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THE GAZETTE SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 1990

PHOTO

SHOW

TRACES

EVOLUTION

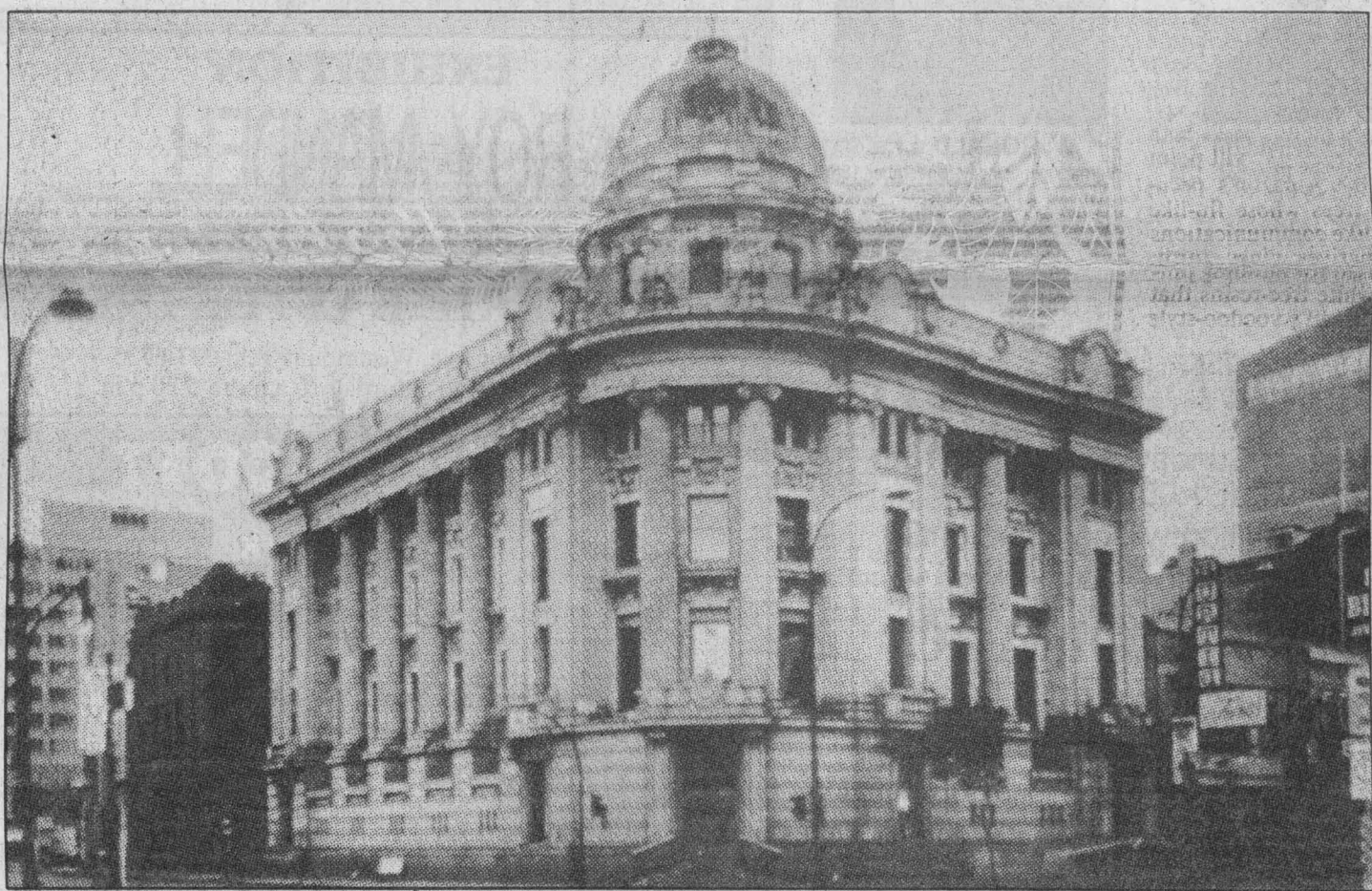
OF BANK

BUILDINGS



Canadian Bank of Commerce building in Innisfree, Alberta, went up in 1907. (Imperial was added to the name later.) Photographed by David Duchow.

TEMPLES OF MONEY



Bank of Nova Scotia dominates corner of Portage Ave. and Garry St. in Winnipeg. It was built in 1908-1910.

