This article illustrates how architectural educator and historian Peter Collins’s collection of 35-mm slides and his personal papers are useful windows on his work, life, and even his death. Parallax allowed Collins to constantly reinvent himself and his work, just as his books suggested that it had provided twentieth-century architects with a revolutionary way of making space.
Parallax occurs not only as visitors to Unity Temple move beside architectural features but also as they move over or beneath features such as cantilevered overhangs. In a building based on extended parallax, that is, building parts slide above and below users as well as beside them.

Among the illustrations he chose for the book to show this sideways movement was Kahn’s Yale Art Gallery (Figure 3), that Collins noted illustrated the effects of parallax created by screens. Kahn’s use of high towers, on the other hand, “which change their apparent relation as one moves round the building,” seems to be entirely within the customary use of parallax.8

Collins illustrated “the reversal of the traditional method of exploiting parallax” with the work of Le Corbusier, whose interpenetrating interiors and exteriors he said were best appreciated in motion.9 In an extended discussion of Giedion’s space-time, he notes that the interiors of Modern buildings could be assessed from outside, while the exteriors required movement. Giedion’s remark that
Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye was “hollowed out” seems crucial to Collins’s reversal of parallax; the building is self-contained from the outside, but space burrows in rather than spilling out in separate parts that might be seen in parallax.¹⁰

Even with the most familiar buildings, Collins’s idea of reversed parallax is difficult to grasp. In addition to describing the particular subtractive spatial complexity of Le Corbusier’s designs, Collins’s use of the term reversal may have pointed to irrational, groundless, or unexpected conditions and forms in the buildings. This categorization is implied by his quote from John Summerson’s *Heavenly Mansions*, which describes Le Corbusier’s work as oppositional, in particular as Cubist, a sum of destructions, and “the reverse logic of every situation.”¹¹ Collins elaborated on Le Corbusier’s role in the chapter “The Influence of Painting and Sculpture”:

. . . most of Le Corbusier’s basic revolutionary ideas also imply what Summerson describes as Alice-in-Wonderland inversions, and which, despite their elaborate rationalization, are essentially examples of a logic turned upside-down. In other words, when compared with traditional building methods, they constituted a kind of “anti-architecture.” For example, whereas in traditional architecture, a villa is situated in a garden, in Le Corbusier’s architecture, the garden is situated in the villa. Whereas in Classical architecture colonnades are placed on a base of solid walling, Le Corbusier places solid walling on top of his columns.¹²

Unpredictable displacements also marked Collins’s early career trajectory. Born in Leeds in 1920, he developed a passion for French architecture early in his youth.¹³ Nevertheless, he claimed throughout his life that he had decided to become an architect as a nine-year-old when he visited Canterbury Cathedral. During World War II, Collins joined the Yorkshire Hussars as a trooper and served as an intelligence officer. After the war, he returned to Leeds to complete his architectural studies. The thesis project (Figure 4) he completed at Leeds in 1948 for a National Seminary—a complex of undecorated, flat-roofed, high-rise towers, and a Church linked through a series of courtyards—shows how his interest in Modern design was already well established.¹⁴ In 1948, Collins moved to Fribourg, Switzerland, where he worked in the office of Denis Honegger, a former student of Perret and one of Perret’s most rigorous followers. He then relocated to Paris, where he worked in the office of Denis Honegger, a former student of Perret and one of Perret’s most rigorous followers. He then relocated to Paris, where he would return frequently, and was employed by Pierre-Édouard Lambert, whose office was among
the firms working with Perret. It was during this five-year period that several of the seeds of Collins’s lifelong passions were sown, especially the architecture of reinforced concrete, the city of Paris, and the work of Perret, the main subject of Concrete, the Vision of a New Architecture.\textsuperscript{15}

A fourth passion of the young architect was Margaret Gardner Taylor of Ottawa. On one trip to Paris, in 1953, he married the young Canadian. Responsible for his eventual move to Montreal, Mrs. Collins became a familiar figure to students at McGill University, as a constantly reappearing scale figure in many of the school’s 35-mm slides (Figure 5). In 1955, Collins graduated with his masters from Manchester University, with a project that had focused on the life and work of Jacques-François Blondel (for which he won the 1954 RIBA Silver Medal). The young couple moved to New Haven, Connecticut, that same year, where Collins taught architectural history as a Fulbright scholar at Yale University, launching his academic career as a transplanted colonist. By the age of 35, then, Collins had lived in England, Switzerland, France, and the United States, in addition to his somewhat mysterious wartime travels in the Middle East (probably Egypt) and Italy. He would return to the United States for two extended periods: in 1964, to teach at Smith College and in 1967–1968, to visit the University of California, Berkeley.

