Author

Figure 1. Lake Louise, Banff National Park.

Ordinary Buildings in Extraordinary Places

by Michael McMordie

Introduction

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other. . . Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.

E. Burke, ...the Sublime and Beautiful,
7th ed., London: J. Dodsley, 1773,
pp. 95-6.

The extraordinary places I refer to are properly called sublime, exciting not only Astonishment, but also Burke's "inferior effects" of "admiration, reverence, and respect." (Fig. 1). If "the mind . . . entirely filled with its object . . . cannot entertain any other," buildings erected in such places must seem unsatisfactory. Their design must meet the exceptional challenge of sites where any building intrudes.

How can buildings best be designed for places where no building ought to go? Good design is, among other things, appropriate to use and setting, and "appropriateness' is judged according to some philosophy of design. Only a philosophy that contemplates the possibility of good, and appropriate design for the parks can lead to a satisfactory result. Anything else leaves the designer at sea without an anchor, and leaves the staff who judge design proposals without map and compass.

Different periods of Parks development illustrate this point. They reveal the existence, or absence, of a design, philosophy, or theory, that joined building to setting, and suggested appropriate forms. Concern with this issue has led the Western Region of Parks Canada to formulate and test guidelines for development in Waterton Lakes National Park and in the Four Mountain Parks of Banff, Jasper, Kootenay and Yoho.

This paper reflects upon my participation in this work, specifically a study dealing with the Waterton Visitors' Centre (townsite) and one dealing with Outlying Commercial Accommodation in the Four Mountain Parks. These reflections refer to two central ideas; 'nature' and the natural, and the 'appropriate'. Both are relevant to questions of building in the parks.

The Parks were created in the first place to preserve certain 'natural' qualities which would have been defaced or extinguished by the ordinary pattern of settlement and exploitation, that is by the course of human intervention. But the creation of the parks was in itself intervention, though at first just to prevent unconstrained settlement. Construction quickly followed, from roads and bridges to houses, shops and offices. Some construction was needed to conserve the wilderness from natural catastrophe such as fire, some to make it accessible for the enjoyment of its owners. The question was, what kind of construction was appropriate. One early and splendid answer was Bruce Price's first Banff Springs Hotel, (Cover), but it could hardly serve as a model for more ordinary buildings in the parks. Rather than Burke's "admiration, reverence and respect" for their setting these tended to show indifference and even disdain.

This paper first outlines the history of the parks and the policies that have directed their development. Second, the architecture of the parks is traced, in the context of architectural developments elsewhere in North America and Europe which provided the ideas and traditions on which it drew. This historical review leads, third, to consideration of questions of philosophy: the nature of 'nature', the place of building in the parks, and the attempt to establish what is 'appropriate'. Finally, the problems of managing design: the direction and control of the design quality of many different kinds of building, which was the reason for the original studies, is discussed with some tentative suggestions for a different approach.

Park History

The first of the National Parks, Banff, was originally to be a spa in the European tradition (though modelled immediately upon the Arkansas Hot Springs in the United States). In 1885, ten square miles around the hot springs at the Cave and Basin were set aside for this purpose, under Order in Council No. 2197. This was followed by the Rocky Mountains Park Act of 1887 which greatly increased the area to 260 square miles in response to the "existence of a large tract of country . . . (which) presented features of the greatest beauty."[1] Thus began the setting-aside of great natural areas for public recreation, as a complement to private settlement of Canada's western territory.

Glacier and Yoho Parks were designated in 1886, Waterton in 1895, and Jasper in 1907, with Kootenay to follow in 1920. Starting with Banff in 1885 the creation of the Canadian system of National Parks had followed by just thirteen years the establishment in 1872 of Yellowstone, the first national park in the world.

At the inception of the parks, the idea of conservation included a confusion of motives. Early notions of conservation accommodated extensive commercial exploitation. This included the spas at Banff and Radium, with hotels and other amenities for tourists, and coal mining, oil exploration (in Waterton), and forestry. Precedents for the recreational amenities were found in the grand hotels of nineteenth century European resorts, and also in the seaside bungalows and villas that were promoted as a more secluded and private alternative in late-Victorian England. The latter implied a suburban or rural village type of settlement. Townsite development at Banff was promoted from its beginning, and townsite surveys were carried out at Field, Waterton and Jasper before the first World War.

