

Author

Figure 8. M.G. Lequer's design for an office building in 1930.

Witness to the Passing of Victorian Architecture - the R.A.I.C. Journal, 1924-1935

By Alexander F. Gross

January of 1924 saw the first issue of the "Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada." It was the initial step of the architectural profession in Canada to provide a means of contact between its members, to exchange views, disseminate ideas, provide information and education, receive complaints and provide a reminder of obligations to the profession. In its statement of purposes, notably absent was any reference to the world beyond Canada. Nevertheless, it was an improvement on its predecessor the "Canadian Architect and Builder," mainly a building trades magazine, which reflected the unprofessional status of architecture in Canada right up to 1907 when the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada was founded and professional status was accorded.

Any observer of the architectural scene who gleaned his information from the pages of the R.A.I.C. Journal throughout the 1920s would

have experienced difficulty predicting the changes which were to come in the next decade. From the content of its articles and advertisement to its format and graphics the Journal reflected the ideals of the Victorian society into which it was born, a society whose mind still lingered in the 19th Century. Louis Sullivan and B.G. Goodhue had both died on April 14, 1924 and in its obituaries the Journal said of Goodhue; "His churches, although based on the principles of Gothic, are in every way modern in their expression." The Journal's conception of 'modern' was certainly different from the conception in Europe. Walter Gropius had already built the glass walled Faguswerk (1911) and Peter Behrens had done his Berlin turbine factory in 1909 but the creators of the R.A.I.C. Journal gave no indication that they had noticed.

There is no doubt that the Journal reflected the state of architectural

thinking in Canada at that time. Gothic Revival style continued to be admired. Since it was an important and recent (1919) public works project, it was perhaps natural that the new Parliament Buildings in Ottawa should be featured in the first issue of the Journal. However, it is noteworthy that not a single word of criticism was offered for the late Gothic style or for the fact that a parliamentary committee "...determined that the building should be re-erected to present as similar an appearance to the old ones as possible...". The Pearson and Marchand elevation drawings, included in the article have a 19th Century flavour with their Gothic printing. They might have been done by Fuller and Jones.

An article in the first issue commented on the demolition of Nash's Regent Street and its replacement with aesthetically worthless buildings. The author asked why, when "We have a school of architects whose work in classical design rivals that of older countries." In the "older countries" such as England, France, Germany, Scotland and Austria the modern age had been heralded 20 years previously in the work of Voysey, Mackintosh, Perret, Garnier, Behrens and Loos, but the Journal article clearly reflected Canadian thinking in 1924.

A rare note of criticism came in an article in the final issue of 1924 when S. Lewis Milligan referred to the New Union Station in Toronto as an expression of inertia and a mausoleum. He then showed his 19th Century roots by suggesting the design could have been enlivened by a dome and carvings.

An admiration for 19th Century Victorian architecture persisted throughout the 1920s. In the first issue of 1925 an article by Professor C.H.C. Wright about the architecture of the University of Toronto shows a totally medieval university campus (Fig. 1). The atmosphere must have affected the Department of Architecture where an exhibit of works by the students, reviewed by John M. Lyle, showed not a sign of the modernism then sweeping Europe. Mr. Lyle said he was encouraged to think that architects would be steeped enough in the great traditional architecture to design, for contemporary use, buildings with the best traditional features. Like all of his associates John M. Lyle always stressed quality of design while looking constantly to the past. In the July, 1928 Journal, W.L. Somerville credited Professor Eric Arthur's measured drawings of early Ontario houses and his contagious enthusiasm with influencing recent work of young architects in Ontario, perhaps explaining the



Figure 1. War Memorial Tower, University of Toronto.

absence of any sign that the young people had been influenced by Voysey or Wright. Buildings featured in the Journal were always traditional in style. The first issue of 1927 featured the Ontario Government Building at the Canadian National Exhibition, a design which would have been in place in the 18th Century. In the February issue John M. Lyle lauded the design of the Chateau Laurier Hotel in Ottawa. In the October issue the Princess Gates at the C.N.E. were featured and their late Roman style was defended by A.H. Chapman in order "...to avoid styles that were liable to become obsolete with the change of fashion or public taste." The April 1928 issue featured the Montreal City Hall, rebuilt after a fire, in the original Second Empire style.

