ADRIAN SHEPPARD IN CONVERSATION WITH JIM DONALDSON

Montreal, July 1999

The first thing we would be interested in hearing is why you became an architect, and why McGill?

The reason was very simple. My father was both an architect and a civil engineer, and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. He was passionate about his professions, and, with time, his passion generated a definite curiosity in me which eventually led me to study and practice of architecture. It began early in life. I found a letter my father wrote when I was ten or eleven years old in which he states that I always wanted to be an architect. Thus, the idea of becoming an architect was already implanted in my mind at age eleven. The process of selecting a professional course was easy and made without hesitation. I did vacillate for a while, however, between civil engineering and architecture, but this was due to my imperfect knowledge of the two professions. I thought they were similar since both disciplines dealt the making of buildings. Little did I know of the profound cultural differences that separated the two; they complement one another, but they are poles apart in terms of practice, traditions, culture, and social concerns. I recognize today that I would have been an unhappy engineer, and the corollary is true: I have always enjoyed the discipline and practice of my métier immensely.

Why McGill? I lived in Montreal, and I did not have the resources to live in some faraway place. It was an obvious straight line from my high school, Strathcona Academy, to McGill. Furthermore, many of my high school colleagues headed straight for McGill. I did the same.

[1:00:15]

Were there any schools of architecture other than McGill and Laval at that time? Did University of Montreal have one?

University of Montreal did not have a School of Architecture in 1953, the year I entered McGill. Their school was founded many years later when UDM absorbed the old Ecole des Beaux-Art and transformed it into a collegiate School of Architecture. The Beaux-Arts was a very different institution and followed an altogether different pedagogy from that of McGill. I never considered applying to the Ecole, even though being a francophone, the language of instruction would not have been an impediment. Laval University offered no architectural program at the time. Their School was founded many years later. My only available option, other than McGill University, would have been to study out of province, but that was out of the question for me. I must mention that while still in high school, I naïvely dreamt of studying architecture in Belgium, not

because the Belgian schools were known to be outstanding but, once again, because my father had studied architecture at the University of Ghent, and I was enticed by the thought of emulating him. He had been a student of Henri van de Velde who was one of the important figures of the Art-Nouveau movement. Van de Velde was the founder of the Bauhaus in Weimar.

[1:53:00]

Did your father practice architecture in Montreal?

Yes, for a short time. We came to Canada in 1950. Fortunately, he found work immediately with one of the large and best offices in Montreal, Barrett, Marshal, Montgomery, and Merritt. Subsequently he worked for two other smaller firms whose names I cannot recall. My father was very happy in this city and was very attracted to Canadian architecture. He liked the way things were done here.

[2:25:19]

Did he live for several years after you moved to Montreal? Did he live to a good age?

No he didn't. He died at the age of 48, when I was only seventeen years old and had just completed my second year at McGill. All in all, he practiced here only for about five years.

At least, he gave you the message that you should follow in his footsteps.

Yes, the message came from him. It was loud and clear, but it was subliminal. And now history repeats itself. I have a daughter who is also an architect and is following in my footsteps, and those of her grandfather. We lack imagination in our family. We all do the same thing: architecture. Could it be inscribed in our DNA?

[3:06:07]

That's hardly true, is it? Architects really shouldn't lack imagination! So, you entered McGill in what year?

I entered McGill in 1953 and graduated in 1959. Architecture was a six year-long program at that time, the longest undergraduate program at the University. The first two years were done together with the engineers. Except for one or two courses which were taught by John Bland, our respective academic programs were identical. It seemed like a never-ending ride. Six years without any interruptions.

It is a long time. When did they change that? Probably in the eighties, was it?

It changed when the CEGEP systems was created in Quebec. Most of the material previously taught in the first two years of architecture and engineering was taken over by the CEGEP. As such, the six years were reduced to four. Nonetheless, the total duration of studies for architecture after high school remained the same.

[4:08:03]

Who were some of the professors you remember best and perhaps influenced your love of architecture?

