

The Buildings of Samuel Maclure: In Search of Appropriate Form

Book Review by Edward Mills

In a province where interest in early buildings is low, the names of two turn-of-the-century architects have nevertheless become well known: Francis Mawson Rattenbury, the flamboyant designer of the Legislative Assembly, Empress Hotel, and a number of major public and institutional buildings scattered across the province; and the retiring Samuel Maclure, whose elegant residential designs became synonymous with the character of exclusive residential areas in Victoria and Vancouver. The careers and temperaments of the two men have proven enticing to biographers, and in recent years a pair of books has appeared on each.¹

In the preface to his substantial volume on Maclure, Martin Segger states that his objective is to present in “an artistic biography ... the account of an artistic imagination constantly searching for form and pattern” He begins with a description of the curious one-time collaboration in 1901 between Maclure and Rattenbury on the design of Cary Castle, the Lieutenant-Governor’s official residence in Victoria. According to Segger, Cary Castle marked a pivotal point, both for Maclure’s career and for the subsequent development of residential design in Victoria. It introduced the architect to an affluent strata of Victoria society and, at the same time, heralded the rise of a local Arts-and-Crafts aesthetic. In the author’s words, “Exterior design and interior decoration in buildings, from working-class bungalows to middle-class mansions, veered off on a new course which radically transformed the architectural image of the local townscape. Cary Castle was a symptomatic and pivotal monument.”

Having asserted that the building was pivotal to subsequent architectural developments, the author poses a series of questions. What was the nature of this architectural transformation? Why did it occur? Who originated it, and what were the respective contributions of Rattenbury and Maclure? The answers, we are told, can be found in the career of Samuel Maclure.

One unusual aspect about Samuel Maclure that sets him apart from other early British Columbia architects is the fact that he was a native son. Born and raised in the Fraser Valley, Maclure’s formal training consisted of a single year of art studies at the Spring Garden Institute in Philadelphia. After several years spent trying to make a living as an artist and art instructor (supplemented by work as a telegraph operator), Maclure began designing buildings in 1889 at age 30. Segger ably chronicles Maclure’s early development, from his pedestrian early designs in New Westminster to his first major commission in Victoria, the 1892 Temple Building. By moving to Victoria Maclure increased not only his commission prospects but also his contact with successful members of his profession. The fact that his office was located in the same small building as T. C. Sorby, Thomas Hooper, and Rattenbury says much about the intimate nature of the architectural trade in Victoria at that particular time. A depiction of the social strata which gradually became Maclure’s principal source of clientele rounds out the preliminary background to an extended examination of the man’s architectural output from the mid-1890s onwards.

1 Anthony A. Barrett and Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, *Francis Rattenbury and British Columbia: Architecture and Challenge in the Imperial Age* (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1983); Janet Bingham, *Samuel Maclure, Architect* (Ganges, B.C.: Horsdale and Schubart, 1985); Terry Reksten, *Rattenbury* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1978); and Segger’s *The Buildings of Samuel Maclure*.

Segger orders his discussion of Maclure’s aesthetic development according to various stylistic directions evident in his designs. A chapter describing the architect’s development of a distinctive open two-storey hall formula is followed by a description of his attraction to the English Arts and Crafts movement. Subsequent chapters deal with his output in discernible genres: the Shingle, Chalet, and Elizabethan Revival styles, the influences of Wright and Voysey. While this approach lends itself to a depiction of Maclure’s growth as an architect, it extracts a price in terms of scope and clarity. Potentially revealing information about the social, political, and economic climate in which he was working is diffused and fragmented over several chapters. We find ourselves reading about residences designed between 1900 and 1910 in one particular style in one chapter, then during the same approximate time period but in another style in the next. Biographical information on clients is varied in detail, as are descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the construction process.

Like many members of his profession, Maclure has left little in the way of written material that describes his intentions or gives first-hand insights into his relationships with clients. In the absence of documentation, Segger frequently substitutes conjecture, sometimes with unfortunate consequences. Attempts to establish linkages are too frequently introduced by phrases such as “there seems little doubt that ...” or “it is likely that” This method is particularly troublesome when it is used to establish links with major architectural luminaries of the period: “It is probable that while in Philadelphia he [Maclure] saw the work of Wilson Eyre” “Had Samuel Maclure, on one of his frequent trips to Spokane, Washington, stayed at the Davenport Hotel, he would have been treated to one of the most eclectic smorgasbords imaginable” introduces the association between Maclure’s development of Elizabethan half-timber motifs and a similar development in the work of Spokane architect K. K. Cutter. Maclure’s adoption of Wrightian forms is cryptically said to be “somewhat of a mystery ... more than a mere interest on the part of Maclure in Wright’s works published in various popular and professional journals of the day.” This leads the author to speculate that “Maclure must have known directly of the Banff National Park Pavilion” (which Wright designed). Rather than convince us of Maclure’s creative abilities, this conjectural approach raises our suspicions — perhaps unnecessarily. The ways and means by which Maclure obtained inspiration for his designs is ultimately less important than the ways in which he used them.

