ARCHITECTURE

CCA exhibits mount spirited defence of Modernism

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

— *Modern architecture is a flop.*
— Architect James Stirling, 1974

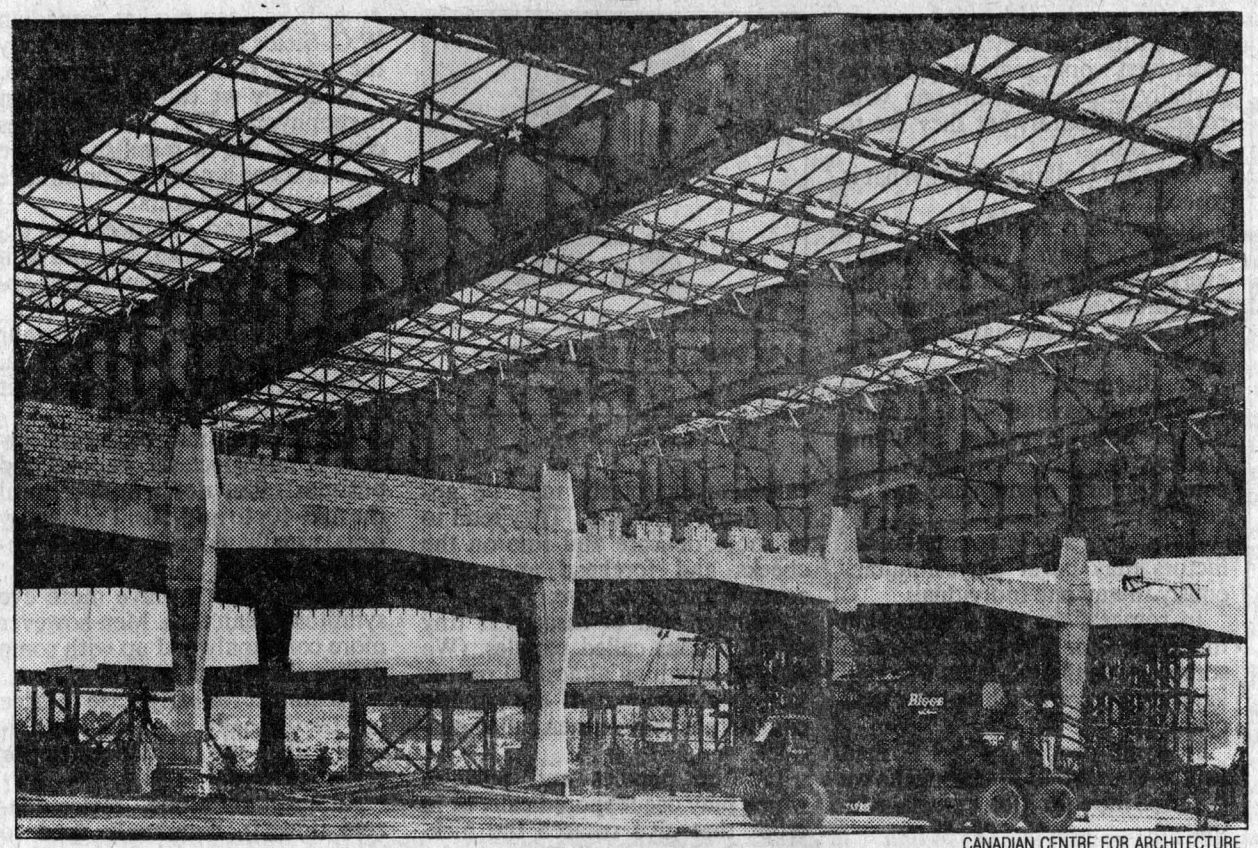
Modern architecture is the style we all love to hate. It lacks human scale, ignores history, and the buildings deny their context, critics of the movement say.

Two independent but complementary exhibitions at the Canadian Centre for Architecture present a completely different view of Modern architecture. They highlight the work of two figures whose important careers have been overshadowed by the work of their mentors.

"Myron Goldsmith: Poet of Structure" and "The Filter of Reason: Work of Paul Nelson" are testaments to the humanistic, structural, and artistic aspects of Modernism. In addition, both architects were, it seems, very interested in history and context.

The differences between Goldsmith and Nelson are equally instructive. Using a mode of communication well-known in architectural education, the two exhibitions are like two sets of slides, offering the careful observer a compelling illustration of the diversity of theoretical positions adopted by architects working within the Modern movement.

