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“WITH THE PRECISION APPROPRIATE”

IMAGES FROM THE PETER COLLINS COLLECTION

ANNMARIE ADAMS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURE AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY

Just months before his sudden death in 1981, Peter Collins set his undergraduate students at McGill University an unusual test: “Pretend you are sending to your best friend five picture postcards during a tour of Europe. Those who do not recognize the image projected on the screen should say so. They will thus benefit from a reward of 40% for their truthfulness. Those who know something will write it with the precision appropriate for the back of a postcard.”

The precise drawings of Architectural History Theory, 1750-1900—then projected individual slides of postcards showing European buildings for eight minutes. This exam question from Collins’ final course was characterized by his emphasis on the visual aspects of architectural education and architectural history. British by birth but inspired by all things French, he stated the question in both languages. He asked his students to identify themselves by number only, always keenly aware of the dangers of favouritism. Honesty and concision, qualities Collins had admired in architectural scholarship throughout his long and prolific career, were recognized and rewarded in his last midterm exam. In the undergraduate curriculum, in innumerable references to his scholarship and character during lectures, design presentations, and casual conversations, and in assorted memorabilia scattered throughout offices and hallways, and in the archive of his documents, Collins’ legacy lives on in McGill’s School of Architecture. (2) Most revealing of Collins the man, however, are his personal collections of slides and postcards, which offer insight into his evolving view of architectural history. An active library used for teaching and research, the slide collection is a constant reminder of Collins’ influence on architectural education at McGill; the postcards, a collection of which few of his colleagues were even aware, is an as-yet-unexplored source of information on Collins’ life.

THE SLIDE COLLECTION

Collins travelled throughout his career, most frequently to Paris and Rome, but also to Palestine, Egypt, Italy, Turkey, Spain, Germany, and Switzerland. (3) Like most architectural historians of his generation, he systematically documented buildings and cities he visited in 35mm colour slides for the purposes of research and teaching. When he joined McGill’s faculty in 1956, Collins added his own burgeoning slide collection to the School’s existing library of large-format, lantern slides. This original collection had been initiated by Stewart Henbest Capper in the late 19th century and subsequently enlarged by Percy Nobbs and Ramsay Traquair. (4)

Collins’ papers underline the importance of the slide collection to his daily life at McGill and his ongoing research projects. In personal letters, official university documents, and his curriculum vitae, Collins frequently placed his supervision of the slide collection on an equal footing with his teaching responsibilities and publications. In a letter written in 1967, for example, Collins explained to a university administrator: “When I was appointed eleven years ago, I had two main duties: (i) lecture on the history of architecture, and (ii) classify, supervise and enlarge the slide collection.”

There is much evidence, too, of the vast amount of time Collins devoted to the slide collection and its organization from his earliest days at McGill. He arrived in Montréal in 1956 a month prior to his official appointment in order to put the slides in an “orderly, clearly marked sequence,” having found them “piled precariously on top of the filing-cabinet, or distributed at random in the drawers.”

Severl incidents during the 1960s and 1970s also illuminate the high priority Collins accorded to the collection. When the University refused to hire a special slide curator for the slide library in 1967, for example, Collins asked the Principal to reduce his own salary to cover the costs. From 1967 to 1973, Collins supervised a massive program of re-labelling and mounting the entire collection in glass mounts and initiated a card-indexed classification system which lists every slide within basic headings. In 1968, he abandoned his system of hand-lettered identification labels, requesting a special typewriter with minuscule characters for use by the slide curator. (8) These projects anticipated, on Collins’ part, an eventual computerized information retrieval system—never implemented—

The system employed by Collins at McGill was modelled on the slide library at Yale University, where he had been a Visiting Lecturer in Architectural History in 1955–56. (15) Almost all Collins’ slides are of public, high-style buildings; housing and vernacular architecture had no place in Collins’ canon. (16) Not surprisingly, there is a great emphasis in the collection on eighteenth and nineteenth-century French architecture, the period through which Collins understood all of modern history. In fact, Peter Collins’ slide collection clearly illustrates the argument of his best-known work, Changing Ideas in Modern Architecture of 1965. In that book and in his mandatory courses, Collins articulated a densely-packed thesis that nothing short of a complete architectural revolution had occurred in the 1750s, forever changing the relationship of architecture to engineering, history to theory, and structure to function. Collins felt strongly that North American students should study architecture developed only subsequent to the discovery of America, and thus taught earlier architecture only as it related to eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century structures. (17) Fascinated throughout his career by the derivation of words, Collins also included in the collection a relatively large number of slides of “text,” intended to prompt discussions in class about the relationship of architectural theory to the built form. (18) Extremely valuable sections of the collection include slides of the development of reinforced concrete, on which Collins was an expert, slides of his own 1948 thesis project for a national seminary, and slides of the work of Auguste Perret, for whom Collins had worked in 1951 and 1953. (19)

