

DOUGLAS CARDINAL: AN INTRODUCTION

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I am honored to have been invited tonight to introduce Douglas Cardinal, one of the truly remarkable architects in this nation. I am particularly happy to do so in the very building, which is his most important oeuvre to date, and in point of fact one of the extraordinary works of architecture of Canada. Anyone strolling around this building or inhabiting this unusual environment, if only for a short time, comes to the unequivocal realization that the author's vision of the world is not that of the orthodox modern architect. Cardinal is indeed a unique person and a giant in his field.

Over the years, Douglas Cardinal has been called many things: an eccentric, a rebel, a non-Western thinker, a sculptor, an intellectual iconoclast, a genius, a loose cannon, a visionary as well as everything else in between. He has even been told on one occasion that he had the wrong family background to become a member of the profession. Cardinal is undeniably, a complex and uncommon figure in the cultural firmament of Canada, and, because he is blessed with a fair share of contradictions, he is not easy to define.

To understand his oeuvre, one must situate Cardinal in the dual context of post-war architectural Modernism on the one hand, and of his own regional and cultural-specific roots, on the other hand. His architecture, in my view, evolved from reconciliation between these two contextual realities.

The Modernist orthodoxy, in which Cardinal learned his trade, was so prevalent at the time of his schooling that any deviation from its well-established canons was well-nigh impossible. Modernism was a Eurocentric movement that called for pure, rational, and simple forms. It celebrated minimalism and abstraction, placed utilitarian considerations above all others, and it rejected history as a valid source of artistic authority. Most importantly, the Movement valued the disassociation of building from its local or specific cultural and physical circumstances. As a point of fact, Modernism came to be known officially and quite accurately, as the International Style.

In his quasi-atavistic manner, Cardinal needed to make buildings that spoke of his native worldview and that were rooted in ground and local geography. As such, his architecture, by temperament and by design, soon became autobiographical and place specific. His cultural roots, the nature of his native land, the value system he inherited from his family and his community, together with the formative ideas of his spiritual and artistic mentors, came in direct opposition to the world of the International Style.

Intellectually, the thoughts that nurtured Cardinal's architecture were those of the great expressionist architects and artists of the twentieth Century: the strong reductivist landscapes of Lawren Harris, the compelling plastic forms of Antonio Gaudi, the powerfully expressionistic buildings of Eric

Mendelsohn and the iconoclastic architectural language of Bruce Goff. Interestingly, in this age of globalization, Canada seems to be in a process of defining for itself a national architecture that speaks of its people and its land. Cardinal, together with a growing slate of other modern architects such as Arthur Erickson, Ron Thom, Brian Mackay-Lyons and John and Patricia Patkau are developing a recognizable architecture deeply rooted in local culture, geography and nature. The future augurs well.

The person who best interpreted the architecture of Cardinal is architect-historian Trevor Boddy. He described the building we are in tonight in a most eloquent and poetic way. ...and I quote...

This winding shell, in resonance and sometimes in competition with its displays, redolent with the history of this country, acts as a memory chamber, a device that filters and amplifies history and ethnicity in unpredicted ways. The building plays an eerie northern tune, one-part fiddle jig, one-part bird call, one-part howling chain saw. At the sound it rises to dance, aboriginal with white, landform with technology, male with female, (Frye with McLuhan), architect with client, French with English, mainstream with avant-garde, city with wilderness, inside with outside. (Divisions and dualities, set briefly aside, here, now, the way we are, changing, dancing).

Douglas Cardinal, I am glad that you had the wrong family background, I am glad that you were a difficult student and were and remained stubborn, I am glad that you were an intellectual iconoclast who rejected traditional Modernism, I am glad that you provoked all of us, and I am glad you needed many bureaucrats in your life. For by being who you are, you advanced the current discourse of architecture in Canada.... No mean feat. In fact, Mr. Cardinal, for the intellectual well-being of this nation, I wish that we had many more people like you with wrong family backgrounds.