Let me start by speaking about John Bland, the director of the School. John was a gentleman of the old school. He was well liked, a good teacher, and an important practitioner. John was appointed Director in 1941 and had inherited a very traditional School and was responsible for changing it into a modern institution. His firm, Rother, Bland and Trudeau, was one of the better offices in the city. The more committed students in our School sought to work in his firm him upon graduation, and many did. John was approachable and pleasant to talk to. He never feared to tell students what he felt was right and what was wrong, and he did not mince words. His language could be somewhat arcane; he would speak of *architecture of good manners, of polite buildings, of gracious environments,* and so on. He taught us to be rigorous, disciplined, and modest in our designs. He believed in an architecture that spoke of spatial order, and which reflected its purpose properly. He was unassuming and quiet, but in fact he was strong person with clear ideas about architecture and the administration of the School. We did not always agree with him, but that did not mean that we did not learn from these discussions. Mies van der Rohe, John's great mentor, believed that students can learn equally from following him, or from fighting him. The Miesian orthodoxy ruled the School, and it was nearly impossible to deviate from it. John had a true reverence for both Mies and Gropius, and he parted this admiration on to us. Gropius, he felt, represented the social conscience of Modernism, and Mies showed us how to put things together in the right place and in the right way.

[5:48:11]

Gordon Webber had a unique presence in the School and certainly he had an impact on me. He was a total individualist and an eccentric who expresses a very personal vision of the world. He taught me to use my eyes and understand abstraction in the visual arts. Except for his Sketching School, I took his course in Basic Design. The course dealt with the fundamental elements of design, composition, color, texture, space, scale, movement, and so on. Moholy-Nagy pioneered this particular course when he taught at the Bauhaus, and which he continued it later at the Institute of Design in Chicago. Gordon was a definite follower of the Bauhaus pedagogy as it related to the visual arts. Through him, we developed a special sensitivity to design and to architecture. I have never encountered another Gordon Webber in my life.

[6:42:07]

Stuart Wilson was the most fearful teacher I met. He was an angry and bitter man, somewhat neurotic, and could be very, very hard-hitting on his students. And yet, he's the teacher who taught me most. In the beginning I found him unbearable. He frightened me, he intimidated all of us, and he humiliated those he did not like. If ever there was an architectural boot camp, it was Stuart Wilson's third year Studio. His, was a method of teaching through applied intimidation. He taught Studio for the entire third year and introduced to us to architectural design and

construction. He gave were simple projects, for the obvious reasons that he wanted us to focus work on construction. By the end of the third, I had learned much and became more confident about architecture.

Before you leave Stuart, were there any women in your class? Any woman architects?

Initially, we had only one female student in our year, Gail Turner, who later became Gail Lamb when she married another classmate, Wolf Lamb. In 1956 or 1957, when I attended my fifth year, four Hungarians architectural students joined our class, two of them women. These students were Hungarian refugees who had left during the Revolution. These newcomers changed the physiognomy of the class to some extent: they were more mature, came with a different cultural baggage, had all been final-year students in Budapest, and they brought a new feminine presence to the class. The addition of the two women students represented a three hundred percent increases in female presence. Their impact on our class and on the School was certainly a positive one. Both were very serious students and made the School less of a male bastion.

[8:44:09]

I have the impression, from talking to several women, that Stuart was particularly tough on them. One of the women was quite outspoken about him. Two questioned how any sensitive person could have dealt with the terror Stuart struck in people.

There was only one woman in my class during my third year, the year Stuart taught our design studio. Since the two other women classmates entered the School in the fifth year, they were spared being exposed him altogether. I do not recall Stuart being particularly tough on Gail Turner, nor did I witness him interact with other women. I think he was rather civil with Gail. But there is no doubt that he was a tough person. He could be vicious and pitiless at times. I recall an incident at a review of a one-day sketch problem. We had to present our work on a single sheet of paper which we pinned up in the studio wall. Stuart entered the room, looked at each drawing carefully, remained silent, and if he didn't like a particular project, he ripped the page off the wall. He went from one drawing to another, and at the end there might have been one or two projects left hanging. Once these drawings were on the floor, he walked on them, supposedly he did not want us to be too attached to actual drawings. What counted were the ideas, not the presentation. But it was devastating for us young students. Inevitably, during or after every single review by Stuart, some would burst out crying. One of my classmates was so depressed by his behavior that he quit architecture altogether. [10:21:08]

He probably had a successful career elsewhere!

Yes, I am told that he became a successful developer. But it is a sad story. He had loved architecture and was the son of an architect.

And how was Peter Collins' teaching at that time?

