

ALAN GOWANS [1923-2001] A Tribute

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As the University of Victoria celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the inauguration of its Department of Art History, it is appropriate to remember Alan Gowans, who is so closely identified with the institution. He taught at “UVic” between 1966 and 1988 and chaired the department for many years. Although Gowans had previously worked only at American universities, he had already made his reputation as the first academically trained architectural historian to focus on Canadian architecture. This golden anniversary provides a good opportunity to recollect Gowans and his lasting contributions to the history of architecture in Canada.

Older members of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada will know and respect Gowans as the author of *Church Architecture in New France* (1955), *Looking at Architecture in Canada* (1958), subsequently revised as *Building Canada: An Architectural History of Canadian Life* (1966), as well as more focused scholarly articles on Notre-Dame de Montréal, Thomas Baillaigé, and what he perceptively termed the Baroque Revival in Quebec. These contributions, written at a time when there was hardly any scholarly literature on architecture in Canada, certainly merit his being thought of as the father of Canadian architectural history.

Alan Gowans is better remembered, however, for his copious writings about American architecture and its place in society. He spent his early years at a number of American colleges and his last dozen years living in the Washington



FIG. 1. ALAN GOWANS IN THE HISTORY IN ART SLIDE LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA, C. 1971-75. | UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA ARCHIVES, 042.1600 #11.

area, and those residencies comprise his popular legacy. In preparing this tribute, I read obituaries in the *Society of Architectural Historians Newsletter*, the *Washington Post*, *Wikipedia*, and the *UVic Torch*—none of which cites any of his Canadian publications.

Gowans was born in Toronto and received his B.A. and M.A. in art history from the University of Toronto. He went to Princeton University in the early 1950s and earned a second master's degree and a Ph.D., writing his dissertation on the churches of New France. This was a challenging assignment, since he had been flatly told by the Princeton faculty that North American architecture was not sufficiently significant to form the basis of a dissertation. But he persisted—he was a persuasive man—and was finally granted permission. In this and in so many other things that he did, he was well ahead of his time.

After graduating, Gowans taught at a succession of small American institutions: Rutgers University, Middlebury College, and the University of Delaware, where he was chair from 1959 to 1966. He became a United States citizen in 1957, a decade before he came to Victoria. He served as president of the Society of Architectural Historians in 1972-1973.

Gowans maintained that he taught “cultural history” rather than “art history.” He believed that the phrase “history of art” reflected a bias toward connoisseurship. He changed the name of his department at UVic to the Department of “History in Art,” which it remains today. His highly praised survey course in cultural history at the University of Delaware—one veteran of the course was the former president of the SSAC, the late Martin Eli Weil—would form the basis of Gowans’ best-known book, *Images of American Living: Four*

Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression (1964). Widely used as a textbook in the U.S., it taught that the vernacular artifacts of everyday life are just as much a part of material culture as high art—a radical idea in the 1960s, but one generally accepted today. The book was awarded the Society of Architectural Historians’ Alice Davis Hitchcock Prize for distinguished scholarship.

Gowans was particularly interested in the popular arts. He wrote and lectured on cartoons. Those he most admired were Popeye and Li'l Abner. He produced and annotated a new edition of the work of Popeye's creator, E.C. Segar, which he called *Popeye and the American Dream* (1982). Other favourites were gas stations and commercial roadside architecture. He constantly explored how artifacts such as these contribute to our society, leading to two textbooks: *The Restless Art: A History of Painters and Painting, 1760-1960* (1966) and *The Unchanging Arts: New Forms for the Traditional Functions of Art in Society* (1971).

Gowans never lost sight of architecture. Two later books are *The Comfortable House: North American Suburban Architecture 1890-1930* (1986) and *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression* (1992), both of which treated Canadian and American architecture together. The latter in particular was written for a popular audience and was published by a trade publisher, HarperCollins. He respected the power of television as a teaching tool, and advised film-maker Ken Burns on a documentary treatment of Frank Lloyd Wright. Gowans may have been most proud of two tomes based on his course syllabi: “The Language of History in Art” (1970-1971), which he published at UVic, and “On Parallels in Universal History” (1974),

which remains in manuscript form. He also prepared a four-volume syllabus for the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, called “History of Ideas in Architecture” (1995). Gowans often had difficulty securing publishers, since his approach was considered eccentric, even outrageous, whereas today we recognize his wisdom.