THE POSTCARD COLLECTION

Collins’ postcard collection, which is as yet uncatalogued, offers a different picture of the travelling historian and a much clearer link to his scholarship and teaching. Packed in seven manila envelopes, the collection of some 1200 postcards is ordered roughly by geographical location. (20) The postcard collection is much more
inclusive and wide-ranging than Collins’ slides; the images include many shots of French architecture since the eighteenth century—from Versailles to Rochechouart—but also photographs of rural villages in Europe, famous and not-so-famous paintings, buildings in North America, and several unidentified black and white photographs of architectural details. It is clear from subtle references on the reverse sides of some of the cards that Collins intended to copy them for the slide library. An aerial view of Siena, for example, fits nicely in his precisely defined category in the slide library. «General: Miscellaneous: Urbanism.» Indeed, McGill colleagues who travelled with Collins remember his appreciation of the difficult views readily available in postcard images. The photographers of postcard images could return to their subjects at ideal times, when mid-day sunlight, for example, might cast sculptural details in high relief or in winter, when architectural ensembles were less hidden by greenery. Not surprisingly, many of the cards are of aerial views and interiors of buildings, often inaccessible to the general public. (21) Collins may also have collected postcards as evidence of a city’s self-image, for him they may have indicated the monuments of which a city was particularly proud, regardless of architectural lineage. (22)

Whatever its meaning, the postcard collection, for Peter Collins, was clearly a different sort of project than the slide library. It was never catalogued, never precisely ordered, and rarely seen by other faculty. Despite its rather secretive and ad hoc nature, several themes surface in the postcard collection. Collins was fascinated by lavish architectural decoration; there are hundreds of postcards of baroque and rococo interiors, showing in great detail the effects of light on modulating wall surfaces. There are many paintings included in the collection; again, throughout his career Collins was fascinated with the world of high-style painting. More surprising, perhaps, is the large number of images of American architecture—for which Collins often voiced disinterest—and views of American pop culture. Niagara Falls, Hearst Castle, and the Hyatt Regency Hotel in San Francisco, for example, are represented in the collection. Collins’ postcard collection, no doubt, occupied a very special place in his larger reserve of visual material. It seemed to be, on the one hand, a fairly enigmatic reserve of images from which he could borrow for the more official collection: the slides. On the other hand, the images represent, as Collins himself was obviously aware, a far more democratic and accessible perspective of the landscapes in which he travelled, far less encumbered by the weight of historical styles and acceptable periods.

Given the complementary natures of his two collections, Peter Collins’ final mid-term test, referred to at the beginning of this essay, in which he demanded students to identify and interpret slides of postcards, was quite rare. It was the only time, as far as his records show, that Collins made direct links between postcard images, slides of architecture, and the experience of real buildings. The exercise acknowledged both the «souvenir» aspect of a postcard, as well as the minimum space allotted on the «back half» for a note to a friend. Most importantly, however, was the challenge implicit in the professor’s question. Collins’ exam demanded an unusually difficult operation: he himself had deftly mastered by this time: the «precise» and «appropriate» pairing of word and architectural image. Both, he believed, had a place in the history of architecture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
I would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Ricardo Castro, Peter Grossage, Jay Hisco, and David Theodore and also to thank Maureen Anderson, Norbert Schoenauer, and Pieter Sipkes for generously sharing their memories of Peter Collins.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. This is the entire text of the exam, 4 March 1981. The Peter Collins Collection of McGill University School of Architecture (PCC), apart from instructions about timing and student identification.
3. For biographical information on Collins, see SAH NewsletterXXVI, April 1982, p. 4-5.
4. These slides are 3 1/4 inches x 3 1/4 inches. See Schoenauer, Norbert, "McGill’s School of Architecture: A Retrospect." McGill: Schools of Architecture and Urban Planning Prospectus, McGill University, 1986, p. 6-7; Collins also continued to purchase large format slides for McGill; see letter to Dr. Helen Rosenau, 23 January 1957 (PCC); estimates on the size of the slide collection vary. In a memo to Derek Drummond, Director of the School, 11 April 1973 (PCC), Collins stated the collection comprised 14,356 slides, half of which were large format. In various memos and letters, he claimed to have added about 200-300 slides per year.
5. Letter to G.A. Grimsen, dated 31 March 1957 (PCC); during his sojourns at Smith College and UC Berkeley, Collins noted both the difficulties and benefits of using other slide collections. See letter to John Bland, 24 December 1964 (PCC).

