

Modernism and Regionalism: Influences on the Work of Leslie Fairn



Figure 1.

By Wayne Brown

IN 1923, LE CORBUSIER published what was to become a major document of the modern movement: *Vers une Architecture* (later translated as *Towards a New Architecture*). In it, Le Corbusier suggested that “a great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit ...; our own epoch is determining, day by day, its own style.”¹ Le Corbusier argued the inevitability of this new spirit, and the inevitability of the new architecture associated with it. He proclaimed “Architecture or revolution. Revolution can be avoided.”²

The new architecture, the roots of which can be traced back far earlier than 1923,³ was indeed inevitable. Labeled the International Style in 1932, this new architecture would eventually ensure that a hotel in Toronto would be little different from one in Abidjan. Although Le Corbusier suggested (albeit more literally) that revolution could be avoided, this new architecture could certainly be viewed as revolutionary; its acceptance, if inevitable, came about with much struggle. It is this struggle which I explore through the career of Leslie Fairn.

Leslie Fairn was an architect deeply rooted in a previous epoch. He was also deeply rooted in Nova Scotia, the province of his birth, and a region with a distinct form and history. His design proposals from the late 1940s and early 1950s demonstrate the struggle with which Fairn attempted to reconcile two epochs, two spirits.

In 1923 Le Corbusier also spoke of those whose “eyes, unhappily, are unable yet to discern” the new style.⁴ Fairn’s struggle suggests that these unhappy eyes might, instead, have seen something in the old which internationalism and the spirit of the machine could not see.

Fairn was born in 1875 — twelve years before Le Corbusier — into an architectural world of Victorian revivalism, a movement much in evidence in the small Annapolis Valley towns where he grew up.⁵ Although not recorded as a graduate,⁶ Fairn spent some time at Acadia University in Wolfville, probably during the mid-1890s. In fact, Fairn once credited faculty at Acadia with first encouraging him to pursue a career in architecture. Certainly his interest in building and craftsmanship was evident by this time, as suggested by a story recounted by Fairn in 1953:

A group of mischievous students were horsing around on the main staircase of old Acadia University. A whispered, light-hearted suggestion and ... the massive stair-railing was lifted from its moorings. Then, something went wrong, nervous hands lost their hold, the whole thing collapsed with a crash that brought the faculty running ... The enraged principal demanded the name of the responsible party ... A tall quite young student deftly blunted the edge of official wrath by declaring that he could and would repair the damage himself. The principal found his ire cooling perceptibly as he weighed the advantages of executing summary judgment upon the culprits or of authorizing their comrade to go ahead with replacements. Prudence tipped the scales.⁷

The new balustrade delighted the college authorities, who encouraged Fairn to “make design and building his life work.”

Perhaps this interest in craft was one factor which steered Fairn away from an academic route (via the *École des Beaux-Arts*, for example) to a career in architecture. Rather, he took the more common, and more accessible, route of apprenticeship. Possibly while still a student, Fairn worked for the construction firm of Rhodes, Curry & Co.⁸ Established in Amherst, Nova Scotia in 1877, this firm was responsible for many large building projects throughout the province. How long Fairn worked here is unclear, but during this period he was involved in at least some site work.

Fairn’s other period of apprenticeship was with Halifax architect Edward Elliott.⁹ Though sources are vague, this was probably around 1900. Elliott was the designer of the Halifax City Hall, constructed by Rhodes, Curry & Co. between 1887 and 1890, a building for the Agricultural College at Truro in 1891, and a science building for the Provincial Normal School (Teacher’s College) at Truro, about 1900. Elliott died in 1902.

By 1902, it would seem, Fairn’s apprenticeship was complete. In that year he was appointed principal of the E. W. Young Mechanic’s

Science School at Horton Academy, near Wolfville. He spent five years in this position where, no doubt, he could indulge his interest in the craft of architecture. Fairn officially opened his architectural practice while still in this position.¹⁰ Although this date is often given as 1903, he was actually designing buildings several years earlier. For example, his design for an alms house in Digby County, dates from 1899.¹¹

The first twenty years of Fairn’s practice saw large numbers of residential and like-sized projects. One exception was the court house at Kentville, Nova Scotia, constructed, incidentally, by Rhodes, Curry & Co. In 1923, Fairn was chosen to design the new administration building at Acadia University. It was, in his words, “my big break.”¹² The result was a well-crafted neoclassical building with simple lines and some eloquence, placed in a setting in which it would be difficult to fail.

