The Growth of Architectural History in British Columbia

by Alastair Kerr

For the December 1972 issue of the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians Harold Kalman wrote an article entitled "Recent Literature on the History of Canadian Architecture". His stated purpose was to bring to the attention of a wider public all books and a number of articles published on Canadian architectural history since about 1960, because many had gone relatively unnoticed. After reading the article two observations are readily apparent. First, Kalman is able to review most of the major contributions to the architectural history of Canada in an article that is only eight pages in length, which demonstrates the paucity of published material before 1972. Second, architectural history was virtually non-existent in western Canada. Kalman states that it was just reaching adolescence in Quebec and Ontario, at its infancy in the maritimes, but still in "the delivery room out West".

Since that time Canadian architectural history has progressed considerably, although it has a long way to go before it can be considered truly mature. The first to mature was British Columbia. A History for the Occasion and the Provincial Government began its major restoration of the Province that it had a distinctive environment as never before and the appetite for increased knowledge created a demand for a variety of publications on historic architecture. They include articles in magazines and journals not usually devoted to architectural history, popular and educationally oriented books to teach a lay readership the elements and diversity of historic architectural design, biographies and monographs of individual architects, monographs on individual buildings, articles and books on building types, guidebooks and governmental sponsored research studies. Each of these seven loosely defined categories are described below to illustrate the kinds of writings which have been published in recent years.

1. Articles in Magazines and Journals

A strict demarcation between popular, professional and academic writing is not always easy to make. Often writing for a popular audience is well researched, perceptive and articulate. Moreover, such publications have added substantially to the total knowledge of a subject and can provide a fitting context for later in-depth scholarly research, which in turn, may refine our perceptions. Much of British Columbia's fledgling architectural history is still in this quasi-popular vein.

The better articles have appeared in journals and magazines related to the arts or antiquities and hence are directed at a more sophisticated audience. For example the 1981, spring issue of West Coast Review, self described as a magazine of the arts for the West Coast, devoted the entire issue to British Columbian architectural history and criticism. It contains eight essays on a variety of topics introduced with newly published material and some reworking of previously published ideas. Notable for architectural history are Martin Segger's article on Samuel Maclure and Cecile Crocker Fox's, David La's on the architecture of Victoria's Chinatown, John Fleming's on the Duncan Public School of 1913, and Douglas Franklin's on the competition for the design of the University of British Columbia.
Somewhat earlier the Canadian Collector had published a series of special issues devoted to each province's cultural heritage. For the British Columbia issue, nine out of twenty-five articles deal with aspects of the province's historic architecture, archaeology, architectural art, interiors and even the restoration and conservation of some of its historic buildings. It was the first time that many of these findings had ever been published and a number of the articles are precursors to major works which followed.

At a much more popular level, the book published by the Heritage Preservation Foundation of New Westminster, The Courthouse of New Westminster, by Martin Segger, was published in response to a multi-million dollar rehabilitation and selective restoration of the provincial legislature. The book deals with the history of its construction, contemporaneous newspaper accounts, another brief biography on Rattenbury, the craftsman and the restoration.

Perhaps the most long awaited publication and a potentially early milestone in Canadian architectural historiography, if it had been published when it was written, is Peter Cotton's Vice Regal Mansions of British Columbia on the various houses for the Governors of the Crown Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia and for the Lieutenant-Governors of the Province. Commenced in 1958, it was published posthumously in 1981. A very well researched, documented and illustrated book, it provides an illuminating history of these kinds of houses and their social functions which have been required for the institutions of Governor and Lieutenant-Governor in British Columbia.

The last monograph of note is The Courthouse of New Westminster prepared by the Heritage Preservation Foundation of New Westminster. The book falls largely into the local history tradition of architectural writing, although the chapter on G. W. Grant who was also the architect for the majority of historic business blocks in New Westminster, is particularly valuable since little has been written about him elsewhere.

2. Popular Educational Books

Along with magazine articles there have appeared a number of books and articles in anthologies aimed at improving the general visual literacy of the public toward architecture. The best is Gerald Formosa's The Pleasure of Seeing: Architectural Sculpture and Decorative Art in Vancouver with an introduction by Edward Gibson. As an art teacher, Formosa's primary concern is teaching people to see and his book contains excellent black and white photographs on little known or appreciated details of many of Vancouver's buildings. Gibson's introduction provides a good architectural historical context for the photo essay and gives depth to an otherwise attractive picture book.

Graeme Chalmers and Frances Moorcroft's British Columbia Houses: Guide to the Styles of Domestic Architecture in British Columbia is a workbook for secondary school art and home economics students, as its subtitle notes. It is literally a workbook for students to look at and to analyze architectural styles through a variety of projects. It is a good introduction for secondary students although style is cut adrift from historical processes.