The author’s familiarity with Maclure’s artistic growth is evident in his sensitive and detailed descriptions of the architect’s residential commissions, particularly those for Victoria and Vancouver Island clients. Equally evident is a strong admiration for the man and his work. While this may be understandable, it does raise a suspicion about the objectivity of the analysis that is being presented. Although the work and possible influences of local architects is noted during Maclure’s early years, it is at best sketchy for the peak years of Maclure’s practice, leaving us little by which to gauge the success of his designs. The roles of his partners are similarly underplayed. Cecil Fox, who opened a Vancouver office in partnership with Maclure in 1903, is cast in the roll of office manager, negotiating with clients, drawing up contracts, and supervising draftsmen, but leaving major design decisions to Maclure. Yet Fox had studied directly under C. F. A. Voysey, whose influence is said to “creep steadily into Maclure’s own Victoria office work” from 1903 onwards, to the point where, by

1910, "Maclure was not adverse to producing residences which must have been almost literal interpretations of the Voysey manner." Who was influencing whom in this partnership? His later partnership with former understudy Ross Lort is even less detailed, leaving us to ponder the nature of Maclure's output during the 1920s.

When Segger does turn to the work of Maclure's local contemporaries in the post-1910 years, it is to cast them in the roles of copiers, members of an incipient "Maclure school." Again the evidence is less than convincing. To describe Robert MacKay Fripp as a mere imitator of Maclure is a case in point. Fripp came to Vancouver in 1888, after training and practicing in Berkshire, the centre of much of the Arts-and-Crafts activity of William Morris and R. N. Shaw. About the time that Maclure was designing simple Queen Anne houses in New Westminster, Fripp was writing impassioned letters to the *Canadian Architect and Builder* about the low quality of design on the west coast, and making attempts to establish an Arts and Crafts society to address the problem. Fripp was producing Elizabethan Revival homes for members of Vancouver's entrepreneurial elite by the late 1880s, and produced his largest building in the style, the Provincial Home at Kamloops, in the early 1890s. While his later efforts may not have rivaled Maclure's in elegance of form, it is erroneous to suggest that he (and other contemporaries) were simply operating in the shadow of Maclure. Obviously, members of the local architectural fraternity were dipping their designer's pens into the same inkwell of inspiration, Maclure no less than the others. Yet the author chooses to see evidence of Maclure's influence in any half-timbered building erected in the province after 1910. Again, the attempt to assess Maclure's importance in these terms may be specious. He was undeniably the best and perhaps the most prolific producer of large domestic designs in this region before the First World War. It seems that the author has fallen prey here to the temptation facing all biographers of successful people: to become so enamored with their subjects' work as to see it as an

epicentre, rather than as a component of a broader cultural milieu.

In this case one consequence is a failure to convey a clear sense of Maclure's ultimate impact beyond the provision of nice homes for an affluent clientele. The introductory assertion that Maclure's work led the way in transforming exterior design and interior decoration on housing in the region "from working-class bungalows to middle-class mansions" is left stranded as an unsupported opinion of the author.

Physically, *The Buildings of Samuel Maclure* is a handsome book, substantial in size and profusely illustrated. A nice balance is struck between plans, sketches, and paintings by Maclure and photos of his buildings and their landscaped grounds. The format does have its defects though. Illustrations tend to be bunched together, frequently before the point at which they are discussed in the text. Since captions are minimal in content, and no figure references are given in the text, connecting verbal description to visual material can be frustrating at times. A list of Maclure's architectural designs and commissions between 1889 and 1929 is provided at the end of the book, with entries listed alphabetically by client name. A chronological listing might have been more useful from a reference standpoint.

In the epilogue Segger responds to the questions he posed at the beginning of the book by suggesting that Maclure was responsible for the details of Cary Castle, Rattenbury for the overall concept of the design. Neither the question nor the answer seem all that important, in the final analysis, to understanding either Maclure's creative abilities or his stature as an architect.

● *The Buildings of Samuel Maclure: In Search of Appropriate Form*, by Martin Segger (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1986). 274 pp., illus. Cloth. \$39.95. ISBN 0-919203-76-0.



Samuel Maclure designed Miraloma in Sidney, B.C., in 1925 as a summer house for W. C. Nichol. (Photo: Douglas Franklin)