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Figure 2. Montreal City Hall an archaeologically correct Second Empire design, a modern building.

A First Award was announced in the January 1929 issue for the C.N.E. Automotive Building which seemed to have been influenced by the San Francisco Panama-Pacific Exposition. In the March 1929 issue Eric Arthur reviewed the Toronto Chapter Architectural Exhibition in which there was not a single design which was not traditional. Arthur's main concern was with breaches of good taste in architectural design. The decade ended without the appearance of a single modern building design in the Journal.

Despite the total absence of a drawing or photograph of modern architecture in the Journal, modernism suddenly appeared in a review, in the April 1929 issue, of a luncheon speech by John M. Lyle in February of that year. He acknowledged the modern movement was sweeping the world and that he had been to Paris to study it. His report concerning the modern movement's characteristic features was warm and approving but this same architect designed the Bank of Nova Scotia in Halifax, featured in the January 1932 issue, a classical building with giant order pilasters, rusticated ground floor and a mausoleum interior.

The advertisements in the R.A.I.C. Journal, throughout the 1920s also reflected the 19th Century thinking of the commercial contributors. Gothic lettering and romantic graphics were used extensively in advertisements.

Equipment offered in advertisements was often very ornate in design. An advertisement for Taylor-Forbes Company Ltd. in the first issue showed boilers and stoves. It would be easy to believe that the moulds for these were designed in the 19th Century. Every issue had an advertisement for the Robert Mitchell Co. Ltd., manufacturers of ornate art metal work for grilles, elevator doors and railings. Likewise, Lord & Burnham Company advertised in every issue their Victorian style greenhouses and conservatories. The National Terracotta Society also advertised in every issue their line of ornamental panels and reliefs. Every issue had advertisements for Indiana limestone or masonry tiles and bricks, reflecting the masonry construction of the buildings. There was never an advertisement for plate glass or steel beams and extrusions. Appropriate to the whole atmosphere of the Journal was the first advertisement for glass in the November 1927 issue, the Pressed Prismatic Plate Glass Co. advertising its ornamental glass. Craftsmanship rather than modern building methods was reflected in the birch flooring advertisements of the big lumber companies. Modern technology can be seen developing throughout the decade but the styling of lighting fixtures and electrical panelboards remained rooted in the 19th Century. They were always overloaded with ornamentation.

The use of the word "modern" in advertisements and articles did not have the same meaning in Canada that it had in Europe. Clearly the Journal equated "recent" with "modern". In September 1927 an Otis Fensom Elevator Company advertisement termed the Royal Bank Building in Montreal a modern skyscraper. It was no doubt new but had classical columns, rusticated stone work and looked like it was inspired by the Mausoleum of Halicarnassos. The Chamberlin Metal Weather Strip Company in April 1928 called the Montreal City Hall, an archaeologically correct Second Empire design, a modern building (Fig. 2). In the same issue the Northern Electric Company advertised its garrish line of lighting fixtures and called them the "...latest development in the field of modern lighting units" (Fig. 3). Apparently, they had not the slightest notion of what was being done at that moment at the Dessau Bauhaus (Fig. 4). In January of 1929, the Indiana Limestone Company was still calling the Chateau Laurier "...a modern hotel building...". In May of that year, the Metal Studios Limited advertised a lighting fixture, which would have fitted in well in the most indulgent 19th Century picturesque building, as part of "...the new Daily Star Building (which) typifies the best in modern design and construction" (Fig. 5). The Daily Star Buildings featured picturesque roof lines, traditional public areas and dimly lighted, Dickensque office areas. Despite the profession's objections to its traditional style, in June of 1928, the Confederation Building in Ottawa was termed by the Armstrong Cork and Insulation Company, in a June 1931 advertisement as "...the most modern structure recently erected in the Capital City of Canada..."