R. A. J. Phillips and Alan Gowans' Up the Streets of British Columbia is a rather whimsical look at the streets of British Columbia's communities as museums which reflect the growth and development of such towns. It is very popular in level and tone and provides another stylistic breakdown of the types of buildings to be found. Gowans' extensive writing on the social function of the arts elsewhere (and which is missing here), the book is somewhat of a disappointment.

Finally, an amusing book which contains some articles in this popular educational vein is Chuck Davis' The Vancouver Book. Described as "an urban almanac" it provides the reader almost anything he ever wanted to know about Vancouver in twenty words or less. Topics range from history to neighbourhoods, environment, city administration, ethnic groups, housing, education, health care, the arts, recreation and culture. Included are three sketches on Vancouver's architecture which are written within the established and generally accepted historical or stylistic approaches.

3. Biographies and Monographs on Individual Architects

Significant biographies and monographs on individual architects are still rare and considerable work needs to be done in this field. Of British Columbia's two most famous historic architects, Samuel Maclure and Francis Mawson Rattenbury, only the latter has been extensively written about. Rattenbury certainly had the higher profile as an architect, developer and entrepreneur and, if for nothing else, he will always be remembered as the architect of British Columbia's Legislative Buildings and the Empress Hotel in Victoria. In life he was a controversial figure, his murder in Bournemouth, England, was equally controversial, and so too have people's opinion of him proven to be long after his death. Controversy makes a good story and Terry Reksten's 1978 biography, Rattenbury provides the first detailed look at the man. A very readable book, Reksten pieces together a credible character study, portraying his strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately she defers a detailed analysis of his architecture to someone more capable than herself and much is left unsaid. The gap is largely filled by Anthony Barrett and Rhodri Liscumbe's detailed study Francis Rattenbury and British Columbia: Architecture and Challenge in the Imperial Age. The book is a well documented, profusely illustrated biography and architectural analysis. The authors have gathered together a previously unknown collection of letters written by Rattenbury to his relatives in England between 1899 and 1931 for their re-interpretation. Their presentation of Rattenbury is in a modern, avant-garde light, but Reksten and his architecture is seen in the context of the monumental traditions of the late Victorian and Edwardian era.

The only other significant monographs on a British Columbian architect are two on Arthur Erikson. The first is Erikson's own book entitled The Architecture of Arthur Erikson. It is a very personal description of his work and is useful in understanding his ideas. The second is Edith Iglauer's Seven Stones: A Portrait of Arthur Erikson. Iglauer spent thirteen years studying Erikson's work and her book provides a much more comprehensive and objective analysis. Its focus is on what the architect has attempted to achieve and there is still room for a book relating Erikson to the broader context of Late Modern and Post-Modern architecture elsewhere, and to the role of regional cultural expression found in his work.

4. Monographs on Individual Buildings

Similar to the books available on architects, there are very few monographs on individual buildings. One of the earliest published attempts to portray a single building from a multi-faceted point of view is the Crystal Gardens Preservation Society's publication, The Crystal Gardens Palace edited by Martin Segger, was published in response to a multi-million dollar rehabilitation and selective restoration of the provincial legislature. The book deals with the history of its construction, contemporaneous newspaper accounts, another brief biography on Rattenbury, the craftsman and the restoration.

Perhaps the most long awaited publication and a potentially early milestone in Canadian architectural historiography, if it had been published when it was written, is Peter Cotton's Vice Regal Mansions of British Columbia on the various houses for the Governors of the Crown Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia and for the Lieutenant-Governors of the Province. Commenced in 1958, it was published posthumously in 1981. A very well researched, documented and illustrated book, it provides an illuminating history of these kinds of houses and their social functions which have been required for the institutions of Governor and Lieutenant-Governor in British Columbia.

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5. Books or Articles on Types or Classes of Buildings

A number of publications have also appeared dealing with different genres and buildings erected for specific groups. Because such structures fall within readily identifiable classes, most publications attempt to give some reason for the specific building forms adopted and their roles within society.

Since churches and other religious buildings are often the most visually and socially distinctive forms of architecture in a community, especially in small ones, it is not surprising that two major works have been written on the province's ecclesiastical buildings. John Veillette and Gary White's *Early Indian Churches: Wooden Frontier Architecture in British Columbia* is an outstanding example of a carefully researched and well written book, accessible to a wide audience, introducing a chapter of British Columbia's historic architecture which had been little acknowledged before. The book began as a study for all early churches in the province, but the authors soon discovered that the Indian mission churches are the best preserved and offer a distinctive class of buildings worthy of study by themselves. The book also contains three excellent introductory essays on the background to the Indian missions, mission church architecture on the Industrial Frontier and the villages and churches today.

The second major work is Barry Down's *Sacred Places, British Columbia's Early Churches.* A beautifully illustrated book, Downs presents a panorama of ecclesiastical architecture from pre-Christian, traditional Indian structures to mission churches and churches in urban and white settlements. Throughout, the author is conscious of the social role of architecture in its historical setting and he recognizes that "it was the church—usually a social as well as a religious centre—that best represented the cultural values of the period."

