ARCHITECTURE

Writing on Canadian architecture has come into its own

Three recent books show depth, breadth of coverage

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE


The Centre Block of the first Parliament Buildings, under construction in 1863. They burned in 1916.

"Architecture is very much like the oldest profession in the world," claimed American architect Philip Johnson in 1984: "It has only one aim, and that is to please for a fee." The desperate longing of Canadian architects to please, even without remuneration, is a common theme in three new books on the profession. Douglas Shadbolt's Ron Thom: the Shaping of an Architect, Angela Carr's Toronto Architect Edmund Burke: Redefining Canadian Architecture, and The Glory of Ottawa: Canada's First Parliament Buildings, by Carolyn A. Young, look at the dynamics of architectural patronage through the careers of some of the nation's greatest designers.


Thom Known for his houses

Author Douglas Shadbolt explores buildings through biography as he tells the rather tragic tale of his late friend, architect Ron Thom. Thom is best known for his Modernist houses in Vancouver and for innovative educational institutions such as Massey College in Toronto and Trent University in Peterborough, built in the 1950s and 1960s. He died in 1986, frustrated by what he saw as the compromises of Postmodernism and weakened by decades of depression and alcoholism.

The book is a chronological account of Thom's career, from his early years as a student at the Vancouver School of Art, through his stormy apprenticeship and later partnership at the respected architectural firm of Thompson, Berwick, Pratt in Vancouver, and his eventual move to Toronto in 1970. Shadbolt is a credible witness to the architect and his times. As director of three Canadian schools of architecture, he played an active role in the development of Modernism.

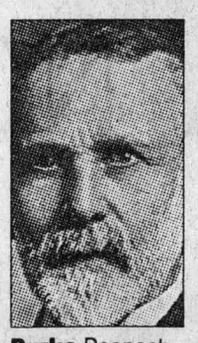
Through hundreds of interviews, Shadbolt gives us an insider's view of the competitive nature of the architectural scene in postwar Canada. In straightforward prose, he recounts the backroom dealings behind some of this century's most significant architectural commissions, such as the B.C. Government Centre in Vancouver. Yet the book's stunning photos and drawings underline Thom's pure talent. Indeed, the post-and-beam houses he designed in the 1950s ushered in a peculiarly Canadian version of Modernism, often referred to as the West Coast Style. Following the work of American architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Richard Neutra, these bold designs typically featured exposed structural elements, rooms which flowed into one another around a massive central hearth, the use of natural materials and a blurring of the boundary between exterior and interior.

The book's succinct narrative, like the buildings Thom designed, is brazen and undecorated. Shadbolt tells us, for example, how questions over the attribution of credit divided the office of Thompson, Berwick, Pratt; that Arthur Erickson, the Vancouver architect who competed with Thom for many major jobs, claims that Thom actually "copied" his own idea for Massey College; and how Thom's tempestuous disposition affected his colleagues and family.

The story is particularly poignant as it relates Thom's eventual physical and mental collapse. In this way, Thom's life is reminiscent of several other famous architects known for their individualism. Chicago architect Louis Sullivan's life was marked by severe loneliness and alcoholism. Antoni Gaudi, designer of Barcelona's unique, nearly organic buildings, was a recluse when he died in 1926.

Angela Carr's Toronto Architect Edmund Burke is much less personal and far more academic than Shadbolt's account. It is, nonetheless, also biographical. Edmund Burke is best known as the designer of Toronto's Robert Simpson store at the corner of Yonge and Queen Sts. Unfortunately, just months after its opening, this pioneering edifice, which incorporated many of the structural lessons of the Chicago skyscraper architects of the same time, burned to the ground in 1895, the target of arson. Burke and his colleague John Horwood immediately rebuilt the store, this time using an iron skeleton which was completely fireproof. This second store, according to Carr, represented the first instance of true skyscraper or "curtain wall" construction in Canada.