The remainder of Collins’s life was spent in Montreal, where he and Margaret moved in 1956, in order for him to take up a position at McGill University’s sixty-year-old School of Architecture, directed by Modernist John Bland since 1941.\textsuperscript{16} Bland and Collins shared a pedagogy based on the Modern movement’s teaching of rationalism and functionalism. Their gentlemanly manner and previous experiences in Britain, too, may have provided the foundation for their lifelong cordial friendship.\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps equally appealing to the young Collins was the absolute freedom Director Bland offered faculty members to teach courses as they pleased.

In addition to secure employment and a like-and open-minded boss, Montreal in this golden decade of the 1960s offered Collins a number of tangible benefits. First, Montreal was close to Margaret’s family in Ottawa. Second, Collins took every advantage of the highly charged architectural scene unfolding in his milieu, as indicated by his beloved photographs. We know, for example, that he witnessed the opening of I.M. Pei’s 600-foot tower, Place Ville Marie, in September 1962, because he described the military band that played at the event in a review for Manchester’s The Guardian and photographed it for the McGill slide library (Figure 6). “A fair sprinkling of inquisitive onlookers [were] attracted by the music of the military band,” he reported.\textsuperscript{18} He also reviewed and photographed Pier Luigi Nervi’s Place Victoria (Figure 7), under construction in 1964. It is difficult to imagine Collins, who always dressed in a proper white shirt, black suit, and tie for class, on this frenetic construction site.\textsuperscript{19} He was definitely there, however, as his photograph of Place Victoria, like nearly all his slides of buildings under construction, focuses on the exposed reinforced concrete frames.\textsuperscript{20}

This backstage perspective on Montreal Modernism offered a new point of observation for Collins’s evolving interpretation of French rationalism, clearly reflected in his changing ideas about Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture. The two-page outline he sent to Faber and Faber in 1959 was for a book completely different from what he eventually would publish. At this stage, there was no five-part division, and perhaps more importantly, no analogies. From the letters and notes which he left regarding the book, the final structure seems to have evolved some time between 1959 and April 1963, when he submitted seven chapters of the book. These were published serially in the magazine Canadian Architect between May 1963 and March 1964. Some parts, too, like the article in Architectural Review, appeared in the international press. There is no mention of any Canadian building or architect in the book, although he began

5. Margaret Collins, Malton Airport. Slide library, School of Architecture, McGill University.
writing reviews and articles on Canadian buildings as early as December 1959.

This parallactic, ever-changing approach to scholarship continued even after the book’s publication. An intriguing, undated note (Figure 8) that Collins probably made to himself listed the changes he would have liked to make to Changing Ideals. There were six numbered points:

1. Pevsner’s factual errors
2. An expanded discussion of Revolutionary
3. More material on the influence of painting
4. Additions to the section on decorative arts
5. Additions to the mechanical analogy
6. Rewrite biological analogy

Unnumbered items also appeared on the list, including the addition of a musical analogy, material on Nervi’s attitudes to various structural types (perhaps inspired by his first-hand knowledge of Place Victoria), an expanded discussion of nationalism and Gothic, a section on environmental harmony, and some people to add to the revised book’s acknowledgments. The undated note is a remarkable document: a one-page review of Changing Ideals by its author, who was its toughest critic, and clear evidence that whenever Collins wrote this note to himself, he had changed his mind about Changing Ideals. Always worried that the book would usurp his usefulness as a lecturer, Collins continuously revised his courses, which may have led him to new ideas for the book.21

Evidence of this penchant for revision appears throughout his papers. His lecture notes, typically only a page (Figure 9), are layered with changes, edits, and suggested improvements. Sections of text are crossed out; arrows indicate a change of order; sometimes there is even a record of discussion time for a particular class.