Another highly visible building type is the railway station. J. Edward Martin's *The Railway Stations of Western Canada, An Architectural History,* begins to trace the evolution of its form in western Canada from 1875, to the present. The book is derived from Martin's master's thesis and provides a good survey of the stylistic development of rail stations.

Taking a slightly different approach is Deryck Holdsworth's article "House and Home in Vancouver: Images of West Coast Urbanism, 1885-1929." The author endeavours to show the role of the single family, detached dwelling as the aspiration for middle class suburban home ownership. By looking historically at the social role of such houses Holdsworth suggests that a function of style is to reinforce the values of these beliefs which in turn have produced a distinctive cultural landscape.

Another distinctive form of architecture in the province is the building and structures erected by various ethnic communities. The present reviewer has written two articles on the topic, one in conjunction with J. Bugslag, which attempts to identify the nature of the evolution of Chinese architecture in British Columbia. A number of excellent articles have been written by David Lai on the geography and society of the province's Chinatowns, but they are beyond the scope of this review. However, Lai, also has written an introductory article on the architecture of Victoria's Chinatown which is worth comparing with the two articles cited above, and an excellent small monograph on historic arches in British Columbia, particularly those erected by the Chinese community.


A variety of historic and architectural tour guides and pamphlets have been produced over the last few years. The only two reviewed here are Harold Kalman's *Exploring Vancouver* and Martin Segger and Douglas Franklin's *Victoria: A Primer for Regional History in Architecture 1843-1929.* Kalman's includes six walking tours and four driving tours, each prefaced with a brief introduction and area map. Descriptions on individual buildings are only a paragraph in length and the book works very well as an architectural guide book with a good balance between historical facts and interpretation and stylistic analysis.

Segger and Franklin's book on the other hand, is a combined formal architectural history and guide book and it is more cumbersome to use as a field guide. Descriptions on individual buildings are generally twice as long, but what is lost by not reading the lengthy texts while on foot is more than gained as a long overdue source book. On page 7, Segger describes it as "an armchair guide to Victoria's architectural history and some of its significant buildings" and in this respect it works very well.

7. Government Publications

The final category dealt with in this review is publications by the Federal Government. Through National Historic Parks and Sites Branch and particularly the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building Division, some of very good reports and articles have been published. Some were written as part of broad national studies to explore architectural trends and developments in the various regions of the country and should be read within this wider context. Of particular note are the reports by Edward Mills on the architectural trends of Victoria (1850-1914) and Vancouver (1886-1914), the early courthouses of the province, and Susan Lambeth and Susanne Juene's history of Fisgard Lighthouse. An article also published by Mills in conjunction with Deryck Holdsworth entitled "The B.C. Mills Prefabricated System: The Emergence of Ready-made Buildings in Western Canada" in *Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History* brought to light the role of the buildings prefabricated by the British Columbia Mills, Timber and Trading Company in the supply of instant architecture for the new towns of British Columbia and the prairie provinces. It is an often cited article and its impact has been felt in historic preservation circles.

CONCLUSIONS

The appearance in recent years of the publications reviewed is a very encouraging sign for the development of an architectural history for Canada in general and for British Columbia in particular. Such publications also serve to identify gaps in our knowledge. There has yet to be a major work on Samuel Maclure who easily ranks as one of the major North American architects within the Arts and Crafts tradition. Happily, Martin Segger is currently working on such a long overdue publication. Biographies on other major architects are also overdue, as well as more area and period studies and additional monographs on the province's important historic buildings. An ideal format which could be considered to remedy these gaps is the two volume history *Space, Style and Stucture: Buildings in Northwest America* published by the American Historical Society which covers a wealth of detail on town planning to architectural design in the northwestern states. Whether or not such a book is ever produced, the mounting information on British Columbia's architectural history should make the next survey book written on Canada's architecture include more than a passing reference to the buildings of the country's most western province.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid, 315.
5. "One Hundred Years of B.C. Living", *Western Homes and Living*, January 1958, 35 - 42.
A Glimpse at Canada Place

EXPO '86

by D. W. Lovell

Canada Place as designed by the joint venture of Musson Cattel & Partners, Downs/Archambault and Zeldler Roberts Partnership, Architects will be the home of the Expo '86 Canadian Pavilion. Subsequent to the exhibition, Canada Place will be converted into Vancouver's Trade and Convention Centre.

This massive complex, 139,350m² (1.5 million square feet) is well underway with a completion date of April, 1986. The lowest level will provide a loading area for cruise ships and parking for 800 cars. A terminal located above the parking floors can service five cruise ships. The Convention Centre with 9,300m² of display area is above the cruise ship level. A 500 room hotel and 23,225m² World Trade Centre sits atop the Convention Centre.