The second twenty years saw Fairn emerge as one of the most prominent architects in Atlantic Canada. In 1927 he helped found the Maritime Association of Architects, and in 1932, the Nova Scotia Association of Architects, for which he served as president during 1934-35. In 1937 he became the first person from Atlantic Canada to be made a fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, an organization he helped found in 1907, and for which he eventually served as a vice president.

The size and number of his commissions also grew during this period. In fact, one of Fairn’s most perfected pieces of architecture came out of this period: the Post Office Building in Amherst, Nova Scotia, erected between 1934 and 1936 by Rhodes, Curry & Co. The building’s classical facade had fluted Doric columns and a heavy cornice with medallions and triglyphs. One author suggested that the building “represents a successful solution to the local and national post office requirements, [by providing] a prominent sense of the Federal presence ... as well as a showcase of local skills and materials.”¹³

Most of Fairn’s work during this second period made liberal use of classical language, occasional references to the vernacular, and frequent use of local craft skills. There were flirtations with the Art Deco, but often this involved relatively new building types such as service stations or radio stations. Also, Fairn’s office was no longer a one-man show, and certainly some design proposals show the influence of other designers like J. Levesque, an American who worked with Fairn.

While Fairn’s first four decades read like a storybook success, the fifth decade read less so: World War II was followed by the arrival of an architectural revolution. The great epoch was beginning in Nova Scotia. As in most parts of the country, modernism was ushered into Nova Scotia largely by young architects, many trained after the war. For an architect like Fairn — who even as late as 1965, at age 90, said, “I have no intention of retiring as long as I can hold a pencil”¹⁴ — this new architectural epoch would have to be confronted.

This confrontation is visible in several designs done by Fairn in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Three building proposals in particular highlight the nature of the confrontation. They also suggest questions about Fairn the architect, and about the relationship between modernism, the international style, and the traditional or regional elements of architecture.¹⁵

