

Architecture in Transition: From Art to Practice, 1885-1906

Book Review by Douglas Franklin

Given its title and the relative brevity of this volume one might expect a fairly restricted interpretation of its theme. The twenty-one-year period it addresses is surely one of the richest in the history of Canadian architecture, rife with larger-than-life personalities, numerous stylistic movements, and a web of complex themes overlaid onto the drama of transcontinental settlement and city building. To his great credit, Kelly Crossman has exploited the length of his study as few architectural historians have. He has identified and examined the most important aspects of architectural practice in late nineteenth-century Canada and pulled them together with only the most minor distractions in his presentation.

Crossman's study is divided into three parts, entitled Professionalism, New Ideas, and Nationalism. His thesis focuses on the remarkable maturity which occurred in the practice of architecture in Canada during the turn of the last century. There is an appealing symmetry in the way Crossman organizes and presents his arguments. Of his nine chapters, the first and last discuss architectural competitions. Throughout the book, Crossman balances the history of the emerging architectural profession with revealing biographical sketches of architects and sound, useful descriptions of their work. The value of the author's

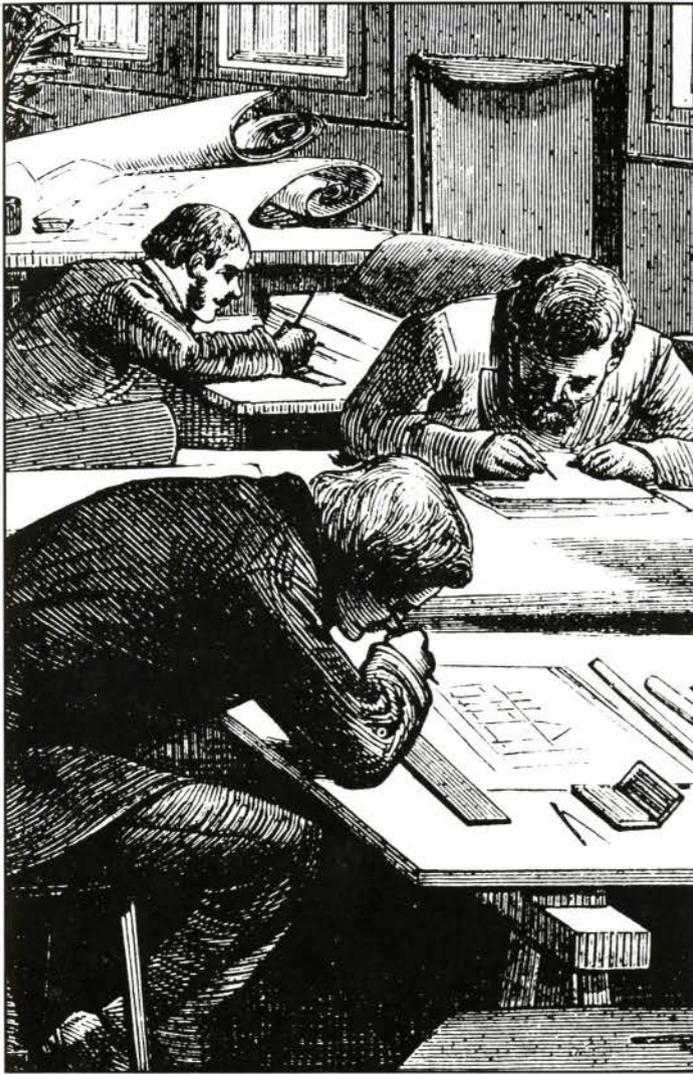
overall approach, in the context of the sheer volume of the historical material available, is that it satisfies. Crossman succeeds in answering the questions he asks, and sheds light on details that other architectural historians have left in the shadow.

The method that Crossman uses relies neither on chronological crutches nor the convenient bookends of well-recognized stylistic periods in Canadian architecture. Instead, he makes a critical examination of the ideological currents in architectural thought in Canada manifested in the writing and behavior of architectural practitioners, educators, and clients. The outcome of Crossman's exercise, attempted by others in addressing this period, is much more enlightening as a result of this technique. For instance, the predilection of Canadians for American architecture in the 1880s was not entirely faddish, but rooted in a genuine national insecurity over Canadian architectural ideas and institutions. To illustrate this phenomenon, Crossman describes the commission for Ontario's legislative buildings by New York architect Richard Waite. The absence of a genuine competition among Canadian architects and the scandalous outcome rank somewhat higher on the scale of irony than the burial of Canada's first Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald ("A British subject I was born, a British subject I will die") in a coffin made in the U.S.A. In this context, Crossman explains the difficult and sometimes painful development of the architectural profession in Canada. Led by the Ontario Association of Architects and Province of Quebec Association of Architects, founded in 1889 and 1890 respectively, the movement to provide coherent training programs and establish professional standards followed a difficult course, requiring personal initiative and sacrifices by a number of Canadian architects. The bid to obtain provincial legislation for the registration of architects was entertained in Ontario in 1890 but compulsory professional registration was not achieved there for many years.