A second form of revisiting past ideas, the notion of architectural precedent, also recurs throughout Collins’s papers, culminating in his third and final book, Architectural Judgement, in 1971. His insistence on precedent is the main reason that the “Vernacular” was such a ticklish subject for Collins. “Important thing is relation of programme to solution,” he says, “difficulty of knowing former vernacular.” In addition to the lack of a clear program, the notion of Vernacular was particularly thorny for Collins, because to him it had no clear relationship to precedent.

Collins’s entire life, indeed, was a search for precedent and authority via these constantly shifting perspectives. In 1968–1969, he stepped out of the box to see things in a remarkably new way by attending law school at Yale University. During his
sojourn at Berkeley, too, he seems to have delighted in the close proximity of the architecture and law departments, Wurster Hall and Boalt Hall, as he frequently photographed the postwar buildings together. It is telling, too, that Collins chose to leave Montreal during its finest architectural moment, Expo ’67, a showcase of architectural Modernism that brought many of his subsequent McGill colleagues to Montreal. Nonetheless, his critique of Montreal’s world’s fair as haphazard was equally revealing of his feelings toward his adopted city, which he described in Canadian Architect in 1966 as “one of the most beautiful settings in North America.”

For Collins, as for other immigrants in the postwar period, Montreal’s benefits extended far beyond its aesthetic pleasures. Perhaps, he felt that he would have no access to the powerful moneyed classes in England and France, whereas Canada’s largest city offered Collins immediate entry into the upper echelons of urban society. His polite British accent, impeccable French (yet disdain for the Quebec sovereignty movement), love of good food and precise language, his conservative wardrobe, and deep intelligence were his calling cards. He lived in a traditional house (Figure 10) in well-to-do, Anglophone Westmount, and drove a yellow Mustang, crafting a relatively strange, nonconforming relationship to both Britain and the former colony in which he chose to live, teach, and write. Collins was not the only postwar architectural historian to react strongly to British class consciousness. In this regard, he shares much with Reyner Banham and Colin Rowe, in particular,
whose perspectives on the power of architecture were decidedly more progressive than Collins’s.24

During his twenty-five years at McGill’s School of Architecture, Collins never discussed his childhood. No father is listed on his birth certificate, and no one seems to know anything about his mother, Ann Collins, who is described as a hospital registration clerk on his birth certificate.25 Did Ann Collins raise her son? Was this in Leeds, at the working-class address cited on the birth certificate,26 or in London? Did Collins know the identity of his father? Was Collins’s unremitting search for precedent and authority in architecture, and his deep interest in lineage, nourished by a childhood without these? Perhaps his deep personal interests in both hierarchy and heraldry are offshoots of his compelling search for a father figure.27

Collins suffered from insomnia and depression throughout his adult life. When depressed, his preference for aristocratic surroundings became especially evident. For example, he often went to expensive restaurants and hotels in Montreal. While on a tour of the Palace of Versailles during a summer course he taught in France in 1978, he confided to a student that he would have liked to live there. He surrounded himself with symbols of aristocracy; in his office (which also housed the slide library) was a huge wooden coat of arms.28 Similarly (and perhaps related to his dislike for vernacular architecture), Collins disdained the ordinary. He found particularly distasteful the penchant of journalists to interview the “man on the street,” whose opinions he considered absolutely meaningless. He had no sympathy for student participation in university affairs. During the student protests at McGill in the 1960s, Collins exited the McConnell Engineering Building wielding wire cutters, and cut the power to the activists’ loudspeakers. Just before his death in 1981, he apparently responded to nearly every remark by his colleagues with a three-word question: “on whose authority?”29 Born into a social system based on authority, lineage,
patriarchy, and exclusivity, Collins came to cultivate these values in his adopted city, Montreal.

