

## TEACHING ARCHITECTURE IN THE AGE OF MODERNISM: JOHN BLAND AND THE MCGILL EXPERIENCE

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Architecture, in the early days of Modernism, was clearly perceived as being first and foremost a social art to which definite ethical and professional responsibilities were attached. Serious architecture could not circumvent these obligations. Bringing to students an acute awareness of the moral and social purpose of architecture is John Bland's primary legacy to the McGill School of Architecture. Like Gropius whom he greatly admired, Bland became a notable teacher not on account of a special methodology or pedagogy, but because he had a clear, consistent purpose.

To study architecture at McGill in the late fifties was an exciting and inspiring experience. It meant sharing in a commitment to a movement that was barely out of its pioneering infancy. The logic and the rhetoric of Modernism were so persuasive that we hardly felt the need to question the Movement. Because of Modernism's universal view, other ideologies were easily discarded. A yearning for the renunciation of the old world, a commitment to mass housing and a heroic vision for the future made Modernism akin to a crusade for a new order. Optimism was boundless, but so, too, were arrogance and a misplaced sense of piety. Everything appeared feasible. No megastructure was too large or too bold, few forms were proscribed, and much of what did not fit the accepted ideological mould was readily rejected.

With the benefit of forty years of hindsight, the fifties were concurrently a period of rationalism and romanticism. Despite the orthodoxy that was rooted in logic and positivism, it was a period of freedom in which originality was celebrated over rules, values were celebrated over causes, free expression over fixed behaviour, and prototype over paradigm. Architecture's reductivism view rejected the use of precedent. The aesthetic mantra of the time, *less is more*, led to an inevitable over-simplification of form and content and to the reduction of architecture to tectonic abstractions. That disaster did not strike our School and that our training was ultimately sound is attributable largely to the teaching of a value system that emphasized the social purpose and accountability of our metier. Social purpose gave the program cohesion, clarified our ideals, and motivated us to link purpose and human needs to aesthetic canons. We profoundly believed that architecture is for people and that buildings must speak of their social function.

John Bland came to the School in 1938 after having studied architecture under Ramsay Traquair at McGill in the early thirties, and later as a graduate student at the Architectural Association School of Planning in London. He was a product of the intensely British Arts and Crafts tradition that was prevalent at McGill, and of the AA's emphasis on the social concerns of architecture and planning. Bland's training, consequently, bridged two traditions, two continents and two periods of architectural history. His understanding of architecture and the strength of his convictions sprang from these dualities. His concern for meticulous design and construction came from the Arts and

Crafts legacy and his commitment to the social mission of architecture from the AA.

John Bland was, by virtue of training and his place in time, a transitional figure in the history of teaching of architecture in Canada. Because he understood the old rules, he could reinterpret them and apply them in a modern way, he could abstract the better of two worlds, and he could erase the frontiers between two eras. It was because of this rich mix that Bland was able to successfully transform a British-inspired Arts and Crafts School into the modern school of architecture that we came to know.

Many perceived the strength of the School as deriving from the heterogeneity of its faculty, but there was, in fact, homogeneity of ideology. Bland had indeed assembled a varied circle of architects from Europe and Canada who came to the School with very different backgrounds and from different cultures. Teachers at the School had the freedom to run their design studios as they wished. Inevitably, each studio bore the personality of its instructor. Divergence in personality, however, did not mean divergence in ideology.

Though no formal doctrine was proclaimed, the School was followed an overriding orthodoxy. Architecture was taught as a reasoned discipline at the service of society. The opinions of Mies and Gropius hovered over us always. Mies' rationalism, his sensibilities, technical mastery and extraordinary aesthetic elegance embodied for us the very essence of the new architecture. Gropius, on the other hand, inspired us not so much by his architecture (which, except for the Bauhaus School, we, as students, found uninspiring) but through his teachings on the newly defined profession and the mission of architecture. Gropius spoke of professional responsibility, of an architecture rooted in purpose and program, of technology and rationalism, in a way that no architect had done before. He was the philosophical mentor of our School.