Development continued through the 1920s, but after the hiatus caused by the depression and the Second World War, a more rigorous view of conservation led to new policies which emphasized preservation of the natural environment and the exclusion of private development. This in turn led to proposals for the recapture of lands already leased for private use.

These policies of the late 1950s encountered financial, political and legal obstacles. Not only was the public money needed to buy back leaseholds not forthcoming, but the leaseholders were able to mobilize strong and effective opposition to the new leasing policies. This opposition was finally supported by the Supreme Court after an appeal heard in 1969.[2] Furthermore, new initiatives in architectural history and preservation, including the establishment of the Heritage Canada Foundation, the SSAC, and the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building, contributed to a changing view of the value of existing building in the parks.

In the early 1970s enthusiasts for architectural history and the conservation of order buildings joined to found, variously, Heritage Canada, the Association for Preservation Technology, and the SSAC. Their efforts were one expression of a rapidly growing international movement. The buildings they were concerned with were not only those likely to be designated as National (or provincial) Historic Sites, but rather a more comprehensive selection representative of their period.

An apparent shift in Parks policy has resulted, stimulated by the lack of success of earlier policies, and by a new awareness of the interest and cultural value of existing buildings. Many of these are as intimately bound to the history and significance of the Parks as such natural features as the Burgess shale deposits in Yoho National Park. Another stimulus is the pressure of use by a growing band of visitors demanding a wide range of services. Because the visitors represent the political foundation on which the whole system rests a way must be found to respond to their needs and desires while preserving and, if possible, enhancing and qualities that attract them to the Parks in the first place. That the two may conflict is apparent from the recent history of Stonehenge, in England, and of the caves at Lascaux in France, where these prehistoric monuments can only be preserved by denying access to many thousands of potential visitors.

Architecture

The century of the Parks' existence has seen architecture pass from the many and combined styles of the late nineteenth century, through simpler and less exuberant designs also based on historic examples, to the puritanical rejection of historicism by the early modernists. Modern architecture then became more varied and complex in forms and materials until, about twenty years ago, a few architects began to reconsider the rejection of older traditions, to introduce elements of the historic styles into their work, in what has been labelled post-modernism. This apparent return to a philosophy of design based on historic styles seemed to complete a cycle, from the eclecticism fo the 1880s to the austerity and anti-historicism of the 1930s, to the new eclecticism of the 1970s and 1980s.

This new eclecticism offers at best a precarious and unstable perch for designers, as the Victorians discovered a century ago. After its recent revi-
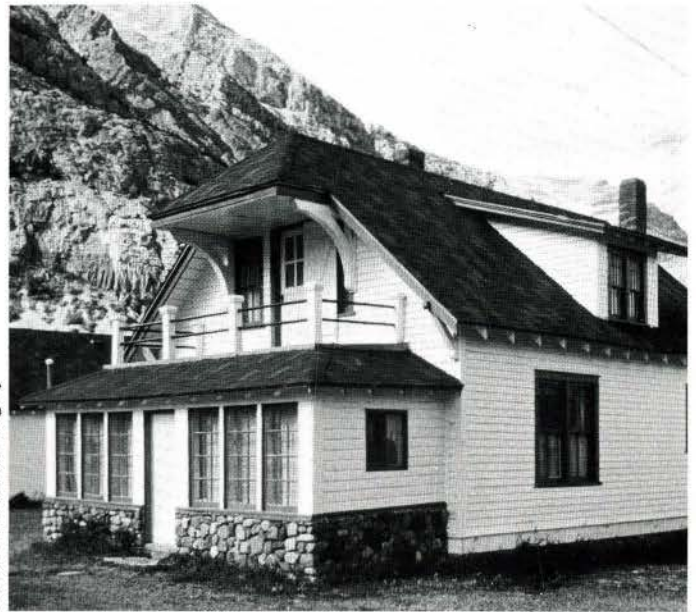
Figure 3. Craftsman style house, Waterton, Alberta.