Peter joined the School when I was in my fourth or fifth year, and since he taught history at that time to the lower years, I never had him as a history teacher. Later, when we became colleagues, I got to know him well. I often consulted him, and I admired his knowledge, though our views were very often poles apart. He was an interesting man; rather old-fashioned, a bit pompous, even condescending. His very British background made him stand out instantly. We saw him as a true academician interested uniquely in ideas. Unlike most of my other teachers who came from a world of practice, Peter was a product of academia. Though he had worked for six years with August Perret in Paris, one never felt he had a true understanding of practice. Peter loved teaching; he enjoyed the presence of students, especially the good ones. During the summer, he looked forward to September when school would re-open, and he could be back with his flock. He was an extraordinarily eloquence man, and expressed his ideas in a very elegant, though old-fashioned, way. He was eccentric in manner and dogmatic in his views on life. His interests went way beyond history. He wore the same dress day in day out: a dark suit, a white shirt, and a silk tie. Since he joined the School as our historian-in-residence, he felt he had a monopoly on the teaching of architectural history and theory. Peter had a Victorian sense of entitlement and authority. His students would not be allowed in the lecture room if they were even one minute late. Before he began his lecture, he would lock the door. Students were given an assigned seat so he could verify who was absent. Attendance was obligatory.

Peter's "Englishness" fitted well with the culture of the upper levels of McGill's administrative establishment. Many of the Deans and Department heads were British or of British extraction.

[13:14:03]

Let's talk about other professors who influenced you.

Four of the five founding members of ARCOP (Ray Affleck, Guy Desbarats, Dimi Dimakopoulos, Fred Lebensold and Hazen Sise) had been Auxiliary Professors at the School at one time or another, but only Fred and Ray taught a Design Studio. Hazen Sise lectured on History of Modern Architecture and Guy led an interesting workshop in which students investigated building materials and construction methods. Hazen was a charismatic person with an fascinating background. He was somewhat of a dilettante historian who taught by reading cue cards.

Ray was my Design Studio teacher in fifth year. He was an effective teacher and, because of his impressive professional background, had great credibility. Students were always happy when he entered the studio. Suddenly, halfway through our school year, Ray left. We all regretted his departure, but we understood his reason. ARCOP had been selected the Associate Architect to I.M.Pei on the Place Ville Marie project. PVM was the largest construction site in the city and ARCOP's mandate was too demanding. He obviously lacked the time teach and practice. Sandy van Ginkel was appointed as his replacement, and he taught us the second semester. To me, Sandy was the most interesting and provocative faculty member at the School. He was an emotional man, born in Holland, and had had a fascinating professional background. Modern architecture, modern art, and modern music mattered a lot to him. Sandy was provocative, inspiring, stimulating, demanding, and could not suffer mediocrity. His passion was contagious.

He was pugnacious, enjoyed shocking us, and lectured with an intensity we had never encountered. His vision of architecture and teaching was diametrically different from Ray's. Years later Sandy and I became professional colleagues on the Place Victoria Project.

I would define Sandy as a likeable enfant terrible. He used foul language when le lost his temper or when he disagreed with our views. He was a bit like Stuart Wilson in terms of temperament, but above all, was a breath of fresh year in the School. In the single semester he taught here, he manifestly changed our studio. Because he was so forthright with everyone, including his colleagues, he had a falling out with John and his appointment was not renewed. It was unfortunate for us, his students, and for the School. We had all learned much from him and he turned many of us around, and for the better. The School preached the Miesian orthodoxy based on the authority of the program and the structure as the principal design instruments. Buildings were to be clear, elegant, and functional. Most of the work in our School was competent, even good, but lacked lyrical dimension. Sandy challenged the Miesian tenets. Because he had a speculative mind, and was most daring, he made us explore "un-miesian" ideas. The social dimension of Architecture mattered as much to him as Modern Art, modern music, and modern culture.

[15:57:01]

Let me recount an anecdote that illustrates Sandy's concerns and teaching well. Before he left, Ray, his predecessor, had given us a project the design a small office building. He had arranged for a curtain wall manufacturer to send their catalogues. Ray believed that the ideal solution for envelope of the modern office building was the curtain wall. When Sandy walked into the design studio for the first time and saw these curtain wall catalogues, he went into a mini rage. Systemic curtain walls have nothing to do with architecture, he yelled. He threw the pile of catalogues on the floor and shouted "We're going to do architecture. We are not going to use catalogues in this studio!" This is how the studio with Sandy began: by being shaken briskly at the first instant.