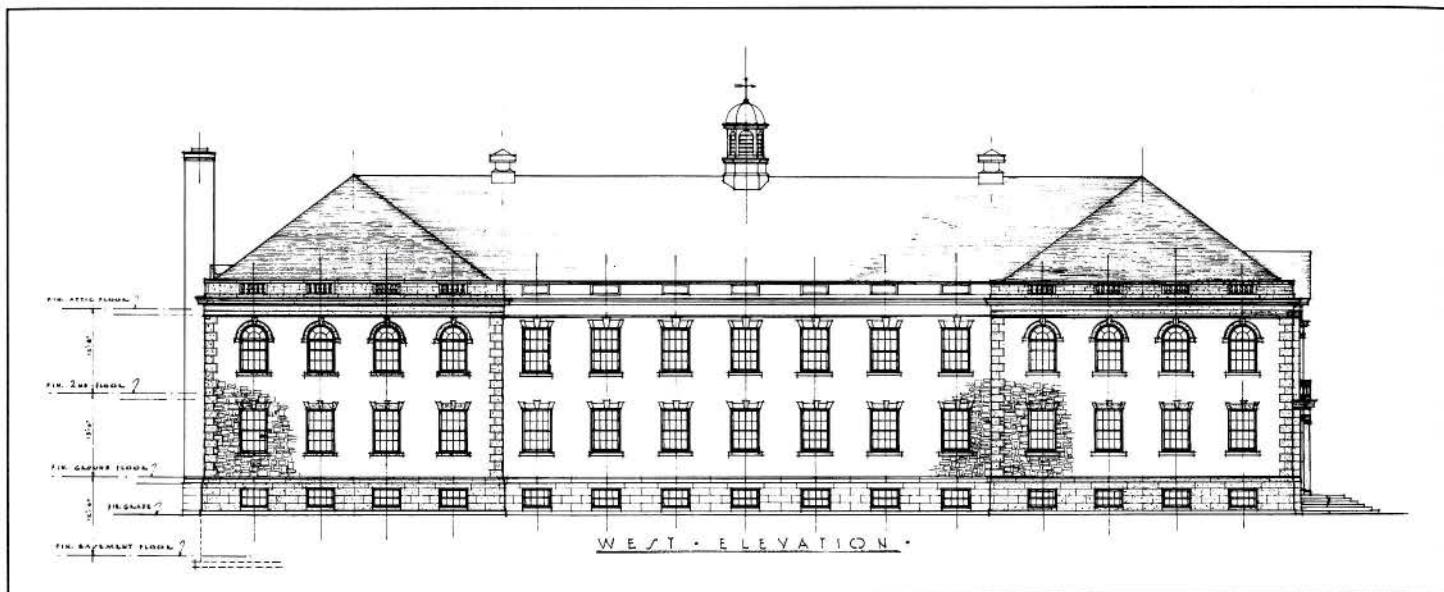


Figure 2. Proposed west elevation, National Research Council laboratories and offices, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1948. (Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Map/Plans Collection)



Figure 3. West elevation, National Research Council laboratories and offices, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1948, as built. (Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Map/Plans Collection)

IN 1948, FAIRN WAS ASKED to design a building to house the National Research Council (NRC) laboratories and offices in Halifax. In April of that year, Fairn proposed a two-storey building of stone, with a hipped roof, cupola, and frontispiece incorporating an entablature supported by Ionic columns (figures 1, 2). Above this entablature was a large Palladian window. Despite the late date, the exterior form and detailing were obviously Beaux-Arts inspired. The interior public spaces also suggested the Beaux-Arts. The visitor was to be carried through a procession of spaces: an entrance way with a broad flight of stairs; a small rectangular vestibule; and, finally, a large octagonal foyer. Off this foyer ran corridors and a main stair well.

The first site chosen for this scheme was at the edge of the Studley (main) Campus at Dalhousie University — ironically, a site on which Fairn's firm would build a library twenty-five years later. Many of the

other buildings on this campus were designed by Andrew Cobb, a Beaux-Arts educated architect who seems to have had a significant influence on Fairn's work. The earliest campus building Cobb erected was in 1913, adjacent to the site in question. In form, and some in details, one can see that the proposed NRC building is very similar to this early Cobb building. Another Cobb building on the campus was the Macdonald Library, built in 1914. The similarity between the large Palladian window in the front elevation of this building and Fairn's NRC scheme is also obvious.¹⁶

For some reason as yet undiscovered, the scheme for this site (which had gone to a working drawing stage) was discarded. Rather, the NRC building was erected at the edge of the university, on a main city street, with no other buildings adjacent. As built, it was a long two-storey building faced in stone with a flat roof (figure 3). The plan,



Figure 4. Front elevation of scheme "A," proposed new town hall, New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, March 1954. (Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Map/Plans Collection)



Figure 5. Front elevation of scheme "D," proposed new town hall, New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, 26 March 1954. (Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Map/Plans Collection)

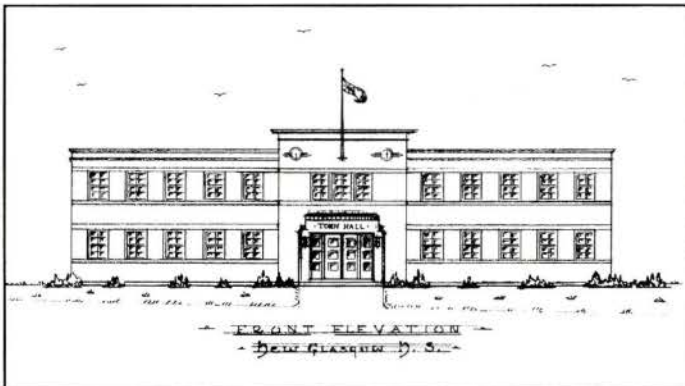


Figure 6. Front elevation of proposed new town hall, New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, 14 March 1953. (Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Map/Plans Collection)

with a strongly-emphasized central entrance, and the west and south elevations, each symmetrical, belied a connection with the Beaux-Arts. The final result was nondescript. An interesting, if esoteric, element was the medallion design, found at either end of the west elevation. By the 1970s, this triangular design had become a symbol of Fairn's firm, and appeared on the title blocks of his drawings.

In 1952 Fairn submitted a proposal for a community library for the Town of Liverpool, a small seaport on Nova Scotia's southern shore which contains a rich store of domestic architecture dating from both the 18th and 19th centuries. For this project Fairn suggested two vastly different schemes, neither of which was ever built.