While Myron Goldsmith is best known as a designer of bridges and skyscrapers, Paul Nelson's name is associated with film sets and fantasy architecture. Goldsmith was concerned throughout his life with the relationship of engineering to architecture, while Nelson was more interested in the lessons of painters. Goldsmith's education and writings reveal a continuous fascination with structure; the exploration of function is at the base of all Nelson's work. Clearly, Modernism is a much more complex story than recent critics would have us believe.



CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE

View of United Air Lines hangar (1958) showing the welded steel girders and part of the concrete core.

Goldsmith worked for the firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill for 30 years. In association with their San Francisco and Chicago offices, he designed monumental and heroic projects: airplane hangars, a newspaper plant, bridges, a solar telescope. Throughout these works, Goldsmith emphasized a structural approach to problem solving. He searched for ways to use building materials more efficiently; as a result, his designs often express, quite succinctly, the particular structural system employed.

In the United Air Lines hangar at San Francisco airport of 1958, for example, the building's structure is clearly executed in two distinct systems. The support frame is reinforced concrete, while the roof structure is comprised of long-span cantilevered plate girders. In both systems, the material distribution follows a simple rule which explains itself — more stress, more material. Models, photographs, and drawings representing six of Goldsmith's built works are displayed in the Centre Square Gallery of the CCA.

But even more fascinating is the material included charting Goldsmith's design process, exhibited in the relatively dark hallway leading to the display of the finished products. The architect's personal notes, documentation of conversations with other architects, and influential books underline the fact that Modern buildings, like traditional architecture, were influenced by a myriad of factors. Goldsmith absorbed the lessons of his teachers Mies van der Rohe and Pier Luigi Nervi, masters of steel and reinforced concrete design. The space between the hallway and the Centre Square Gallery holds his thesis from 1953, in which he studied the effects of relative size and structure, synthesizing many of the ideas of his early education and travel.

Paul Nelson's work also speaks to the international context of Modernism. Whereas Goldsmith's career was made in corporate America, Nelson's work was conceived in the more personal milieu of Paris between the wars.

An American by birth, Nelson studied under Auguste Perret at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. His friendships with visionary artists such as Buckminster Fuller, Braque, Miro, and Leger were inspirational throughout his career; he even designed a set for the movie *What a Widow!* in 1929.

The Nelson exhibition follows the same pattern as the Goldsmith show; process and product are carefully separated and copiously documented. Of the products, the most intriguing item in the show is certainly the model of the Suspended House, designed by the architect in 1936-38. In this design, Nelson followed the pattern set by other Modern architects, such as Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe. A refreshing study of the function of living, the model shows how the house was to be supported by two frames of stainless steel, covered by a sheet-metal roof and clad in a diamond-mesh grid holding the windows.

Nelson's primary inspiration for the Suspended House, evident in its use of steel and prefabricated elements, was Buckminster Fuller's 4D house, patented in the late 1920s. The Suspended House is also indebted to the work of George Keck, whose "House of Tomorrow" and "Crystal House" were designed for the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago in 1933.

In the early 1930s, Nelson worked on a number of proposals for hospitals and medical facilities in France and Egypt. It may seem surprising that an architect who was an accomplished painter and who counted among his friends so many influential artists would concern himself with the highly technical field of hospital planning. Nelson's prolific career is testament to the broad interests and concerns of the early Modern movement for the application of science to the wellbeing of everyone.

After the war Nelson's prewar hospital studies came to fruition. The Franco-American hospital of St. Lo (1945-56) was followed by hospitals at Dinan, Neuilly and Arles.

Neither Myron Goldsmith nor Paul Nelson are well known architects. Goldsmith's obscurity is partly because of his "submersion," for most of his career, in the huge architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; in addition, Goldsmith had difficulty in disengaging himself from his formidable mentors, Mies and Nervi.

Similarly, Paul Nelson, the quintessential "American in Paris," was submerged in prewar Paris, a place where he could pursue his interests in painting, set design, and theoretical architecture. His interests were thus remarkably similar to Le Corbusier, the Modern master who single-handedly dominated the European scene.

Both CCA shows are worth a visit; taken together the exhibits are worth several visits. However, the relatedness they demonstrate would have been better served if the exhibits were physically linked. As it is they must each be entered from a different part of the museum.

"Myron Goldsmith: Poet of Structure" is at the CCA, 1920 Baile St., Montreal, until June 2. "The Filter of Reason: Work of Paul Nelson" is on until May 26. Adults $5, students and seniors $3. Students are admitted free all day Thursday and the general public on Thursday, 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. The CCA is open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Wednesday and Friday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Thursday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday.

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