Certainly, Collins’s deep interest in precedent had a discernible impact on his critique of Canadian Modernism. The buildings he admired, such as Rother Bland Trudeau’s Ottawa City Hall (Figure 11) or Toronto’s Malton Airport (Figure 12) by John B. Parkin Associates, constructed as he was writing *Changing Ideals* between 1957 and 1965, were ones which both relied on and set obvious precedents. Because the wise decision was made to emphasize a parking garage, claimed Collins in an assessment of three Canadian airports in the *RAIC Journal* of 1964, “Malton undoubtedly constitutes a prototype of world-wide significance in its compositional conception.” Buildings he did not admire, like Viljo Rewell’s Toronto City Hall (Figure 13) and Wright’s Guggenheim Museum, were unique and thus commanded little sense of authority and engaged no precedents. He described the New York museum as “about as inhuman as a boa constrictor and as exotic as the tendrils of some Brobdignagian plant,” and Collins critiqued Rewell’s widely praised masterpiece:

There is no doubt that both the Guggenheim Museum and the Toronto City Hall will be regarded by future historians as great works of art, because art historians tend to see buildings as abstract sculpture, requiring neither antecedence nor succession for their justification. It will be a mark of excellence that no one has ever designed anything like them before, and that no one will ever design anything like them again.

Regardless of his subject, Collins always found a way to mention his pet peeves, especially the myopia of art historians and the devastating impact of the so-called Form-Givers (Modern architects who ignore the program and produce arbitrary sculptural forms, like Paul Rudolph). This was his real contribution to the interpretation of the
architecture of his own era. His criticism of the Toronto City Hall, Sydney Opera House, and the “forms” produced by Rudolph et al. addressed the same problems as Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s Learning from Las Vegas (1972). These authors, too, condemned Rudolph’s work for being irrelevant, self-important, and original. Collins’s clear identification of this problem of novelty in postwar Modernism more than a decade before Learning from Las Vegas has yet to be recognized.32

Near the end of his life, Collins’s parallax became a one-way system. In the way his personal life unfolded, there was no doubting back, no reworking of the parti, and in the end, no final look back. By the late 1970s, his perspective on Perret was even ambivalent. During the second and final time he taught Summer Course Abroad (Rome and Paris) in 1978, he encouraged his students to visit Perret’s Le Havre, but refused to go with them, perhaps recognizing that the project was less successful than he had previously believed.33 In the fall of 1980, Collins’s world of reason and order was shattered by depression and loneliness, especially following the death of Margaret by suicide in Montreal while he was in Paris. With this devastating passing of his life partner and scale figure, his changing point of observation apparently lost all discernible references. He took his own life at home on June 7, 1981.34 His second book’s title, in this sense, was an accurate reflection both of its central argument on parallax and as a biographical metaphor for Collins the man: Changing Ideals.35

Nearly twenty-five years after his death, Collins’s role as a major figure in the historiography of Modernism is only beginning to be studied. Special issues of architectural journals (ARQ: Architecture Quebec and Fifth Column) devoted to his work, the republication of two of his books and a French translation of Concrete, and a symposium and related publication at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 1999 have nurtured new interest in his prolific career. Our understanding of this elusive scholar, like his own work and life, is thus changing in parallax.

Acknowledgments
An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians in Richmond, Virginia, in April 2002. I am thankful to members of the audience and to the session chair, Marc Grignon, who raised insightful questions on that occasion, and also to the Institut de recherche en histoire de l’architecture, Montreal, for a seed grant in support of this research. I also acknowledge the helpful comments of two anonymous JAE reviewers. Peter Collins’s papers are housed at the John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill University. My colleagues at the School of Architecture, McGill University, have generously contributed to this paper through their vivid memories of Peter Collins, especially Maureen Anderson, Vikram Bhatt, Martin Bressani, Ricardo Castro, Derek Drummond, the late Norbert Schoenauer, Pieter Sijpkes, and Radoslav Zuk. Cynthia Hammond, Jeffrey Hannigan, David Krawitz, Tanis Hinchcliffe, Anthony King, Louis Martin, Aurèlie Parisien, Peter Sealy, David Theodore, and Dell Upton also helped with the challenges of researching this elusive man.