One scheme called for a 1 1/2-storey fieldstone building with a steeply pitched gable roof and dormers. The residential image of the structure was strengthened by use of details commonly found in the local area, including a portico, fan light, and particular mullion patterns. The interior was divided into several tightly-enclosed spaces, and along one end wall was a large fireplace.

The other scheme, with one sketch drawn by Fairn and marked "low cost," showed a one-storey brick building with a flat roof. The facade was asymmetrical, though the entrance was centrally placed and prominent. No floor plan for this scheme has been found, but one might surmise that the interior space would have been less enclosed, and likely more related to function — that is, with no fireplace.

During 1953-54, Fairn worked on the design of a town hall for New Glasgow, a town in northern Nova Scotia. Over a period of twelve months at least eight schemes were developed in a variety of styles, with, in some cases, similar elevations being applied to different plans. Three of these schemes were neoclassical, with very similar facade designs (figure 4). Each was a two-storey structure with round-headed window openings and centrally-placed entrance way. Above the doorway was a large Palladian window, a detail already seen in Fairn's National Research Council proposal (and in Cobb's Macdonald Library). The facades of these schemes were all symmetrical — one had a hipped roof while the other two had simple gables. Some of these schemes had cupolas, a detail also found in the NRC proposal and Cobb's Science Building at Dalhousie.

The neoclassical schemes differed in plan. One had a simple rectangular plan, while the other two had a central rectangle with wings projecting diagonally from either end. The simple rectangular building would have been placed on the site with its back to the street, facing the axes running between a second street and the adjacent court house. The other two proposals would have faced the building to the intersection of the two streets, its back to the court house. These two approaches to the site seemed directly opposed to each other in attitude. At least two, possibly all three, of these schemes were drawn by Maiga Vetra, originally from Latvia, who was likely one of the first women to practice architecture in Nova Scotia.

A fourth scheme, quite unrelated to the others except in plan, is probably the most interesting; it is certainly the most unexpected. It is a two-storey building (likely stone) with a flat roof, wide pilasters in low relief, and a central dome, very shallow, surmounted by a small cupola (figure 5). An Art Deco imagery is reinforced by details like the winged clock located in the cornice, over the entrance. This scheme appears most imaginative if one forgets it was proposed in the 1950s, not the 1930s, and if one is unaware of a civic building Fairn had previously proposed for the Town of Dartmouth which employed many of the same elements.

The other four schemes were more modern in form, though all featured a prominent central entrance and symmetrical facades (figure 6). Some incorporated Art Deco details. All schemes were two storeys in height with flat roofs, and horizontal lines were reinforced by the window detailing. It is interesting that these four "modern" schemes were the first two designs drawn by Fairn (in March 1953) and probably the last two designs (dated March 26 and 30, 1954). None of the eight proposals was ever chosen; in 1962 a former post office building was bought for use as a town hall. The court house was demolished in 1963.

THE STARK DICHOTOMIES SEEN in these and other projects suggest two obvious questions: Was Fairn too tired, timid, or entrenched in the past to ever catch the spirit of this new architecture? Or did he have concerns that the manifestations of this architectural revolution, international and anti-historical by definition, could not effectively respond to the local and traditional? The answer to both is probably yes, in differing measures.

Fairn, if not timid of modern architecture, was certainly more comfortable with traditional and neoclassical languages. Architects just beginning to practice during the later period of his career recall Fairn as an established architectural figure whose contacts ensured coveted commissions, but whose old-fashioned attitudes frustrated those who approached architecture with some amount of revolutionary fervour.¹⁷

By 1965, Fairn himself appreciated the reality of this situation. With an air of resignation, if not nostalgia, he told a reporter that "Trends are away from the traditional type of architecture to the more functional. I'm not criticizing it, we're living in a changing world and we have to go along with it."¹⁸ By this time, Fairn's firm had grown into an international business, firmly entrenched in modern architecture and, indeed, even exporting it to Central America and the Caribbean.

One can readily sympathize with the rebel architects of the period, and agree that Fairn's anti-modern proposals demonstrate a stale approach — and an architecture lacking the extra-ordinary — quite beyond the particular style or vocabulary employed. Within his work, however, there does exist a relationship to the extant: a point of connection with the local, the particular, the traditional. Quite possibly, Fairn did not view this connection, or its importance, in a conscious way, nor with the same perspective (and language) that the current architectural generation might — but certainly he did sense the need for this connection and continuity.