val, it is already a fading fashion. Modernism, renewed by an accommodation with earlier traditions, now appears likely to continue for some time yet as the dominant approach.[3]

Changes in taste from the Victorian to Edwardian periods anticipate the mid-twentieth century architecture of abstract form. A good example is the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament in Ottawa. The original (1859) design by Fuller was a robust exercise in picturesque neo-gothic, vigorously modelled and rich in spiky detail. As rebuilt after the fire of 1916 by Pearson and Marchand, it is smoother, more regular, and more unified.

This half-century also saw the emergence and propagation of the Arts and Crafts, a style closely related to neo-gothic (and picturesque in spirit), but most fully developed as a vehicle for unpretentious, practical houses often inspired by regional vernacular traditions. Particularly influential in the west was a North American variant developed and widely publicized by Gustave Stickley, the Craftsman style. This style is frequently associated with the California Bungalow which was prominent in the suburban development of west coast cities like Los Angeles. In the cities of Western Canada it shaped so much of the ordinary housing pre-World War II that it constitutes a kind of pre-war vernacular. (Fig. 3).

The alternative classically derived styles were less influential in domestic design, though some classical detail was often incorporated in predominantly Craftsman style houses, and the classical orders found a place in commercial architecture and the western provincial capitals.

Figure 4. Kootenai Brown's log house, Waterton area, Alberta, 1877.

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Figure 5. *Num-Ti-Jah Lodge, Banff National Park, c. 1939-42, addition 1949-50.*

Figure 6. *Staff Quarters, Lake Louise Village, Banff National Park, 1987.*

Figure 7. *Cottage, Waterton.*

Both traditions, gothic and classical, kept contact with pre-industrial building crafts in their choice and detailing of materials. Simplified moldings, pitched roofs, small-paned windows, dentils, eaves, brackets and carved barge boards show continuity with the past even though they were now reproduced by machine, and often chosen from a catalogue.

Mechanical reproduction of period detail was anathema to the modernists, whose revolutionary ideas began to have lasting influence on Canadian design only in the 1930s. The architecture they promoted sought utility through the techniques and products of industry, and an aesthetic vision compounded of the classicism of the early nineteenth century, and the informality and asymmetry of the Picturesque. However the result is to be judged, it provoked by the mid-sixties a further reaction in the form of a renewed interest in historic architecture. Design was once again to be founded on tradition, including both local and regional traditions, however humble, and the great central western tradition stemming from Greece and Rome.

The parks have drawn, selectively, from this past century's architecture, from handcraft and historicist to industrialized and abstract. The earliest building was in the ages-old log vernacular: hand-hewn horizontal logs saddle-notched at the corners. The first building in the Waterton area, Kootenai Brown's 1877 cabin, (Fig. 4), is an example, and more recent log buildings continue this durable tradition, from private cottages of all dates to Num-Ti-Jah Lodge (c. 1939-42, addition 1949-50), (Fig. 5), and the just completed Staff Quarters at Lake Louise Village. (Fig. 6). This primitive rural vernacular is a recurrent theme in the parks.

The development of town and industrial sites which soon followed the first settlement produced a representative sampling of turn-of-the century design. These Late-Victorian and Edwardian buildings include modest cottages (Fig. 7) and the great resort hotels, with the picturesque splendours of the Banff Springs and the Prince of Wales Hotels (Back cover and Fig. 9) overshadowing the rest.

Though the palette of fashionable North American styles included numerous off-shoots of the classical tradition, these are rare in the parks. Picturesque neo-mediaeval and English vernacular styles were preferred to these and to the art-deco that became fashionable elsewhere at the end of the 1920s. One official attempt to produce a style appropriate to the setting and suitable for modest buildings was the Tudor-rustic used for the registration buildings at the entrances to Banff and Waterton parks. (Fig. 9).