The evolution of architectural education in Canada in the period 1885-1906 is critically important in Crossman's study. At the beginning of this period the apprenticeship system was the norm, but few architects obtained a well-rounded education. Crossman quotes the predictable advice given to students from a leading Canadian architect at the time: Go the United States. However, the establishment of a system of progressive examinations by the provincial associations, based on the model of the Royal Institute of British Architects, was a first and logical step forward. The architectural syllabus of the 1890s, which Crossman describes, was clearly responsible for the contemporary preoccupation for reworking the Classical and Romanesque styles. The first chair in architecture in Canada was established by McGill University in 1896, a seminal event in the development of both architectural education as well as the profession itself. In this context, Crossman also reveals the role of the influential *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and its methods in shaping the nascent profession.

Crossman devotes one chapter of his study to "Steel, Iron, and Glass in the 1890s." Again, the subject of his exercise is not a narrative history but a critical examination of the effect of technology on the architectural profession. Crossman sheds further light on the debate between architect as artist and architect as engineer during this lionized decade of building in Canada. By way of illustration, the author reviews several important commissions of the period, especially the





Robert Simpson building in Toronto. Perhaps the most notable documentary evidence presented in this chapter is the prophetic observation by A. T. Taylor in 1892 on the limitations of the skyscraper as architecture.

Crossman's discussion about education and technology furnishes a solid introduction to his chapter on the Eighteen Club and the Beaux-Arts system. His dialectic treatment of the tension between architects under the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement and those nurtured by the École des Beaux-Arts is very astute. For those architects who traveled in either circle, the inclination towards particular styles was an ideological accompaniment to their education. Arts and Crafts architects were inspired by the vernacular and attempted to recreate its nativist milieu. Beaux-Arts architects sought the first principles of logic and organization in classical antiquity. Crossman relates the central role of John Lyle who studied at the École de Beaux-Arts and conducted an atelier in Toronto. The "most gifted and articulate" spokesman for the Beaux-Arts method in Canada was William S. Maxwell of Montreal, who believed that it was the most

systematic approach to architectural education. His defense of the "discipline" of this "rational system of education" already found favour among architects of all ideological persuasions who pressed towards professionalism.

The third part of Crossman's study, entitled "Nationalism" and perhaps the most synthetic part of his work, begins by describing a common theme expressed by architects during the period, namely, that architecture could play an important role in the development of Canadian society if it could develop its own character. By "character" was meant not only style but also appropriateness to climate. Crossman reviews the work of Lord Dufferin and his Irish architect William Lynn in promoting a romantic vision of Quebec based on pre-conquest late medieval and early Renaissance forms. Quebec architects Eugène-Etienne Taché and Charles Baillaigé also drew inspiration in a self-conscious way from the early architecture of Quebec. But it was Scottish-trained Percy Nobbs, recruited as McGill's second Chairman of architecture, who became the main proponent for a national architectural character. Grounded in the English and Scottish Arts and Crafts movements, Nobbs proselytized the notion of architecture as cultural expression. Developing a powerful base as Canada's preeminent professor of architecture, he also published extensively and chaired several key architectural competitions. One of the most important of these competitions, in Crossman's estimation, was that called in 1907 for the Saskatchewan Legislature. In this exercise Nobbs was able to stem the tide of American influence (which he also equated with the influence of the École des Beaux-Arts) and amplify the value of both British styles and architectural culture as well as Canadian institutions. Hence, Crossman's concluding chapter provides a counterpoint to his opening chapter on Canadian deference to the United States.

Crossman's study has helped me to reconcile Eric Arthur's rather harsh indictment of the Ontario legislative buildings in the late 1940s. Perhaps Arthur's disdain for Richardsonian Romanesque had much to do with his own contribution to the agenda set by Percy Nobbs. Undoubtedly, the notion of Canadian nationalism in architecture raised once again in *Architecture in Transition* deserves more examination.

My only reservations are stylistic ones, and my criticism is with the editor rather than the author. The book suffers from not having a separate chapter for a conclusion. The style of Crossman's work is, at times, too earnest, "indeed." No scholarly study of this sort needs to be encumbered with such phrases as "... but the point to be made here is that ..." and the redundant hand-holding in "... as we saw in Chapter 6" repeated in subsequent chapters. Physically, the book is very appealing, with high quality typography marred only by the distracting misuse of dashes as hyphens.

Architecture in Transition makes a substantial contribution to the study of architecture in Canada.

● *Architecture in Transition: From Art to Practice, 1885-1906*, by Kelly Crossman (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987). 193 pp., illus. Cloth. \$35.00. ISBN 0-7735-0604-7.