

COMPETING MODERNISMS: TORONTO'S NEW CITY HALL AND SQUARE

By George Thomas Kapelos [with an Introduction by Christopher Armstrong], Halifax, Dalhousie Architectural Press, 2015, 128 pages

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This excellent book and the exhibition it presents revisit a stimulating and productive time in Canadian and international architecture. The end of World War II in 1945 released energy until then bound up in the war effort, for deferred and new civil projects. Reconstruction in war-devastated countries was an important part of this internationally; in Canada, returning service people and the creation of new families led to a surge of demand for housing, schools, and all the other facilities and amenities of a vigorous and growing population. One was a new city hall for Toronto.

Christopher Armstrong's Introduction sets the civic context for the competition: the need for a new building to replace Lennox's Victorian Romanesque City Hall, and the commissioning of an established local firm, Marani and Morris, to design it. When their uninspiring proposal was greeted by vigorous protests, a second was produced by a consortium of established local architects, but that proved equally unacceptable. Instead, city council gave way before a well-organized campaign to hold an international architectural competition. Eric Arthur, University of Toronto professor and editor of the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, served as professional advisor. Arthur's selection of the international, all-architect jury was critically important for the competition's success.

A substantial account by George Kapelos follows, not just of the Toronto competition itself, but of international and Canadian precedents and critical reaction both to the competition and to its result. The evident success of the competition, 509 entries from 42 countries, attracted attention from such eminent figures as the historian and critic Siegfried Giedion. It was held in two stages, with eight finalists chosen to submit more fully developed schemes for final adjudication. Kapelos reports comments from a number of the competitors on the experience, fifty plus years later; clearly the competition was a major event in the careers of many.

Kapelos discusses the diversity of entries, illustrating the "competing" modernisms of his title. One of the great values of the competition and its record is the insight it offers into ideas of the "modern" in architecture in the 1950s. Arthur's

competition conditions were written to invite just such a range of approaches; Kapelos quotes Arthur's comment from an unpublished manuscript that the submissions show the period "frozen in time" (p. 27). His reflections on the influence of the competition as a precedent and inspiration for others such as the Edmonton, Mississauga, and Kitchener city hall competitions are followed by a concluding meditation on questions of national identity and a Canadian modernity.

The following sections of the book, amply illustrated, present the "Finalists," "Canadian Entrants," and "International Entrants." These 70 pages include not just illustrations and comments on the designs, but brief biographies of their authors. The jury report is given, including the dissenting "Minority Report" of Sir William Holford and Professor Gordon Stevenson. Finally, the list of entrants is reproduced from Arthur's marked-up typescript, with comments on discrepancies.

As Kapelos notes, some of the younger competitors went on to find employment in Toronto, and either continued there or went on to practise elsewhere. John Andrews, for instance, worked for a while in the John B. Parkin office, before returning to a distinguished career in his native Australia. David Horne joined the office of Page and Steele in Toronto, and Andrew's collaborator May Dubois also built a successful Toronto career.

There was a sense at the time that modernism had finally arrived in Canada, after some tentative experiments before the war. The depression of the 1930s followed by the pressing demand for people and funds to prosecute WWII meant a long pause in development. The 1950s saw the return or entry into practice of young architects with an enthusiasm for the ideas of the pre-war avant-garde, some experience of contemporary European work, and a desire to experiment with new forms and new technologies. Parkin's 1954 Ontario Association of Architects headquarters building marked a new openness to modernism and established the Parkin firm as flag-bearer for the movement.

My own years in the bachelor of architecture program at the University of Toronto (1957-1962) coincided with this blossoming of new growth and I shared in the excitement. Classmates, including George Baird and Ted Teshima, went on to notable

careers helping to shape and expand Canadian modernism within and beyond our borders. The City Hall competition both energized this movement and clearly established its international dimensions. Canadian architecture drew on international examples such as Viljo Revell's and other Scandinavian leaders, but also found attention and respect in international publications. Young Canadians travelled internationally to study, work, and teach, securing these connections while further enriching practice at home.

Achieving the competition itself owed a good deal to young local agitators. Architecture students Harvey Cowan and Peter Richardson led the campaign to subvert city council's original plan. School of Architecture faculty led by Eric Arthur offered strong support, and with the leadership of the progressive-minded mayor Nathan Philips to sway council in its favour, the campaign brought about the opening of the project to the world.

As professional advisor, Arthur had the knowledge and the vision to conduct an ambitious and highly successful competition. To judge the entries, he assembled an effective and knowledgeable jury, not least because it included Eero Saarinen—the dominant figure according to all reports. Informal accounts relate that Saarinen, because of other commitments, arrived a day late for the jury sessions. His first move was to demand a wheelchair for viewing the entries with least physical effort. Sir William Holford, who had been acting as chair, explained that the group had made an initial selection of potential winners. Saarinen examined these, then insisted on reviewing the rejects. Revell's scheme was among these. The discussion that followed must have been intense, and the resulting jury account included a minority report expressing reservations held by Holford and professor Gordon Stephenson (p. 114-115).

Revell's design helped create an image of the city as forward-looking, adventurous, cosmopolitan, in place of the long-established picture of a staid, largely Protestant British colonial outpost. The change recognized its growth, already underway and driven by immigration from all parts of the globe, into a diverse, multicultural centre, as well it had already begun to replace Montréal as the financial hub of the country, and a significant cultural centre as well.

The new City Hall became a symbol of this re-imagined city. A sketch of the two curved towers guarding the domed council chamber above the podium is central to the city's logo. London's

Big Ben and Sydney Opera House come to mind as among the few comparable architectural symbols.

One matter not addressed in *Competing Modernisms*, but worth considering fifty years after the competition, is the idea of modernism itself. The building's completion in 1965 was followed in 1966 by the publication of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art). The versions of modernism represented with many variations in the competition entries were no sooner celebrated than a radical reconsideration of the idea was proposed. Venturi's intention was to open and enrich post-war modernism by examining and rejecting widely accepted limitations on architectural design, from rules of composition to the choice and use of materials, the response to architectural history, and the relation of individual buildings to their urban context.

Other critiques appeared and new attention was directed to those designers who had deviated from, or never joined, the modern consensus. Much of this was subsequently, and loosely, labelled "postmodern." One notable Canadian response was the 1982 competition for the Mississauga City Hall with George Baird as professional advisor. Another was Peter Rose and Phyllis Lambert's Centre Canadien d'Architecture in Montréal, opened in 1989. Both buildings draw on their historical context for siting, materials, and architectural detail. These inform their designs in a way that would have been anathema for modernists in the 1950s.

Current architectural work suggests that much of the critique has been absorbed into the mainstream of architectural and urban design, along with the pervasive effects of digital technology. Modernism continues to evolve, with the Toronto City Hall competition as a major landmark along the way. *Competing Modernisms* by George Thomas Kapelos is a valuable reminder of this notable event, and a useful contribution to the continuing discussion.