That the R.A.I.C. Journal was comfortable with the content of its articles and advertisement can be seen in the format and graphics of the magazine itself. The 1924 issue had a cover dominated by Gothic lettering (Fig. 6). All titles and headlines in the Journal were done in Gothic lettering and this persisted until a competition was called for a new cover. The January 1928 issue had the new cover which was plain with classical lettering (Fig. 7).

It is clear that the R.A.I.C. Journal existed in a Victorian society for the first few years of its life, but that was mainly a stylistic aspect. Technology had always advanced and had made great progress in the 19th Century. The Journal reflected this progress. In the first issue there was an article on "Studies on Cooling of Fresh Concrete in Freezing Weather" by Tokujiro Yoshida. The April-June issue had an article on sound proof partitions and the October-December issue had an article

Figure 3. Modern lighting units, April 1928.



Figure 4. Lighting fixture designed at the Dessau Bauhaus.

on "Stability of Thin Walls." An article in the January-February issue of 1925 compared various systems of wall insulations. The technology necessary for modern buildings was in place, certainly in Europe, and, as Gowans points out, when the demand for light and space was made, modern buildings appeared. Modernistic buildings began to appear in the early 1930s in Canada and they emphasized plainness, but they were not glass curtain wall structures. They were Art Deco masonry and structural steel buildings with small windows and minimal ornamentation.

Considering the advances in building design being made in Europe, what can explain the persistence of Victorian architecture in Canada and the United States? There can be no doubt that North America passed through the period called Late Victorian from 1890 to 1930. During this time, past styles were copied perfectly by such talented architects as Ralph Adams Cram, Bruce Price, McKim, Mead and White and Richard Morris Hunt. They were anachronisms in an age which had discredited symbolism for Renaissance or Gothic could hardly reflect the 20th Century. Traditional styles nevertheless persisted.

Partly, this persistence can be explained by patrons who, lacking adventure, still wanted to live in Tudor mansions, stay in manorial hotels and go to school on Oxfordian campuses. The Beaux-Arts practitioners were eloquent and powerful. In Canada architects like John M. Lyle were doing fine work in the Renaissance style. His Thornton-Smith Building, featured in the March-April 1926 Journal was an anachronism but a fine anachronism. The same could be said of the Gothic work of Sproatt and Rolph. Eric Arthur was scornful of pinnacles and turrets but he still admired good design where proportions were correct and tradition was tastefully applied. In the March-April 1926 Journal he said of Sproatt and Rolph "Gothic architecture is in the hands of most, a dead thing; but the work of the latter firm is as alive and as rational as the best work of the Gothic period." North America had emerged from the Great War of 1914-1918 richer and with its optimism intact. A culturally immature America ignored what was happening in Europe. It took Nazi persecution to make America notice the Bauhaus. Although Gothic Revival had started to decline in England, a loyalist Canada still clung to what it thought was typical of Mother England.

Canada might have looked to its architectural profession to lead the way out of Victorian times but the profession was young and the practitioners not inclined to change. Percy Nobbs was certainly an intelligent man and an inspired designer of historically styleless buildings but his Arts and Crafts movement constantly looked to the good of the past and rarely to the possibilities of the future. In Journal articles running from July to November, 1930, he showed that he understood the difference between North American skyscrapers and the "architecture of reality" being practiced by Mies Van der Rohe in Europe. However, he cautioned against Canadians "losing their heads over modernity" and insisted that the traditionalist was the better, more competent, more thorough craftsman. Percy Nobbs was after all a Scot, and A.T. Galt in the Journal of August 1935 attributed Victorian persistence to the Scottish background of the Canadians, a conservative ancestry slow to change. Architects of the calibre of Henry Sproatt still considered Gothic relevant. At the 22nd Annual Dinner of the R.A.I.C., in 1929, Sproatt theorized that French Gothic was of the intellect and English Gothic was of the heart as it if still mattered. Scholars such as Ramsay Traquair and Eric Arthur were absorbed with frequent articles in the Journal dealing lovingly with the 18th Century architecture of Quebec and Ontario. Eric Arthur could have been a strong advocate for change in the architecture faculty at University of Toronto but he constantly demurred. In the March-April 1926 issue of the Journal he expressed admiration for Sproatt and Rolph's Hart House, saying it ranked with the best college work in England. He was repeatedly called upon to report to the Journal on exhibits of architecture. His review in the March 1929 R.A.I.C. Journal of the Toronto Chapter Architectural Exhibition has been noted above and as late as December 1932 Eric Arthur was still reviewing traditional architecture, approvingly, for the Journal. In his review of the R.A.I.C. Exhibition he approved of the classical Bank of Montreal in Ottawa and also had nice things to say about two very Georgian houses with pedimented fronts and giant orders. He did not like the new National Research Council Building in Ottawa saying the Sproatt and Rolph design was "portentious." Professor Arthur thought they should stick to Gothic.