[17:04:27]

You only were exposed to him for a short interval?

Yes, for one semester only. It is too bad that things didn't work out between him and John Bland. Several years later when I was working in Rome with Nervi and Moretti on the Place Victoria project, Sandy was hired as planning consultant to replace Harold Spence-Sales who had been let go. This is the time I got to know Sandy quite well, not as a teacher, but as a professional colleague enjoying a Roman adventure together.

[18:22:22]

Did you have any exposure to Harold Spence-Sale? Did he teach you while you were at McGill?

Harold Spence-Sales who taught us Civic Design was a most articulate man, and a caricature of the English aristocrat, which I do not think he was. I do not know how well he interacted with Peter Harold, the other Englishman on the Faculty. Civic Design was to be an introduction to

Urban Planning and Urban Design, but in fact it was mostly about Spence-Sales' own work and the planning of Oromocto, a new town in the Maritimes which he had planned. He introduced to us to some basic ideas of urban planning, but not much else. The course was like Harold himself: friendly, entertaining, disorganized, and interesting. One felt that he entered the lecture room and simply talked about what came to his mind that moment. For me, the fringe benefit of the course was meeting Norbert Schoenauer, and the beginning of a long friendship: a relationship that began as classmates, evolved into a friendship, later professional colleagues, and partners, and finally as colleagues at McGill University. We followed each other all along the way.

[19:29:04]

> *Was it Watson Belharrie who taught the course on business and on Professional practice?*

Yes, indeed, it was Watson Balharrie. He had an active practice in Ottawa and came every week to Montreal to give his course. He travelled in his own plane, weather permitting. His course introduced us to the world of Professional Practice in a pragmatic way. He was a solid professional, and in full command of his subject. As luck would have it, it is my role today to teach the Professional Practice at the School. Things have changed radically since Watson's days. The profession has become more complex and litigious; more parties are involved in the making of a building, clients are more demanding and informed, fees are lower, and so on. Watson was a very sensible architect who never addressed issues of design in his course. He talked about business and professional practice and recounted many anecdotes which were always interesting and very useful for our understanding of practice. I have fond memories of Watson.

[20:32:20]

> *Do you want to talk about some of the courses or some of the anecdotes or memories other than professors?*

Things have changed much at McGill over the years. Some will say "unfortunately", others "fortunately". I identify with the latter ones. There were two categories of courses: those which dealt with engineering subjects, those which related directly to architectural design, architectural culture, history, sociology, and so on. Our feeling was that many of our technical courses were somewhat useless in terms of education or training for the profession. Now thirty or forty years later, our students are still complaining about similar things, and are often right. But I hasten to add that many things have changed or are in the process of being changed, and for the better. Because we are part of a Faculty of Engineering there is undue emphasis on the technical courses. John Bland was a great believer in this marriage with Engineering and was the instigator of this union. He and others felt that technical courses were worthwhile as "support course" for architecture and they afforded our education a greater degree of discipline and rigor. Architecture, as a profession, must address equally objective and subjective concerns, or so the theory goes. I can remember spending many long days figuring out the number of rivets in a girder, or doing complicated calculations for Soil Mechanics, knowing full well that I would

never apply these disciplines. Surveying is another case in point. The need for knowledge of surveying for architects is a 19th century notion of the nature of the profession. I have practiced architecture for many years and not once did I use any of that knowledge in any way.

[21:57:22]

How about Calculus?

Calculus was the required pre-requisite for all the technical courses. We simply had to take it, and understood the reason for it. But we survived.

George Jolly was much maligned. He left McGill and went on to Loyola heading its Engineering department for a while. He was a strange man, was he not?

