



The pressed metal panels of the Empire Hotel (1884) which were put into storage following the demolition of that building are used as a facade for an addition to the Pantages Theatre, in this design proposal by the author.

Toronto Baroque

by Ann Cameron

The contribution of immigrant groups to the diversity of style in vernacular Canadian architecture is a field which has commanded the attention of a number of architectural historians. Ukrainian churches, Jewish synagogues, and Mennonite barns have been studied with a view to understanding their Old World prototypes and their often eloquent message concerning the practical lives and cultural and aesthetic formation of their builders and users.

By the mid-1960's, the large and prosperous Italian community of the Toronto area had also developed its distinctive building type. To anyone familiar with the culture of the modern Southern Italian, it comes as no surprise that the building which receives the most loving attention, is that which embodies, shelters and enhances the heart of community life, the family home.

While there are numerous practical reasons why the Italian family in Toronto is able to create an "Italian Style" house, as it is called within the community, the basic motivation for building what are often costly and extensive special features is a profoundly different aesthetic orientation than that of the Anglo-Canadian.

The vitality of the Southern Italian Baroque left its imprint on the tastes and minds of people in every stratum of society in the regions where it flourished, and post-war immigration to Canada has been predominately from the then-economically depressed areas south of Rome.

More than any earlier emigrating group, the Italians who came to Canada in the 1950's and 1960's intended to settle permanently in their new country. Their family finances were directed primarily towards the acquisition of a home, and with the boom economy of those years, a surprising eighty per cent of them succeeded in attaining their goal by 1970. Moreover, prosperity and large numbers combined with a relatively liberal social climate (Multiculturalism at the political level) to make the Italians relatively unselfconscious about expressing their taste for distinctive dwellings.

Let us examine the stylistic characteristics of that most public aspect of the family home, its street facade. The characteristics which I will describe are found both in older, downtown houses and in newer suburban developments. Facade renovations in both are usually



Facade renovation with balustrades and brick arches, Grace Street, Toronto.

owner-designed and initiated; the real estate developers who built "subdivisions" entirely in this style found that they were excessively limiting their market, so closely has this style become identified with Italians. More important, even when an owner wants an "Italian style" house, he would rather design his own version of it, similar perhaps, but recognizably different from that of his neighbours. Architects seldom enter into this kind of project; they are too likely to project their own design personality.

Although recently I have noted an increasing number of urban "palazzo" facades, severe and relatively closed



The Veranda.

in appearance, the overall tendency is an unsurprising one in a group with a predominantly rural background: a "villa" type is created, similar to that which one finds in the suburbs and countryside of Italy.

Brick, the most common domestic exterior wall material in Toronto, has been accepted by the Italians as suitably solid and durable for their houses, but not so the other material customarily used with it, wood. Perhaps more realistic than other Torontonians about the menace of insects (termites are gaining ground in Toronto), Italians are usually anxious to replace their wooden verandas with a concrete porch, which often covers a *cantina*, or cold cellar excavated at the same time. Throughout the home, in fact, wood is viewed with suspicion as a flimsy, unhygienic and untrustworthy building element, and to be disguised if not replaced. The veranda is often enlarged, setting the scene for informal social events in summer and providing a vantage point for a warm-hearted and lively street life. Interestingly, the incidence of street socializing tends to diminish with distance from the city centre. The two favoured materials for veranda roof supports and railings both tend to be decorative; wrought iron, often in lacy floral designs, or brick semi-circular arches, which can create a shady recess, almost a courtyard.

In the facade design, there is a distinct formal emphasis on the quality of symmetry or assymetry. A simple response to utilitarian needs looks to an Italian eye like carelessness. Hence, we frequently see gracefully curving steps off-centre on the front of a small mid-town bungalow or, on the other hand, a rather ponderous classical balustrade made of concrete to emphasize the regularity of pattern and organization of the front of a larger two or three storey home. In the suburbs one may find a portico with classical columns, usually Corinthian or Ionic, as well as the more customary brick arcades. Not just the ornament, but even the underlying attitudes of the classical approach to art can be discerned as one discusses the ideals which motivated the design with its creator. Control, balance and containment are valid and important principles, even to the uneducated and inexperienced. It is, however, this naivete, as well as incomprehension of the "English" Canadians' building traditions, which can lead to some incongruous results.

The employment of classical devices in the "Italian style" house parallels the use of these motifs in the "Post-Modern" idiom, in that both can imply a rejection of the lack of ornament and artifice of the Modern style. It is most important to note, however, that while the building in the Toronto "Italian style" and the Post Modernist may even purchase their classical ornament, such as columns, from the same supplier, they are using them in an entirely different spirit. Where the Post Modernist architect uses these motifs in a playful, ironical or whimsical way, the Italian, whose ancestors built ancient and Baroque Rome, cannot see the joke. The aesthetic and, by implication, moral nobility in the classical style, which so moved our English Georgian ancestors, is a living, albeit unconscious tradition for the Italian in Toronto.