Apart from Frank Lloyd Wright's long-lost Banff pavilion (with Francis Sullivan, built 1913, demolished 1939) Modern seems not to have reached that parks until after World War II. Radium Hot Springs Lodge in Kootenay National Park (Fig. 10) is a successful example (though marred by the later external elevator tower to the hot springs. Most other post-World War II building, such as the ordinary commercial architectur of the townsites, lacks any sense of place, and also lacks the fineness of texture and the quality of detail that was a matter of course in the earlier periods.

Detail is critically important, especially for buildings which are to be known close at hand rather than to be seen and admirec from a distance. This is the case for most of the buildings of the town-sites, and for the other minor and background structures which constitute the majority of the park buildings. The most successful bungalow camps (Fig. 11 and 12) show an understanding of texture and detail absent from more prominent structures. The strongest tradition found in places like Waterton and Banff stems from the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts, particularly in its Craftsman versions. It provides the most consistent examples of appropriate form and good detail. (Fig. 13, 14, 15 and 16). Perhaps this is because it had its origins in the ordinary buildings of ordinary people. Close to the land in forms and materials, and characteristically unassertive, the strength of the Arts and Crafts lay in these qualities and in their enrichment at close hand by thoughtful detail.

Only in the last few years has the sensitivity to place, materials and detail of earlier periods appeared again in a few important park buildings. One is the Post Hotel addition at Village Lake Louise. (Fig. 17).

Philosophy
Successful design management must rest on a clear design philosophy.[5] The Post Hotel is a demonstration both of good design, and successful management by Parks staff of the process of review and approval. It demonstrates a clear grasp of the issues and the understanding of tradition, context, form and detail needed for their resolution. The result is a building of great presence, and appropriate to and respectful of its park setting. It offers valuable clues to building for the parks. Such lessons need to be studied and distilled into a widely useful philosophy of design, applicable to many different kinds and sizes of structures.

In the formulation of that philosophy other general issues need also to be considered. How do people use the parks, what experiences do they seek, what facilities are needed to support appropriate use, what
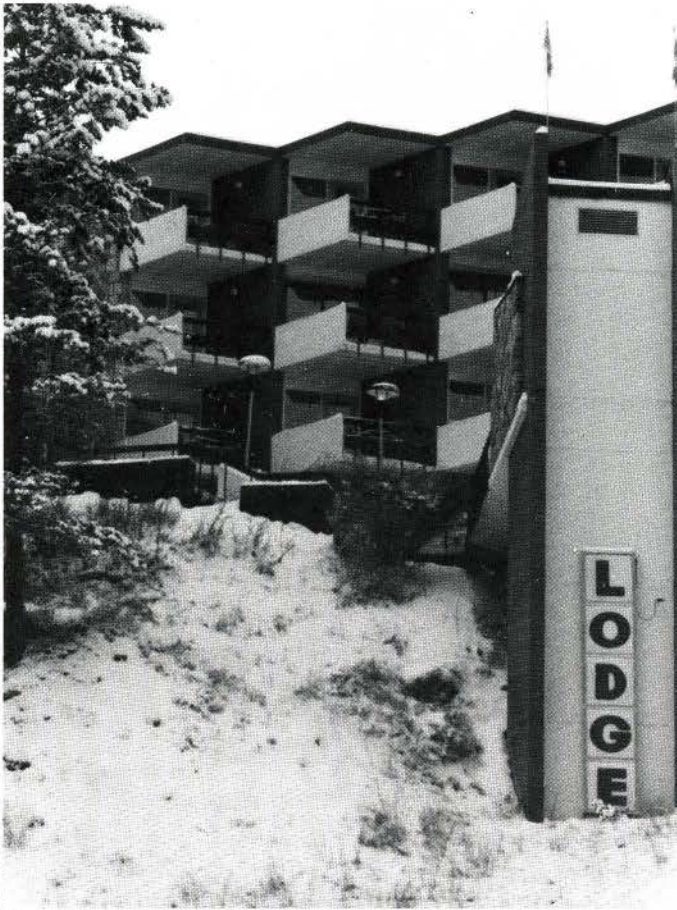
*Figure 10. Radium Hot Springs Lodge, Radium, B.C., 1965, 1972,
architect: A. Dale.*

should be visible, identifiable and easily found, what should be unob-
trusive and even invisible to the ordinary visitor? These are questions
to consider, as they apply to roads and bridges, lights and signs, as well
as to hotels and service stations. They also need to be considered as they
apply to the townsites. Their size, composition and character need to
be assessed, and their future qualities determined.