Notes
3. For more on Collins’s slides, see Annmarie Adams, “‘With Precision Appropriate’: Images from the Peter Collins Collection,” ARQ: Architecture Quebec 75 (October 1993): 18–19.
8. Ibid., p. 293.
10. Ibid., p. 290.
14. Although the design of the thesis is overtly Modernist, Collins’s slides of the project include a series of precedents drawn from pre-Modern, traditional architecture: the refectory of the Dominican Convent of S. Sisto in Rome; the Aula Magna of Le College du Pape, University of Louvain; a fourteenth-century crozier and the spire of Rheims Cathedral; the Triptych of Odense Cathedral in Denmark; and the Seminary at Mechlin, Belgium.
15. Peter Collins, Concrete: The Vision of a New Architecture: A Study of Auguste Perret and His Precursors (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. xv–xx. Frampton notes that the book title was “perverse and
misleadingly” complex, as it was actually three books in one. See his f-
16. More information is needed on how Collins came to meet Bland. He
may have been visiting Margaret’s family and dropped in on the School,
according to colleagues.
17. Although born in Lachine, Quebec, Bland had studied planning at
the Architectural Association in London and was a member of the Royal
Institute of British Architects.
18. Peter Collins, “In Place,” The Guardian (Manchester), September 25,
1962.
19. Collins worked seven days a week and wore a sports jacket to
McGill on Sundays. He stayed in his office every night until
Margaret telephoned to say dinner was ready. Personal
correspondence from Derek Drummond, April 16, 2002.
Review 139 (June 1966): 433–38. A particularly interesting set of
slides of buildings under construction are those of Frank Lloyd
Wright’s Marin County Civic Center. Collins labelled buildings under
construction “u/c.”
21. See Annmarie Adams, “Changing Ideas about Changing Ideals,” in
Latek, ed., Peter Collins and the Critical History of Modern Architecture
23. His attitude to the profession may also have been related to the
comfort he found in exclusivity. There is no evidence to suggest that
he ever practiced again, once he left Paris, yet Collins maintained his
membership in both the PQAA, the RAIC (he was a Fellow), and the
RIBA. He described himself, too, as an architect, rather than a historian,
although most of his prizes and honors were for his books and articles.
24. Collins’s relationship to his contemporaries, such as Sigfried Giedion,
Colin Rowe, Reyner Banham, Joseph Rykwert, and Manfredo Tafuri, is
a rich and largely unexplored subject and his personal papers abound
with correspondence with key figures. The relationship of Collins and
Nikolaus Pevsner is touched upon in Adams, “Changing Ideas,”
p. 30–43. Alberto Pérez-Gómez situates Collins vis-à-vis hermeneutics
in his “Architectural History as Intellectual History: Peter Collins’
Partial Hermeneutic Project,” in Latek, ed., Peter Collins and the
Critical History of Modern Architecture (Montreal: IRHA, 2002),
p. 120–32.
25. I am grateful to Tams Hinchcliffe for finding and describing
Collins’s birth certificate. He was born on August 13, 1920, at 123
Beckett Street, Leeds (subdistrict North Leeds). Ann Collins’s address
on the certificate, however, is 10 Manchester Street in London W.,
which was a residence connected to University College Hospital.
Hinchcliffe speculates that Ann Collins may have worked in London,
and gone to Leeds to give birth. Another confusing detail is that
Collins lists “Vera Collins” as his mother in his will.
26. 123 Beckett Street is in Harehills, an industrial area close to the
city center. I am grateful to Anthony King for comments on the area
and its back-to-back terraced housing. Personal correspondence
from Anthony King, April 25, 2002.
27. Adnan Morshed notes the role of “father-seeking” in modernist
architectural theory in his film review, “Architecture as a Means of Filial
Discovery: Nathaniel Kahn’s My Architect,” JAE 58, no. 3 (February
2005): 60.
28. Drummond recalls that the coat of arms was from the set of the
Red and White Review, perhaps My Fur Lady, rescued by Collins
from the garbage. Personal correspondence from Drummond,
April 16, 2002.
29. Drummond remembers that Collins said this frequently over the years,
and more intensely just before he died. Personal correspondence from
Drummond, April 16, 2002.
32. Collins admired Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction in
Architecture, although he criticized its central argument. See “Editor’s Postscript,” SAHJ 26
(October 1967): 198.
33. Joseph Rykwert notes that “Collins’ ultimate loyalty was to Perret
and the whole of his architectural thinking can be considered as a
justification of Perret’s architecture. Even when the master broke what
would seem to me one of the cardinal points on which Collins was so
insistent, and that is the belief that the architect must always work within
the given context—a belief from which he departed in the reconstruction of
Peter Collins and the Critical History of Modern Architecture
34. Collins overdosed on sleeping pills. Drummond remembers that
Collins, who had taken sleeping pills for years, was increasingly
worried he was addicted to them.