

VICTOR PRUS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF CONDITION ¹

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January 2017*

With the passing of Victor Prus, Quebec lost one of its important post-war architectural giants. To appreciate his contribution to Canadian architecture, one must situate the man and his practice in the context of the time of his apprenticeship as a young practitioner in Europe and the professional circumstances of that time.

To a some extent, the Modernist movement grew out of the teachings and practice of the Bauhaus in the 1920's and the 30's. Modernism was a revolutionary ideology based on a doctrine of moral integrity, rationalism, social relevance, and constructional innocence. The movement came to blossom in Europe and America during the post war years, but like most pioneering movements it overlooked, in its rebellious zeal, many fundamental and vital aspects of architecture, most of all the experiential and subjective tenets of architecture. Victor Prus entered the architectural mainstream during the early post-war years and except for a brief period of work and teaching in Great Britain, he sustained a professional life of many decades that had been centred, first in Princeton, and subsequently in Ontario and Quebec.

Ideologically, Prus' work easily diverged from the accepted canons of Modernism of the times, insofar as he shifted the emphasis from concerns of program and construction to that of expressive and more humanistic considerations of architecture. His work had been an attempt to fill some of the conspicuous voids in the Modernist movement by addressing questions he considers intrinsic to good architecture, yet habitually forsaken by most practitioners. Prus saw architecture as an intermediary process that finds meaning in experience rather than expedience. He referred to his work as an "Architecture of Condition" in which Condition is the provision or the prerequisite for the occurrence and the actualization of an Ambience. He defined Ambience as the abstract quality of Condition. For Prus, Ambience was the ultimate reality of architecture.

Because of these concerns, he developed different attitudes and formulated different design approaches throughout his architectural practice. By rejecting Program as the ultimate authority, Prus asserted that architecture is an act that is both subjective and objective. Above all else, he sought the interplay between intuition and reason, between function and experience, between adaptation and opposition. His architecture was one of accommodation willing to address conflicting requirements without diffidence. In his winning design for the competition of the *Grand Theatre* (1964-1950) in Quebec City, he merged two opposing objectives: those related to the internal spatial considerations, and those related to the external contextual circumstances. The

¹ The text is a revised version of my Introduction to Victor Prus' book on the "Architecture of Condition"

building strove to generate an ambience of illusion in which the spectator is made to react to a continuum of experiences during the time lapse of a journey through the theatre, while at the same time he let the external building form be governed by a powerful, if somewhat traditional urban considerations, namely, that the *Grand Theatre* should act as a visual focal point in the neighbourhood. The result is a rich and spectacular interior environment clothed externally in a highly formal and somewhat alienating garb. The building is, using Robert Venturi's language, an example of "architecture of complexity and contradiction". By and large, most critics have hailed the design of the interior, but harsh criticism has been levelled at the image of the *Theatre* in its relationship to its context.

In a similar manner, he recognized the notion of "contradiction and opposition" in the design of the *Palais des congrès de Montréal* (1979). The building is a stretched oblong that straddles a sunken expressway and marks the boundary between two diametrically different zones of the city: Old Montreal to the south and the Chinatown to the north. In his attempt to establish a link with each of these areas, Prus produced a building with two different fronts in order to make for a more sympathetic graft in the urban tissue. It must be born in mind that the original *Palais des congrès* was radically altered by the expansions of the building on all four sides, thereby making the reading of the design of original *Palais* impossible. The latter additions virtually obliterated the wished-for duality in the public image of the building.

In his winning entry for the competition of the Royal Canadian Air Force complex, Prus explored the prospect of superimposing varying ambiances, each relating to specifically different spatial or movement conditions which the observer encounters. The design recognized three totally distinctive, yet equally important, levels of perception: from the air, from a motoring passer-by, and from a visitor on foot. Prus met his objectives by making the building a landscape figure in which scale and form are perceived differently, depending upon the space-time relationship of the observer.

Whereas the French Beaux-Arts tradition regarded the plan as the generator and the indispensable basis of the architectural composition, Prus preferred the section as his principal compositional tool. The *Grand Theatre*, James Lyng Comprehensive High School, the Bonaventure Subway Station in Montreal, and the Grantley Adams International Airport in Barbados, all tell their stories most clearly through their respective cross-sections. These disclose not only the formal substance of the design, but the hierarchical organization of space, the primary nodal points, the lines of movement and the structural *parti*.

Frequently, Prus' buildings are metaphors of the city, in that they deal with the inter-relationships and conflicts of scales, form, function, and movement. They are structured around hierarchical principles of order and priorities. Prus was not a formalist or a designer of beautiful objects in the strictest sense of the word, nor was he a confirmed rationalist. He did not follow the credo that form is absolutely determined by its fulfilling function. In the architecture of Victor Prus, for unlike that of, say, Rudolph, Mies, Aalto, or Le Corbusier, there is no neat chain of sequential events in his oeuvre in which each phase is developed or derived from the

preceding one. There is no obvious chronology, and no conspicuous common denominators. What there is, however, is a common concern and consistency in attitude. The architecture of Victor Prus is one of refinement, order, controlled formal appropriateness and correct response to purpose. His architecture is a premeditative act striving for complete physical and psychological meaning.

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