Another related approach is to distinguish between background and
landmark structures, and design each differently. Background structures
would be self-effacing, where possible, hidden from view; landmark struc-
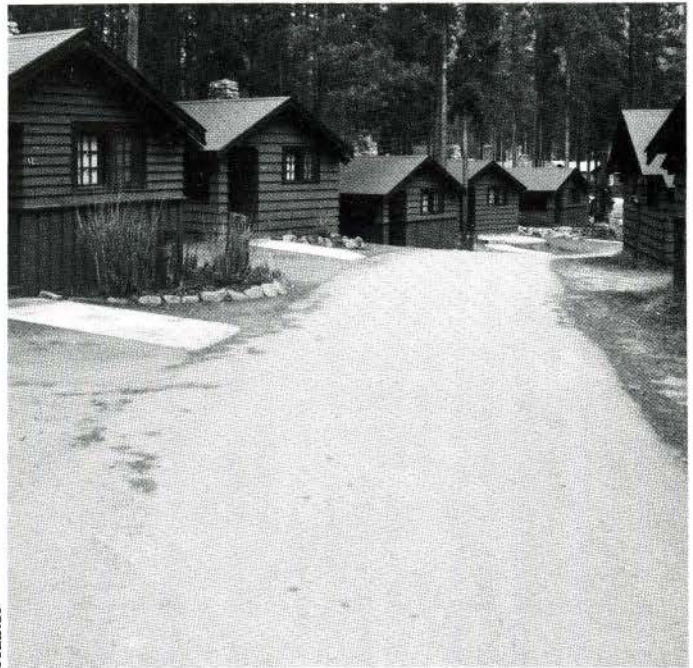tures, by contrast, would be highly visible; even prominent features of

Figure 11. Becker's Chalets, Jasper, Alberta, begun 1939-42.

distant views. Such a distinction requires consideration of landscapes
and the views they offer, just as much as of buildings.

The existing buildings, however humble, are at least as important
as any new building. Their architectural and historical worth needs to
be assessed as part of the design management program. Most impor-
tant is the contribution of ordinary buildings to the ambience of the
townsites; buildings of little individual importance may be integral to
a successful group. Conservation of historic structures and districts ap-
plies with particular force within the parks where many worthy older
structures gain value from their associations with park history.

The historic character of the townsites needs to be maintained and
strengthened as an important part of the visitor's experience. Architec-
tural conservation is part of the wider issue of conservation of the natural
environment. It is an integral part of park management.

The final aim of the design philosophy should be to strengthen the
distinctive character of each park's architecture. Careful appreciation
of the existing structures and settlements in relation to the character
of the park as a whole is needed. Conservation of old buildings and sen-
sitive design of the new should be co-ordinated to this end.

Figure 9. Registration building, Waterton National Park.

*Figure 12. Addison's Bungalows, Radium, B.C., begun 1948-55, original
owner (and designer?), Addison E. Scratch.*