This independent, contrarian streak was revealed in some of the lecturers he brought to the University of Victoria. The one who attracted the most attention was the Russian-American Immanuel Velikovsky. He was notorious for having reinterpreted ancient history and its chronology based on literary and cosmic sources, and his admirable, groundbreaking ideas have been banished to the fringe.

Gowans’ professional character can be understood only by looking at his academic background. He studied at Princeton University with Donald Drew Egbert [1902-1973], who was his dissertation adviser. (Egbert was also my dissertation adviser some fifteen years later.) Egbert began his career with focused, scholarly publications on medieval ivories and manuscripts, then turned his attention to broader issues that looked at American and European architecture and civilization. He was a man of contradictions: a staunch conservative and Republican, and the son of a Congregationalist minister, who had a life-long interest in socialist art; a thorough scholar who in later life abandoned primary research. Egbert's last book, *Social Radicalism and the Arts, Western Europe: A Cultural History from the French Revolution to 1968* (1970), was based entirely on secondary sources. Gowans collected and published a number of Egbert's periodical articles as a “festschrift reader,” *On Arts in Society* (1970).

Egbert in turn had been a student of Earl Baldwin Smith [1888-1956], who taught at Princeton for many years. Smith abandoned his discipline—Early Christian Art—and became a cultural historian, well ahead of the pack. His most important books were *Egyptian Architecture as Cultural Expression* (1938; republished by Gowans in 1968) and *The Dome: A Study in the History of Ideas* (1950). In many ways, Gowans' and Egbert's careers mirrored that of Smith.

This focus on architecture as cultural expression has found its way down to several of Egbert's students, including Pierre du Prey (retired from Queen's University), Claude Bergeron (retired from Université Laval), and myself (formerly on the faculty at the University of British Columbia, now an affiliate at UVic). Another former Egbert student was architect Robert Venturi, whose book *Looking at Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (1972) shares much in common with Gowans' *Images of American Living*.

In order to appreciate an aspect of Gowans' impact on the study of Canadian architectural history, I must get autobiographical. As a graduate student at Princeton, working with Egbert on my dissertation, I discovered and valued Gowans' *Looking at Architecture in Canada*. Egbert introduced me to Gowans, who encouraged me to study Canadian architecture. Gowans was responsible for my first publication, *The Railway Hotels and the Development of the Château Style in Canada* (1966), which he used to launch a series of monographs at the University of Victoria. (His *On Parallels in Universal History* was part of the same series.) He likewise encouraged me to write a successor to his *Building Canada*, which became my *A History of Canadian Architecture* (1994) and assisted me as a

valued member of the book's advisory board. My overall approach follows those of Smith, Egbert, and Gowans, treating architecture as a tangible expression of culture and society. It too is based mostly on secondary research. My work had a distinct advantage that Gowans lacked, namely a generation of good primary research by other Canadian architectural historians, all of whom had been inspired by Gowans.

Alan Gowans was brilliant, witty, sharp, and quick; a far-seeing scholar who always sought the big picture and the overall defining patterns. He was also pessimistic and dictatorial, famously irascible with people he did not like. He was a self-acknowledged curmudgeon who found comfort in corresponding with a fellow misanthrope, Malcolm Muggeridge. Gowans was deeply troubled by contemporary society. He found a degree of refuge by living in small communities (including Victoria). He did not have a happy personal life and faced some difficulties in his professional life. Alan and I kept in touch until shortly before his death. Late in life he sent me the manuscript of a short diatribe set in a mythical university. It was clear that the story had parallels with his frustrations at UVic. He asked whether I could help him get it published. I would have liked very much to have returned the favour he had done for me . . . but was unsuccessful. Gowans probably had a dozen more book projects in his head when he died.

Alan Gowans passed away on August 19, 2001, at the age of seventy-seven. He died of congestive heart failure at a nursing home near Washington, DC, the city where he had lived for about a dozen years. He donated his marvellous collection of twenty-five thousand slides, including many images of roadside attractions, to the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Martin Segger, who taught in Gowans' department for many years (and who assisted in the preparation of this tribute), organized a dinner in his memory in Victoria. The date of the dinner was September 11, 2001 . . . and as a consequence of the momentous events of that day, many invitees did not attend. Perhaps this was a fitting way to say goodbye to a man who had perceived so much evil in the world.