Speaking of George Jolly, I recall one very painful moment. Joe de Stein, the professor who gave the course in Structural Design in Steel had asked us to do a tedious and difficult assignment. We had to produce 20 or 30-page brief with all sorts of mathematical analysis. It was an enormous task, but I was rather proud of the result. At the end, we were told to submit our brief to George Jolly, the Associate Dean. I arrived at his office barely a few minutes late, maybe 3 or 4 minutes. Jolly was there and was in the process of closing his office. As I handed my paper to him, he just said, “I’m sorry. You are late. I cannot take your paper”. He just locked the door in front of me, refuse to take my paper, and he walked away. I was totally distraught by the event. I couldn’t believe it. It was like a bad joke. It represented weeks of work and I had really met the deadline. I was desperate. I couldn’t believe that somebody could do such a thing. I don’t think a professor would get away with such behavior today. It was purely an act of meanness; some would say sadism. That is one of my less pleasant memories of my courses at McGill.

[24:13:26]

On the whole I enjoyed my architectural education a great deal. After my six years of study here I had come to realize that I had been well-trained, that my professional preparation made sense. I had learned how to draw, I had developed a critical sense about architecture, I knew a fair bit about construction, and I developed a genuine interest in architectural history. It was a long march but it ended with a gratifying feeling.

[25:33:18]

Do you remember who your thesis Advisor was?

I had one official Advisors, Doug Shadboldt, but I worked a lot with Peter Collins. Shadboldt was not very involved in my thesis. It was his first-year teaching at McGill and he remained aloof and ill at ease with students. So, I consulted Peter Collins who helped me a lot. It was also the time when I got to know Peter for the first time. He and Peter had completely different points of view, and they obviously didn’t like each other. Being placed between these two opposites never bothered me. In fact I enjoyed their frequent skirmishes. I was mature enough to be able to weigh the merit of their respective views. It was a wonderful way for me to learn how to exercise

judgment and decide who was right, and what to take from each one of them.

[26:19:17]

What year did you graduate in?

1959.

Can you speak a bit about some of your classmates?

I had interesting classmates. A few stand out in a special way. I can think of Oscar Newman who became somewhat of a celebrity when he published Defensible Space. He was a talented designer but abandoned traditional practice to focus on the sociology of architecture and planning. He was a articulate and blessed with an acerbic sense of humor. Philippe Delesalle was my closest comrade-in-arms. He was a great romantic, a mountain climber, an extreme sportsman, and altogether an amazing person. He moved to Calgary (partially to be near the Rocky Mountains) and founded with two partners one of the largest practices in the nation. Melvin Charney, who was a year ahead of me and was known as our resident provocateur, but he was the most serious thinker amongst the students. Moshe Safdie was in School at the same time as me but I did not know him well. I remember fondly the Hungarian students because they were older than us and came with a very different training. David Farley, who later became the head of the School of Urban Planning, was much older. We also became close friends during our studies, and often did our engineering assignments together. We suffered together, but we had fun. He came with an Art degree from the Ontario College of Art and was already a mature painter. He was articulate, kind and funny. Overall, we were a very cohesive group.

[28:46:24]

Was that on McTavish Street?

No, the School was located on University Street at the corner of Milton Street and was relocated to an old Greystone mansion on McTavish Street. I studied in our new (and temporary) quarters during my last year. The old School was demolished to make way for the McConnell Engineering Building.

But who were my other classmates? There were Jim Donaldson, Derek Drummond and Lloyd Sankey who eventually opened an office together. Lloyd was the member of the trio I knew best. Michael Fish was ever-present and later in life became the great conservation guru in Montreal. He is still around and continues to fight his battles. Finally, I must mention Eric Dluhosch who became a professor of architecture at MIT. He specialized in affordable housing, not unlike Witold Rybczynski.

[30:11:23]

Can you speak about your career?

Like that of many colleagues at McGill, my career began by working at ARCOP. I stayed there for one year. I worked exclusively on the design of Place Ville Marie and Place des Arts, but

mainly on the latter. I left ARCOP to work and travel in Europe. My first "stop" was at Maxwell Fry's office in London. Fry was one of the significant figures in the European architectural milieu. He was given credit for having brought modern architecture to England, via his partnerships with such luminaries as Walter Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn, and others. Many of the German refugees went to America via England, and by way of collaboration with Maxwell Fry. Fry, Drew and Partners was an interesting office and a magnet for young architects from all over the Commonwealth, and beyond. We enjoyed ourselves immensely in the office and did not work too hard. After England I moved to Rome and I worked there with Pier Luigi Nervi and Luigi Moretti, primarily on the Watergate Development in Washington and Place Victoria in Montreal.