ANNMARIE ADAMS
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Money Matters: a Critical Look at Bank Architecture is about contemporary photography, as much as it is about buildings.

The exhibition, now on display at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, includes 160 stunning contemporary photographs and 10 historic images of North American bank architecture.

The pictures are the work of 11 Canadian and U.S. photographers who were commissioned to document and interpret 56 bank buildings constructed during the past two centuries.



Susan Wagg
Montreal historian

The result is a compelling view into the world of banking, as well as a provocative statement about the role of photography in presenting architectural history. The exhibition is ordered chronologically in the main galleries of the CCA; the story of banks in North America is told in nine stylistic chapters, starting with the Federal Period in late-18th-century America and ending with post-modern bank buildings of the 1980s. This sequence makes evident that banks — more than most other building types — can be seen as indexes of changing fashions in architectural taste.

Early banks often resembled mansions or classical temples. Later, eclectic 19th-century styles gave way the steel-and-glass boxes

of the mid-20th century and the historicist pastiche of postmodern architecture.

The exhibition attempts to trace the complex relationship between banking practices and architectural form.

Classicism, a conscious reappropriation of the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, was considered a proper expression of financial solvency until recent decades. But postwar architects preferred the ahistorical, undecorated spaces of the International Style.

New type of institution

The open, accessible architecture of Modern banks was meant to signify the new type of institution which emerged from the stock-market crash of 1929, the Depression, and World War II.

It would be optimistic to expect, however, that so many photographers, working independently of each other, would tell the same story. The text accompanying the photos attempts to link banking history with its architectural form, but the photographs seem to recount several stories.

Images range from abstract compositions intentionally divorced from any social content to views that explore bank architecture in a changing urban scene.

Canadian photographer Robert Bourdeau delights in the various textures of the materials used in the façade of the Molson's Bank on St. Jacques St. in Montreal — designed by John William Richardson Browne and built in 1864-66 — in his series of five photographs of the building. Closer views of the bank deny the observer any references to scale or context, transforming Browne's sophisticated architectural solution into an abstract two-

dimensional image composed only of light and shadow.

At the other extreme, photographer George Tice, in his charge to interpret Mies van der Rohe's Toronto-Dominion Centre (1964-69), included the entire skyline of Toronto in his series of four photographs. Tice's images of the city's soaring bank towers in the daytime, at sunset, at twilight, and at night are among the most inspired points of the entire exhibition.

He forces the viewer to examine the complex relationships among modern banks and the distant views of a city, real-estate values, competition among banks, and consumer advertising.

Such diversity is not, in itself, a weakness in the exhibition. More confusing is the relationship between Canadian and American examples as dictated by the chronological sequence of the show.

The two nations' major banks are presented independently of each other in the first four sections of Money Matters, up to the late Victorian period, then together in the final five sections.

Susan Wagg, the Montreal architectural historian who acted as the exhibition's associate curator, explained that there was little dialogue between Canadian and U.S. architects before this century.

British influence was then displaced by that of our southern neighbors, and 20th-century Canadian and U.S. banks began to show similar characteristics.

In this way, Money Matters raises the perennial question of the relationship between Canadian and American architecture while offering no new, clearcut answers.

Other inconsistencies between the concept of the exhibition and its presentation, ironically, serve to

strengthen the overall impact of Money Matters.

In order to include some of the most important buildings in the history of bank architecture, the organizers of the show bent a few rules along the way.

Buildings which had been demolished have been represented by historic drawings or earlier photographs. At first glance these seem distracting, but in some cases they provide meaningful counterpoints to our contemporary view of banks, reminding us that we are seeing history only through the eyes of the photographers, not seeing the buildings themselves.

Compelling questions

Like all important exhibitions, Money Matters raises some compelling questions. It asks us to consider the role of photography in explaining architectural history; it questions whether buildings in which money changes hands are somehow more important than others; and finally, it asks the question about the relationship of Canadian and American culture.

Perhaps most important, Money Matters suggests that we take a fresh look at this familiar building type, by going out and seeing with our own eyes.

■ *Money Matters is at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1920 Baille St., Montreal, until Feb. 24. Admission: Adults \$3, students and seniors \$2. Students are admitted free 6-8 p.m. Thursday. The CCA, closed Mondays and Tuesdays, opens other days at 11 a.m. and closes Wednesday and Friday at 6 p.m., Thursday at 8 p.m., Saturday and Sunday at 5.*

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