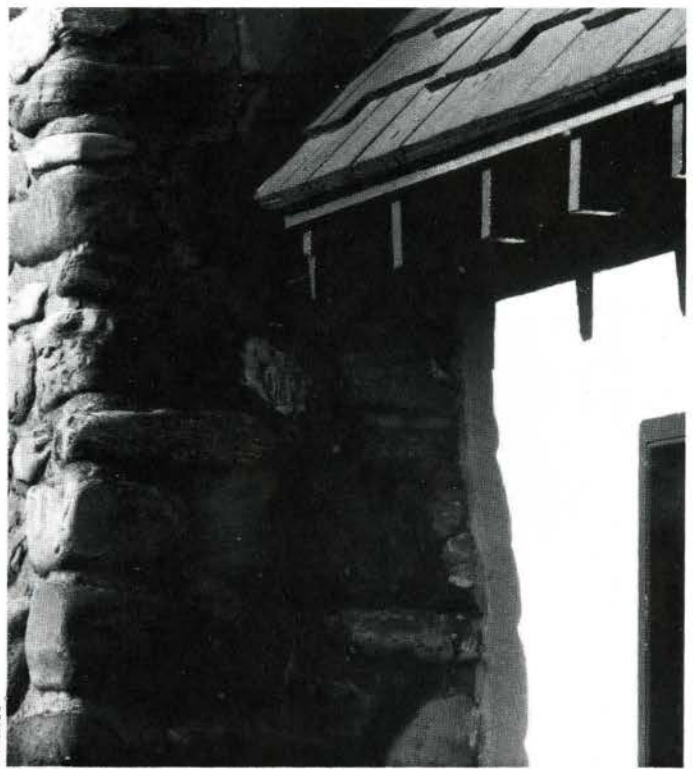Figure 13. Crandell Mountain Lodge, Waterton, Alberta.

Figure 15. Detail, cottage, Waterton, Alberta.

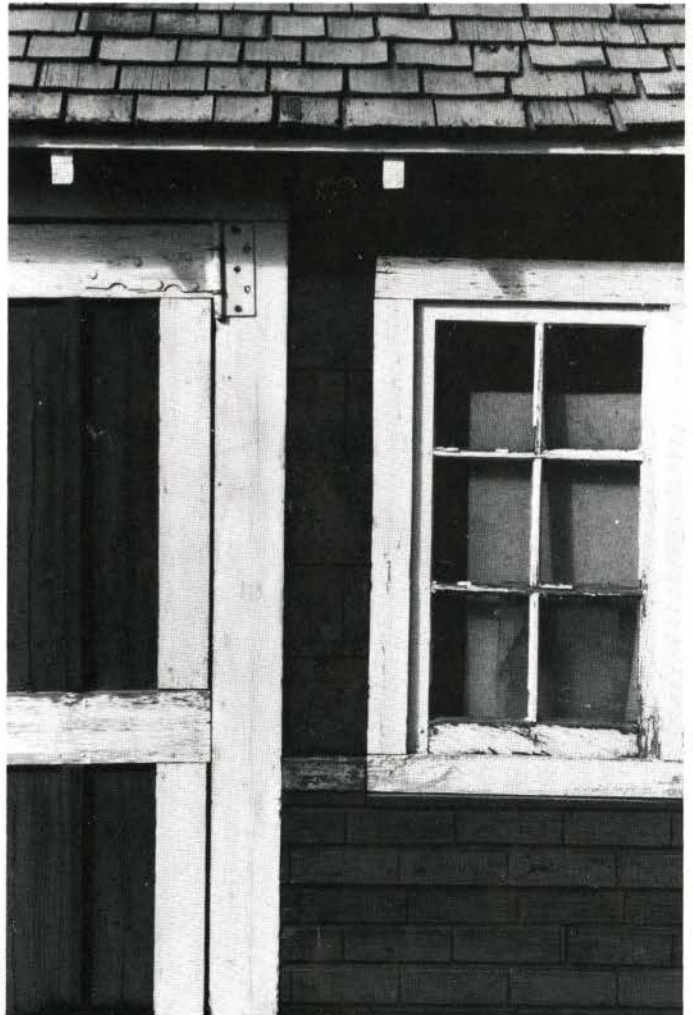Figure 14. Detail, outbuilding, Waterton, Alberta.

Figure 16. Detail, storage building, Waterton, Alberta.

Figure 17. Post Hotel addition, Lake Louise, 1987, architects: Andrishak and Sturgess.

Management

Implementation of the design philosophy requires a clear process and specific tools. The stages of design review may involve difficult negotiations if private and public interests are to be reconciled. The essential tools for the process are written and graphic statements of the design objectives and requirements. Parks Canada has developed these in the form of written guidelines. When tested, however, they have permitted some highly unsatisfactory results: buildings badly sited, inappropriately massed, and insensitively detailed. The government has been among the worst offenders. It appears that better tools are needed, both more comprehensive and more specific.