6. Memo to Drummond, 11 April 1973 (PCC).
7. See letter to Dr. H. Rockefeller, 29 March 1967 (PCC); the appointment and responsibilities of a qualified, bilingual slide curator greatly preoccupied Collins and is the subject of many letters and memos, particularly in 1967, 1970, and 1971. Marilyn Berzan was employed as the School’s first curator in July 1967.
8. Letter to Marilyn Berzan, 24 April 1969 (PCC). Collins realized the slides would move under the heat of projectors and become unfocussed when he brought them from McGill to teach at UC Berkeley; many of the changes enacted in the slide collection after 1968, particularly in materials, were suggested by the slide curator at Berkeley. See letter to Marilyn Berzan, 3 June 1968 (PCC).
9. Memo to Drummond, 11 April 1973 (PCC).
10. Collins kept the slide collection in his own office until the hiring of Berzan, at which time he relocated his office to another room.
11. Letter to Marilyn Berzan, 3 June 1968 (PCC).
12. Stuart Wilson, who never used slides in his teaching career at the School which spanned over four decades, but emphasized sketching instead, suggested in 1969 that slides purchased by the university should be stored in a library located—on the other side of campus—available to anyone who is a member of the University. «Memo from Stuart Wilson to John Bland, 22 September 1969 (PCC). The suggestion inspired a sharp rebuttal by Collins indicating the enormous travel expenses he felt he had invested in the slide collection, while the university provided only the film. See letter to John Bland, 26 September 1969 (PCC). For more information on Wilson, see Schoenauer, p. 18-19.
13. In the mid1970s, Collins feared that Quebec’s Ministry of Education was attempting to put McGill «out of business.» He attached the utmost importance, therefore, to the immediate preservation of the university’s material assets. See letter to Vice-Principal Froideveau, 1 December 1973 (PCC).
15. Even when Collins recognized the failings of classification by style, he remained committed to the Yale system. As Collins stated, «I propose to maintain this system, for the same reasons which have forced the McLennan Library to abandon its costly system of reclassifying all its existing holdings to conform to the newly-adopted Library of Congress system.» (Emphasis in the original) See memo to Drummond, 11 April 1973 (PCC).
16. This may seem surprising, as McGill’s School of Architecture was an early centre for research and teaching of Housing. Collins maintained throughout his career, nonetheless, that vernacular architecture was a subordinate and primitive form of building. See his file labelled «Vernacular» (PCC).
17. See Collins’ undated statement, «The teaching of the History of Architecture in the first two years of the Professional Five-year Course in the School of Architecture at McGill» (PCC).
18. These slides cover major architectural theorists, such as Vitruvius, Durand, Laugier, Ruskin, Pugin, texts representing systems of architectural education, manifestos by individual architects, and quotes from architectural histories.
19. The Peter Collins Collection also includes a substantial set of photographs and negatives, many as yet unidentified.
20. There are five envelopes labelled in Collins’ distinctive handwriting: Paris and Versailles, France excluding Paris and Versailles, Italy/Germany/Turkey, 20th Century, German Roccoco. Two envelopes are unpacked; 141 postcards are loose. There are several series of black and white photographs interfiled with the postcards.
21. Peter Sipkes, who travelled with Peter Collins on student trips to Paris and Rome, remembers Collins’ special interest in these characteristics of postcards.
22. I am grateful to Norbert Schoenauer for this speculation.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
Annamaria Adams teaches Architectural History at the School of Architecture, McGill University. She was a student in Peter Collins’ classes, 1980-81.