[31:27:21]

On Watergate, did you say?

Yes, on THE Watergate Development in Washington, which later became famous for reasons other than its architecture.

Oh, I didn't realize that Nervi did that.

No, the Watergate project was done by Moretti with American structural engineers. Nervi was not involved in it. Place Victoria, on the other hand, was designed jointly by Moretti and Nervi. After a two year-stay in Rome I went to Amsterdam where I worked for a year. I enjoyed life in Amsterdam a great deal, but I did not learn very much architecture there. I left Amsterdam to undertake graduate studies at Yale. After Yale I returned to Montreal for good. It was to be the end of my professional wanderings

[32:12:04]

Who was dean of at Yale?

Gibson Danes was the dean, and Paul Rudolph was chairman. The program of studies and the pedagogy of the School was determined by the chairman, not the dean. I went to Yale because of Paul Rudolph. I was attracted by his work and by his recently completed Art and Architecture Building.

To me, the A&A building represented a significant new departure in terms of design and construction and the integration of the mechanical systems. It was also a synthesis of the spatial ideas of Corbusier and Wright. It was the best of the New Brutalist buildings anywhere. The spatial weaving is simply amazing.

[32:47:26]

Does the building still exist? Did they not have a fire there at one time?

They had a major fire and the building was closed for quite a while. One heard many different stories about that tragedy. Some claimed it was a criminal fire, other attribute the fire to an electrical short circuit. There is talk now of restoring the building to its former glorious past.

Robert Stern, who became the Dean lately, has made the restoration of the A&A building a priority. It is an important building that must be restored. It had an impact on an entire generation of architects.

Good.

Coming back to my professional background, after Yale I came back to Montreal and worked with Victor Prus. Subsequently I joined the office of Gerry Miller and Édouard Fiset. Fiset had been the chief architect of Expo 67, and I hoped that his office was destined to achieve great things, but it was not to happen. When Norbert Schoenauer invited me to join the office of Desnoyers, Mercure, Lezyi, Gagnon, in which he was a partner, I jumped at the opportunity, and two years later I accepted a partnership, and the office became les architects Desnoyers, Mercure, Gagnon, Sheppard. Their offer was generous as they made me an equal partner, even though the others had been part of the firm for many years. It was a time when DMGS was an exciting place, due primarily to Norbert's contribution. He single-handedly changed an average office into environment experimentation and substance. He gave it a real direction; he was committed to housing and good planning and was guided by a strong social conscience.

[34:58:14]

In what year did you join McGill?

In 1978, and the following year I was offered a permanent position as Associate Professor. I have never looked back since. I'm still practicing with two other architects, but at a reduced scale. I get involved in one or two projects per year on the average. At the present time, the office is involved in historical renovation work, mainly churches. But my teaching has become my primary occupation and preoccupation.

You enjoy it?

Tremendously. I enjoy my colleagues, the institution, my students, and the intellectual climate. It is a luxury to be given time to think about ideas, to read, to travel, etc. The present professional context does not allow for that. One has less free time, one lives under continuous pressure, one had to deal with contractual obligations, administrative tasks, political realities, and so on. I joined the University as a faculty member at the age of forty-two, with a good hold on practice, which I felt was important, at least for me. It has been a happy conclusion to my professional career.

[36:17:01]

You're still enjoying life, even though you've been sort of through some health problems.

Yes, well, my doctor told me that my operation came with a fifty-year guarantee, so I'm quite optimistic about the future. I feel quite good and am very active. I read an enormous amount on architecture, and I enjoy traveling and experiencing buildings in different places. I like architectural tourism. I call it architectural voyeurism.

It’s nice and fortunate for you to have a wife who enjoys it. But when you have a daughter or son who appreciates it and see things through two different sets of eyes, you can talk about it. It’s all in the same genetic background.

You’re right. My wife does enjoy looking at architecture as much as me. But seeing architecture through the eyes of my daughter is different. She is of another generation and her references are very different from mine. This brings me back to teaching. Students inevitably look at the world in a very different way, and often with less biases. They have different mentors and are guided by different values. Their references are not the same. They travel in another way. They read different books and listen to different music.

Good. And thank you very much.

Thank you. I hope that this interview has been of some help in the building of the archives.

I’m sure it will be.

[38:29:02]