Suddenly, the Victorian world of the R.A.I.C. Journal was penetrated by a sign of modernism in the March 1930 report on the exhibition of student's drawings. M.G. Leger, a fifth year student at the Montreal Ecole Des Beaux Arts submitted a design for an office building with square lines and abundant glass (Fig. 8). In the April 1930 issue a very modernistic design for "A Modern Ontario Home" received 5th prize (Fig. 9). The June 1930 issue commented editorially on a debate between a modernist and a traditionalist and in the December 1930 issue there appeared a report on an address by the German modernist, Dr. Erich Mendelsohn to the Architectural Association in London, England. In it he put forward the fundamental principles of modern architecture and ended by saying "The wall free of load, ...opens up the whole surface between



IN THE STAR BUILDING

Every detail of the new Daily Star Building typifies the best in modern design and construction.

The lighting fixtures — one of which is pictured above — were designed by Messrs. Chapman and Oxley, Architects, and executed by Metal Studios.

◆◆◆
Metal Studios Limited

Hamilton, Ontario

Figure 5. Daily Star Building, 19th Century picturesque or modern design.

the structural supports." The age of modern architecture had clearly arrived in the pages of the R.A.I.C. Journal but traditional attitudes would persist for at least five more years.

The appearance of modernism is certainly understandable. France and England had emerged as pyrrhic victors from World War I and European society was disillusioned with old values. The cataclysmic events of the war and the depression which followed spurred a movement toward purification and austerity which was embodied in the International Style. Light, space and the free use of technology was called for and Gothic Revival was an impediment to this. New economic realities demanded economies in construction.

A change in attitude was immediately apparent in the Journal. As early as June of 1927, in the review of the Architectural Exhibition at the Montreal Art Gallery, ornamentation in buildings had been questioned and mention was made of the lack of adaptability to modern technology in traditional buildings. By May 1931, Jacques Carlu, Director of the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts was attacking tradition in the pages of the Journal. He attacked stylists who denied their steel with stone and asserted that only modernists preserved the fine tradition of true expression of structure and material. In the same issue Le Corbusier is quoted, "The house is a machine for living in" and "Our old houses are like old coaches filled with tuberculosis." The once loved Victorian architecture was again attacked in the Journal of September 1932 by P.W. Thompson in a reprint of his Mail and Empire article "Toronto's Heritage

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Figure 6. Gothic font for all titles and headlines of the R.A.I.C. Journal 1924.

THE JOURNAL ROYAL ARCHITECTURAL INSTITUTE OF CANADA



JANUARY
1928

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TORONTO - CANADA

Figure 7. January 1918 R.A.I.C. Journal set in classical lettering.

of Ugliness." He said, "The late Victorian era, the worst, from an architectural standpoint, that the world has ever known, arrived in all its hideousness" and then suggested "...Toronto ...must cleanse her streets of mean and debasing structures..." In February of the same year even John M. Lyle was reported in the March Journal asking whether Canadian architecture would turn to the International Style or "...remain a dead thing chained to the moss-grown chariot of Rome or to the mystic spirit of the middle ages?"