Clear objectives should be established for each development. These should cover conservation through adaptation of existing structures and new design, as with the work currently underway at the Banff Springs Hotel and the Chateau Lake Louise. At Lake Louise the view from the lake back to the hotel is drastically altered by the addition of a new wing extending the mass of the hotel across the valley. (Fig. 18). The result may be accepted as consistent with the original siting of the hotel, but alternative positions for the new wing would have been less obtrusive. The effects of new developments on existing sites and views must be considered as well as their other qualities.

Figure 18. Chateau Lake Louise with new wing under construction, 1987.

Good models could be chosen from existing developments, and the reasons for their success identified and compared. This process if systematic, might help with the refinement of existing guidelines, and might also furnish concrete examples to which applicants for development and their architects might be directed.

More specific criteria than are presently offered for the details and colour of new works would be useful. Materials in combination, colour, height, bulk, profile, continuity of forms and surfaces, construction and finishing details of buildings, and sites, all need to be scrutinized closely. A more detailed extension of the existing guidelines could be used, perhaps in the form of a pattern book after some of the nineteenth century models. (Fig. 19). Such a tool could be a welcome aid for small scale works, including alterations and additions to existing buildings, and completely new projects. When badly done, such modest buildings can have a devastating effect on the appearance of a street or wilderness view. Well done, they help to enhance the experience of the parks as special places.

Design management by public authorities is a bold and unfashionable enterprise. The mythical prospect of unfettered creativity still attracts many architects. Their clients and other entrepreneurs resist the encroachments of the state on their individual enterprise. Nonetheless they remain committed to the park system, which is the expression of social commitment and collective effort. That effort is directed to maintain environments, and the possibility of experiences which would otherwise disappear. To maintain those environments requires massive intervention, overriding private and local interests for wider and longer term benefits (most recently demonstrated in the creation of the South Moresby Park in B.C.). Design management extending from major resort developments to the small and ordinary but ubiquitous bungalow camps, shops and cottages simply follows and makes effective the grand aims expressed in the founding of the parks.□
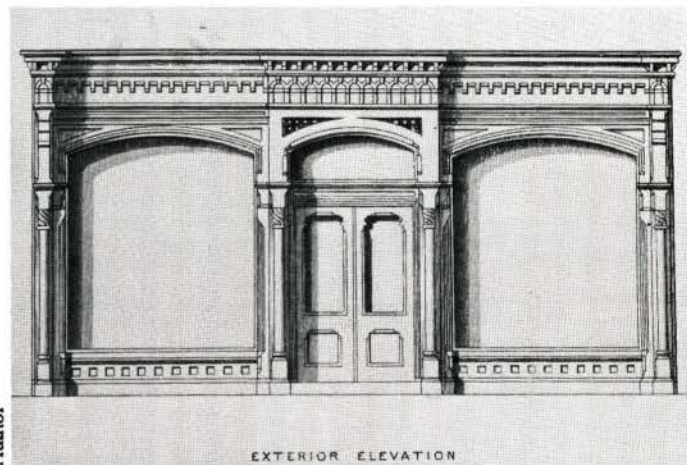

EXTERIOR ELEVATION

*Figure 19. Design for a shop front from **The Builder's Practical Director**, Leipzig and Dresden, (c.1853).*

Notes

1. Lothian 1976, v.1, p.23, see also v.4, p.16.
2. Lothian 1976, v.2, p.77.
3. Modernism may come to be considered a kind of meta-theory, like the Picturesque, under which may be accommodated any number of theories and styles.
4. T. Mills, "Tudor-Rustic: The Quest for an Architectural Identity in the National Parks," paper read at the SSAC Annual Meeting, Toronto, May, 1987.
5. This casual use of 'philosophy' is widespread and no more suitable word is available.
6. For example a part-work published in the 1850s **The Builder's Practical Director** (Dresden, Leipzig, London, n.d.), gives, among much other practical information, designs and some details for houses, shops, and many other ordinary buildings. (Fig. 19).