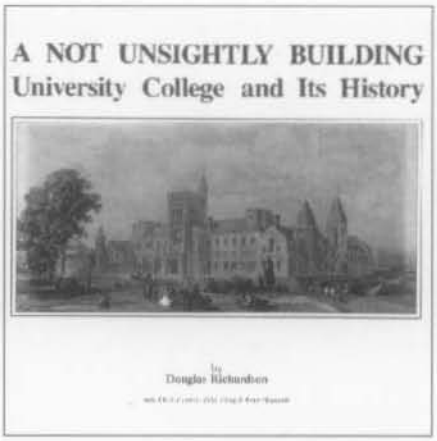
A NOT UNSIGHTLY BUILDING
University College and Its History
Douglas RICHARDSON *et al.*
University College Alumni, Toronto, 1990
174 pp., 69 col., 82 b/w illus., $29.95



Douglas Richardson's history of the central building of University College at the University of Toronto takes as its subject what may well be the most significant university building still standing from nineteenth-century Canada. I would guess, however, that I am not the only reader to be perplexed by this publication. For one thing, the authors seem to have little thought to a possible readership outside their own city: the world contains many other buildings called "university college," after all. I wonder if the parochial title *A Not Unsightly Building: University College and Its History* will not puzzle even a million or so of the residents of Toronto. It is not clear for which audience the book was crafted, either. From its size and from the inclusion of a dozen handsome colour views, this appears to be a standard coffee-table book, marketed for University of Toronto alumni. But it is far less interesting in a nostalgic way than those books tend to be, and much more data-filled with architectural questions.

On the other hand, *A Not Unsightly Building* does not by any means contain all that is expected of a standard architectural monograph. Nowhere in the book can one find a single modern plan of the structures under discussion. Also missing is a modern site plan; its closest equivalent, fig. 6.32, is an old plan of 1906, whose modern caption neglects to point out the building that is the subject of the book. There ought to have been an aerial photograph and a modern city plan, showing where the University College buildings fit in the urban scheme. The book has to be deemed parochial in the extreme in that it pays only the most cursory attention, scarcely more than a photograph or two, to the significant *other* buildings of the University of Toronto campus. Only a University College alumnus - and a highly knowledgeable one at that - could figure out the Byzantine switches of title and institutional configuration with which the first two chapters are largely concerned.

There are in addition strange decisions made in the compilation of this monograph. Chapter 1 is a standard institutional history, though particularly narrow in its inclusiveness. Chapter 2, by another of Richardson's collaborators, covers much of the same territory, though with a slightly wider humanistic interest. It is peculiar that this chapter then gives

the reader great detail about the 1890 fire that consumed the main University College building, more than 30 pages before Richardson gets to adduce its construction!

In Chapter 3, Richardson discusses in considerable detail an interesting Greek Revival scheme for a predecessor college. This discussion concerns an institution somewhat different from that which University College finally became, and it documents a project of which only a fragment was built and of which today nothing whatever remains. This earlier "University of King's College" project certainly merits close examination, and (to this reader, at least) is a real "find," but its introduction here only adds to the confusion of the reader. Then, the undisciplined mix of data pertaining to the institution and of data pertaining to the buildings tends to satisfy neither type of reader. Only in Chapter 4 does Richardson finally get to the construction of the building whose destruction was chronicled two chapters before.

The delayed account of the existing college building is not entirely satisfactory. There is, first of all, an unfortunate clash between the text and the visual information throughout the volume. University College is heir to a group of highly interesting architectural designs that many other institutions might well envy. This does not mean that so many of them ought to have to be set before the reader, particularly as they are here thrown into a hodgepodge of designs for other comparable buildings, such as the University Museum at Oxford or the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. The confusion is only compounded by a strange editorial decision that each caption should emphasize most prominently the source of the illustrated material, and only secondarily give the name of the material itself. Thus fig. 4.14 is prominently captioned *UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY* but only in rather small letters does the reader learn the structure viewed stands in Oxford. The proofing of the volume was less than rigorous also, since an illustration intended for page 116 enigmatically appears on page 48 instead.

Ecological activists work under the motto: "Think globally, act locally." Architectural historians should be guided by the same philosophy when they write, since the act of publication is by nature a "global" act, and there ought to be no bounds to the audience to which a book should aspire. *A Not Unsightly Building* does the reverse: it acts globally and thinks locally. Such a handsome and even lavish book anticipates a wide if not global distribution. But the thinking is local. It treats of a building that has major significance - Canada's Smithsonian Institution, let us say. But it does a disservice to its subject to treat it with such methodological casualness. If University College is as good as this book claims it is, why not make this claim in the most convincing manner possible?

FRANKLIN TOKER
Henry Clay Frick Fine Arts Department
University of Pittsburgh