Even Eric Arthur was having doubts in his December 1933 review of the R.A.I.C. Exhibition in Montreal "We can't seriously, in 1933, go back to Tudor England or Francis Ist unless a client demands it." John M. Lyle thought Eric Arthur was going modern and credited it to the influence of the Ernest Cormier house in Montreal, (February 1934, Correspondence) but the reader of the May 1934 Journal is hardly prepared for the viciousness of Arthur's attack on traditional architecture. Referring to the Queen's Park Legislature, Victoria College and Toronto City Hall he said "In an architect's Utopia a disposition to arson would be one of the great virtues" and "Rarely has a single individual wielded so great an influence on the architecture of his day as (H.H.) Richardson, and one can only regret that he was so completely ignorant of its real nature and purpose" and further "That they (the Canadian architects influenced by Richardson) failed to produce a single building of distinction may be explained by the general level of taste throughout the world (in the 1870s to 1890s)." By 1938, Eric Arthur had permitted John Alford in the foreword to his book, *The Early Buildings of Ontario*, to refer to the revival styles of Romanesque, Gothic and Tudor as a hotch-potch of degenerate styles.

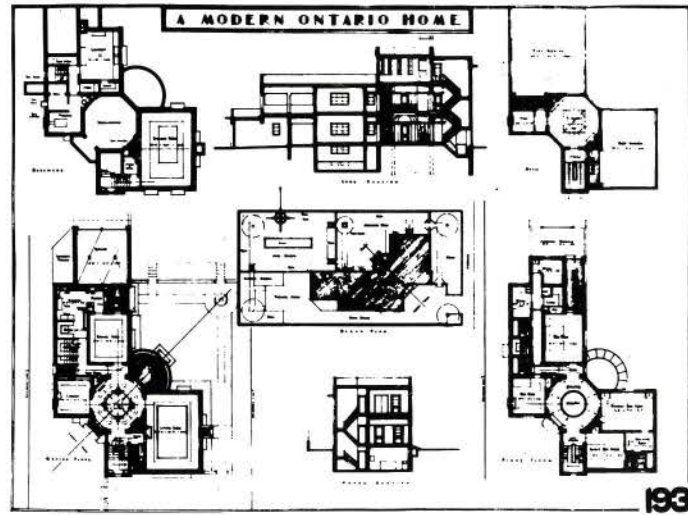
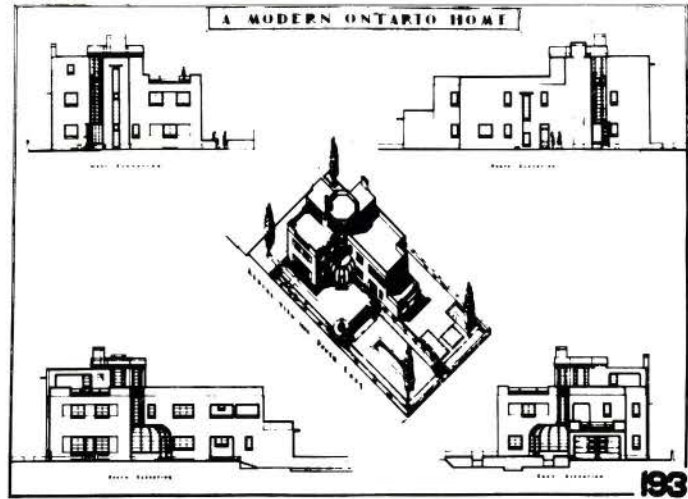
The loathing for Victorian architecture was fairly general by the time of Emile Venne's article in the July 1935 Journal "The Modern Trend in Domestic Architecture." He called traditional architecture a worn-out and romantic living in the past and suggested that microbes collected in the decoration of the old architecture. William Lescaze, too, was concerned about germs in the April 1937 Journal article "Why Modern Architecture?" when he said "It is absurd that we of the 20th Century should waste our time, our energies, our health, within the meaningless and bad copies of past civilizations."

The proud owner of a traditional house in the 1980s might find all of this invective rather amusing but it was more understandable in the 1930s. Austerity often follows a period of excess such as Victorian picturesque eclecticism. A wakening working class could now aspire to an individual house with modern creature comforts even if the Depression prevented its attainment for many. It was a time when streamlining was equated, strangely, with comfort. The public health campaigns of the early years of the twentieth-century had borne fruit in a more aware population who understood sanitation and sunlight and wanted it for their families. Clean kitchens and bathrooms were demanded, as well as large clear glass windows. The times would no longer tolerate dirt, darkness and degeneracy.