How, then, do Fairn's anti-modern proposals connect to the local? Contemporary architectural theorist Leon Krier, in his crusade against modernism and for vernacular building and classical architecture, has suggested that "modernism has fathered a meaningless uniformity and a uniform meaninglessness," and that the vernacular/classical tradition is necessary to remedy the "culture and social placelessness" that results.¹⁹ A sense of cultural and social place results from the connection to the local and traditional, and it was Fairn's use of vernacular and classical references which provided the connection.

In terms of vernacular building, one can see in a project like the Liverpool Library a direct borrowing of vernacular form and detail — though one might suggest that the reference to vernacular could be less obvious or literal, and possibly provide the connection in a more effective architectural manner. The vernacular building tradition also concerns craftsmanship and materials. Fairn's sensitivity to these elements probably worked more effectively than the references to building form.

The notion that references to classical architecture could contribute to a sense of the local, of place, might seem illogical. One architectural historian has suggested that "Classical architecture transcends narrow symbolism, to mean different things to different users It was the failure of the international style to communicate on that level that ultimately disqualified it in the public realm."²⁰

Nova Scotia has a building history of several hundred years, a history which has constantly been infused with ideas of classical architecture (while at the same time developing a strong vernacular). These infusions, in turn, have become part of the regional reference: St. Paul's Church (1750), Province House (1818), and the Law Courts in Halifax (1858). Thus, Fairn's use of classical references does provide a connection to the local, though again one might suggest that its use is too literal, and that, while using a particular architectural language, he seems to have little new to say.

Fairn ultimately resigned himself to the idea that an architecture of function would replace an architecture of tradition. Architects today are in the converse position, and see this architecture of function in turn being replaced. With what is unclear, but it can be hoped that the void will be filled with an architecture that acknowledges place and memory.

In a recent interview, the dean of the only school of architecture in Atlantic Canada suggested that "It took the continental wave of Post-Modernist thought to shift attention here from the architecture of Modernist geometry. Once the shift was made, however, there was much right here that architects could look at with a sympathetic eye. Do they do that well? I don't think so, partly because they have forgotten how to do anything well. But they are trying. Their efforts show a sense of direction And it is just as well because there is a long way to go."²¹

Endnotes

- 1 Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 82. (First published in French, 1923; in English, 1927.)
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- 3 See Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 725.
- 4 Le Corbusier, p. 82.
- 5 Biographical information has been obtained from a variety of sources, including *The Chronicle Herald*, 14 August 1971, pp. 1, 2.
- 6 Acadia University *Yearbooks*.
- 7 H. B. Jefferson, "Leslie R. Fairn, the Distinguished Pioneer Architect of the Atlantic Provinces," *Maritime Advocate & Busy East*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (December 1953), pp. 5-30.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, and *The Chronicle Herald*, op. cit., p. 1.
- 10 *The Chronicle Herald*, op. cit., p. 1, and *The Kentville Advertiser*, 19 August 1971, p. 4.
- 11 This drawing can be found in the Map/Plans Collection of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

- 12 Jefferson, p. 9.
- 13 C. A. Hale, "Former Dominion Public Building, Amherst, Nova Scotia," Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office, *Building Report 83-40*, p. 128.
- 14 *The Chronicle Herald*, 28 June 1965, p. 9.
- 15 Drawings referred to below can be found in the Map/Plans Collection of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia.
- 16 For a discussion of Andrew Cobb's buildings on the Dalhousie University campus, see Gemey Kelly's catalogue *Andrew Cobb: The Vision of Dalhousie* (Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1986).
- 17 The reality of this situation is conveyed by a comparison of Fairn's Halifax City Library, built in 1949-51, and St. Francis School, designed by C. A. E. Fowler in 1951. (Fowler had just taken over his father's practice in 1950, and would be elected president of the RAIC in 1966.)
- 18 *The Chronicle Herald*, 28 June 1965, p. 9.
- 19 Leon Krier, "The Reconstruction of Vernacular Building and Classical Architecture," *Architect's Journal*, Vol. 180 (September 12, 1984), pp. 55-58.
- 20 Kostof, p. 719.
- 21 Essy Baniassad, cited in "Focus on Atlantic Canada," *The Canadian Architect*, November 1986, p. 19.