Our firmament of architectural stars also included Aalto, Wright, Le Corbusier, Dudok, Perret and Sullivan as well the engineers Nervi, Fressinet, Maillart. Aalto and Wright, the two great Romantics, were admired, even loved but, inexplicably, we never emulated their work, nor did we fully assimilate their vision. Le Corbusier was acknowledged as the father figure, the grand old man of the Movement. He was, for us, the ultimate creative genius, the most mystical of the pioneer form-givers of Modernism. Though Bland admired Le Corbusier, his true allegiance, we felt, was to Mies. Perhaps it was uneasiness with the French wing of Modernism. For whatever reason, the English, Dutch, German and Scandinavian schools were closer to McGill's way of thinking.

John Bland urged us to read. He made continual references to books that became our constant companions. We read Gideon, Witkower, Summerson, Pevsner and Richards. We devoured Le Corbusier (especially *Vers une architecture*), and Gropius' *New Architecture and the Bauhaus*. *Space, Time and Architecture* was the text that gave us the most satisfying definition of the Modern Movement. Summerson's *Heavenly Mansions* (and especially his essays on Le Corbusier) introduced us to a new, non-dogmatic interpretation of architecture. James Fitch's *American Buildings* and Pevsner's *An Outline of European Architecture* were our basic reference guides to American and European architecture. Gaunt's elegantly written *The Aesthetic Adventure* initiated us to Art Nouveau, which we loved, but grudgingly, for this knotted and "slightly deviant" art contradicted all that was morally right and aesthetically beautiful. Wright appealed to our romantic impulse. His books were loud manifestos written in a passionate mode.

Bland encouraged us to read *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, Frederick Gibbert's *Town Design* and Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Our primary historical reference tome was Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture*, though we were soon to learn of its flagrant omissions.

Many of the significant buildings we studied in Bland's History and Theory course are still considered icons of Modernism today, but some have lost their status as exemplars of modern architecture. For example, the UN Plaza, Le Corbusier's League of Nations, Mies' Commons Building at IIT and Perret's apartment building on Rue Franklin Roosevelt are considered as seminal today as then. However, the Unesco Headquarters in Paris, Harrison and Abramovitch's three small chapels at Brandeis College and SOM's Air Force Academy near Denver are amongst the buildings which no longer have a place in our architectural references.

There are always lacunae in education. Our aesthetic sensibilities were unduly based on an orthodoxy rather than on a broad appreciation of architecture and its past. We were unable to value Victorian or eclectic architecture for its own sake. Perhaps the 19th century was too close for comfort. If we accepted any works of pre-modern masters, we did so more on ideological than on aesthetic grounds. What we deemed of merit was either very old or very new. We naively believed that contemporary architecture was a manner of building with a sense and sensitivity that owed little to the past. Historicity could only hamper objectivity and logic in the design process.

To reflect on the past is to reflect on the present and to question Academe today. Architecture has abandoned its early heroic commitment to society. Formalism, Aestheticism, Historicism and Eclecticism we rejected then in favour of a new rationalism are back with a vengeance. Modernism has been supplanted by Neo-Modernism, the latest of many stylistic pastimes. In a world where problems have become more complex, society more democratic and heterogeneous, morality more circumstantial, and pessimism more prevalent, the question arise: To what degree is it still feasible and relevant to persevere along the path established in the fifties. Is an architecture of social purpose congruent with global capitalism and bureaucratic thinking?

We, who trained in the fifties with John Bland, recognized in him the moral and professional conscience of the modern School at McGill that he had built and led. He made us feel part of a dedicated and socially committed environment in which rigorous training and professional excellence were the quintessence of our existence. He made us feel that architecture could change the world, that architecture mattered.

John Bland's School reflected the *zeitgeist* of the time and embodied of his personal values. He brought a new expression of purpose in architecture, a faith in the architect's problem-solving ability, a vision of collective work and common good, a rejection of self-indulgence and aestheticism, a belief in the social and functional basis of form, a hope in internationalism and a liberalism. These were his concerns and his commitment. By the time we finished school they had become our concerns and our commitment.

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