Naturally, the realization fell somewhat short of the dream. Gropius, Mies and Le Corbusier had never intended to dehumanize the cores of cities but the misuse of their styles contributed much to what has happened. MacLean's Magazine (December 21, 1981) refers to "...the sterile parameters of the international style modernism—the glass box in the windswept plaza." Even in 1931 in the May R.A.I.C. Journal E.H. Blake was reacting to Le Corbusier. "We may all of us be in revolt against the stuffy over-decoration and the distracting gimcracks of the Victorian age, but we still want books and pictures; ...colour and pattern ...the privacy that can only be got from the use of curtains; and the quiet that can only be got from the use of rugs... We do not find in concrete a suitable or pleasant material for domestic buildings; and we fail to see that a steamer's superstructure presents the most appropriate or even the most healthy model for an urban dwelling." In the 1935 and 1936 Journals, writers expressed concern at the boredom and lack of variety in the International Style.

Certainly, one of the most disturbing aspects of the arrival of Modernism was the destruction of the Victorian City. Jacques Dalibard of Heritage Canada refers to the imposition by developers and politicians of a "single-generation image on our communities," so typical of North America but not of Europe; the destruction of the creations of a hundred past generations. In her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs laments the loss of buildings of the Victorian age and the consequent sociological problems. In an Ottawa Citizen article (December 28, 1974) architect John Leaning writes of traditional architecture in which "...ornament was everywhere ...breaking down the hard lines of structure into soft, playful and humanly understandable forms." Loss of things familiar to humans is perhaps the greatest condemnation levelled at modernism.

So, what Calder Lath and Julius T. Sadler referred to as "The Only Proper Style: Gothic Architecture in America" persisted overly long and then died to the accompaniment of much vituperation. Traditional ar-



First Prize — E. M. FORBES, TORONTO

Figure 9. 5th prize in 1920 "Modern Ontario Home" design competition.

chitecture lay buried under modernism for 50 years but we now see a rebirth in post-modernism. Preservationists no longer have to work quite so hard to protect what is left of our Victorian architectural heritage and that is good. However, preservationists will soon have to address themselves to the protection of what was good from the past 50 years. In the meantime developers will cash in on the rebirth of traditionalism and most of what they build will not be great architecture (Fig. 10). This certainly illustrates the overimportance attached to style. The undoubted influence of William Morris on the Modern movement, not only through Arts and Crafts but also through the Bauhaus, shows that formal considerations are only part of what emerges as important from any age. Above all, he called for "well-building," quality in conception, design and execution and that is what emerged as common in the work of such disparate architects as Eric Arthur, John M. Lyle, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe.

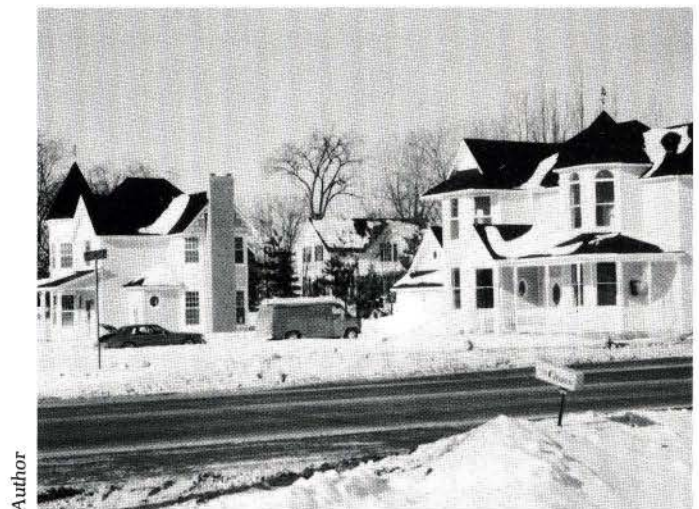


Figure 10. Developers profit from rebirth of traditionalism.