Originally a doctoral dissertation, Toronto Architect Edmund Burke is extremely thorough, buttressed with hundreds of footnotes. Carr is assistant professor of Art History at Carleton University in Ottawa. Her approach to the subject follows closely the methodologies of traditional art history. She favors formalistic descriptions of the buildings' aesthetics, rather than structural or functional ones. Her evidence is derived from archival documents, primarily the enormous Horwood Collection at the Archives of Ontario, and from the professional press of the time. Unfortunately, some of the illustrations are poor reproductions and one is even printed backwards. There are no recent photographs of Burke's buildings. Like many art-historical studies, too, the author privileges what she calls "pivotal monuments," presumably those works that acted as milestones in the architect's development.


Burke Respect from colleagues

The real contributions of Carr's tome, in terms of scholarship, are her analysis of the architect's place in the development of the profession in Canada and her convincing depiction of the influence of American forms on Canadian buildings. She sees her subject as a bridging figure between the colonial roots of the profession, which she describes as a form of craft, to the architect as the modern consultant we know today. In this regard Toronto Architect Edmund Burke echoes the 1987 work of Kelly Crossman, whose Architecture in Transition: From Art to Practice, 1885-1906 concentrated on this question.

Burke's life story is considerably cheerier than Thom's. When he died in 1919, the obituary in the journal Construction reported that "few men of the present generation of architects have so widely held the respect and esteem of their confreres, or been more closely identified with the building progress of the country." Carr's book explains why.

The Glory of Ottawa, by Montrealer Carolyn A. Young, is equally academic and art-historical in its perspective, though not biographical. It, too, was first a thesis – both Carr and Young studied with Professor Douglas Richardson at the University of Toronto. Young's study uses the 1859 architectural competition for the parliament buildings in Ottawa as a snapshot of mid-19th-century practice in Canada. In this respect, hers is the most imaginative approach to the study of architecture among these three new books.

In three beautifully written chapters, Young explains the social and political contexts of the Gothic Revival style, which characterized Thomas Fuller's and Chilion Jones's winning entry. Influenced by the design of University College, Toronto, the Oxford University Museum and the Manchester Assize Court, the Canadian Parliament Buildings have long been considered a flawless example of what is known as "Ruskinian Gothic," after British art critic John Ruskin. Only the polygonal library survives of Fuller's & Jones's original Parliament Building; the Centre Block was destroyed by fire in 1916.

Nineteenth-century Canada's most recognizable architectural symbol was plagued by scandal and intrigue from its inception. Young shows how one of the judges, Samuel Keefer, assessed only eight of the 32 entries. She also illustrates how Fuller and Jones plagiarized a description of the Manchester building by its architect, Alfred Waterhouse.

Young's study extends far beyond a simple analysis of the winning scheme. She considers the backgrounds of the competitors, explores the reception of the building in the press and revisions made to the original design. The book is illustrated with 75 period photographs and many architectural drawings. An interesting set of tables and appendices includes a complete list of the architects involved in the competition, the "score sheets" of the judges, and the original notice and program of the contest. The book will satisfy readers interested in the history of competitions, construction, professionalism, and 19th-century Canadian social history.

Thus far, 1995 has been a good year for books on Canadian architecture. At its annual meeting in Montreal a few weeks ago, the Canadian Historical Association awarded its Sir John A. Macdonald Prize for the best book in Canadian history to Harold Kalman for his monumental two-volume History of Canadian Architecture. That a wider audience is now drawn to the tiny but growing scholarship on Canadian architecture is a good sign. These three new books hold the promise of further growth in the field.

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■ ***Toronto Architect Edmund Burke: Redefining Canadian Architecture,*** *by Angela Carr, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 233 pp, $44.95)*

■ ***Ron Thom: the Shaping of an Architect,*** *by Douglas Shadbolt, (Douglas & McIntyre, 165 pp, $40)*

■ ***The Glory of Ottawa: Canada's First Parliament Buildings,*** *by Carolyn A. Young, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 204 pp, $34.95)*