cite one example, the authors here, wanting to avoid types as determiners, do not, I think, emphasize the bungalow sufficiently, and so give scant attention to

a curiously fascinating feature of western cities (starting at Kenora): the seas of stucco, wood, and occasionally brick or stone bungalows, laid out on flat, gridded streets, with aspens or birches on the lawns. As a result, the achievement of western architects such as Maclure, who varied the form with great effect, is diminished.

Because they want to draw attention to what makes each style look distinctive, the authors have given a peculiar structure to the essays, one so consistent as clearly to be deliberate. Almost every essay begins by listing the features of the style and ends with background information on its precursors and proponents, carrying the essay backward in sense and time. I find myself wanting to "flip" almost every essay by moving the last paragraph to follow the opening sentence, so as to reverse the flow and move the argument from past to present, general to particular, international to Canadian.

The authors try hard to be fair to all historic styles and the architects that practised them. Still, one senses a bias against effects of grandeur, rhetoric, and ornamentation (especially where it is eclectic). These, it is implied, are departures from the true, pure, implicitly modern faith: early phases of the Gothic Revival lack the structural integrity of neoclassicism (page 43); the Queen Anne shows "dizzying variety" and "bewildering combination," though "underlying discipline" (page 98); Beaux-Arts public buildings are "executed on a vast scale, with monumental porticoes, intimidatingly long flights of stairs, and blindingly white stone surfaces" (page 111). I cannot think of one Beaux-Arts building in Canada that answers that description, and few outside, though I have no trouble thinking of recent skyscrapers that do. Post-Modernism is "an eclectic style that regards all of architectural history as fair game" (page 198). Because of this bias, highly decorative buildings tend not to be appreciated as they might. On page 48, a pretty, gothicised house with scalloped porches and bargeboards in Saint John, N.B., is a "wedding-cake" with Gothic trim which, it is said, might just as easily be classical dentils. But this diminishes a charming, rather funny house, just the sort of thing one goes to Saint John, a port city which once had many ship's carpenters, to see. The "pinched" French Gothic façade of a chapel in Quebec City "suggests the architect had not come to terms with the style" (page 73). To me, it suggests that its designer, the accomplished, versatile F.-X. Berlinguet, who was (among his several trades) a church decorator, was adapting the form of a Gothic Revival altarpiece, of which he did several, to this high, narrow, quirky façade. Too often, the fine grain and astonishing individuality of architecture — its beauty and wit — are lost as buildings and architects are stretched across a grid of styles onto which they fit only more or less.

Of all Victorian styles, perhaps none was ridden quite as roughly by 20th-century critics as Second Empire (Cass Gilbert once seriously proposed blasting the engaged orders off Old State, War, and Navy). Yet, what strikes one studying the buildings in *A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles,* and in Christina Cameron and Janet Wright's excellent *Second Empire Style in Canadian Architecture* (Parks Canada, 1980), is their sheer variety. Langley (like Mullett) is lush; Taché is thin and serious (but look what Quebec City's climate does to stone); Teague is Ruskinian; Scott is protean; Fuller is forceful; McKean and Fairweather are supple and elastic, almost Richardsonian; and Perrault is simply magnificent (his post office on St. James Street, Montreal, now gone, must have taken the breath away). This love of architecture and its myriad effects is what we want Canadians to have, the sense of it as a varied yet disciplined set of responses to needs presented by nature in forms and techniques given by culture. This is what Maitland, Hucker, and Ricketts wanted to do and, I think, have largely succeeded in doing. The authors could have gone farther and been more relaxed, expansive, and lyrical without losing rigour (in fact, gaining it). They have set a tray of delicacies before us, and we should ask for even more. With these reservations in mind, I, for one, will recommend the book to my students.

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