

MUSIC OF THE EYE

Architectural Drawings of Canada's
First City, 1822-1914

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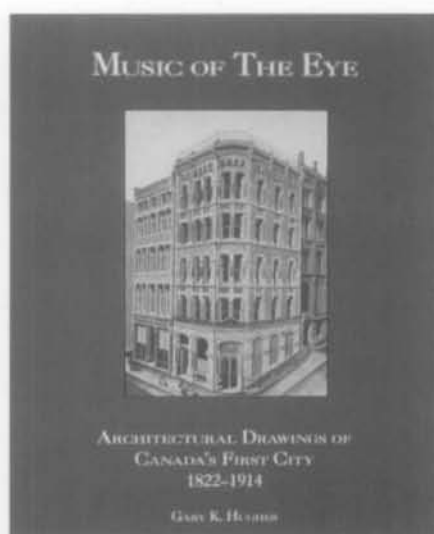
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POUR LES YEUX: Dessins d'architecture
de la première ville canadienne, 1822-
1914*)

This investigation of Saint John's heritage in architectural drawings appears to have had five objectives: a discussion of the architectural drawings in their own right, as vehicles for representation; the role that these drawings played in the production of the resulting building - though by no means all were built; a history of the resulting buildings themselves; an architectural history of the city of Saint John as the collective result of all of these drawings and buildings; and an inventory of architects active in Saint John. These are all high and laudable objectives. *Music of the Eye* perhaps could be called a resounding success only in the last of these five categories, but it does a reasonable job of attaining all of them.

Since it is the drawings themselves that are the focus of the book, it seems a curious omission that there is no discussion of how so many of these drawings survived - or indeed, just how remarkable this group of draw-



ings is for Canadian cities. One would guess that for a city of its age and size, Saint John is particularly fortunate in its surviving architectural drawings, but the author does not help us in arriving at this conclusion. The reader learns of the circumstances of survival of these drawings only in selected instances, as in catalogue entry 5, an instance of an important drawing that was accidentally discovered (in the United States) only a decade ago. Many of the projects, and particularly the unexecuted ones, possibly came to The New Brunswick Museum or to the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick from the family archives of the architect or the estates of the patrons, whether built or not. A few are from the National Archives of Canada.

Mr. Hughes begins with a useful and intelligent discussion of the draw-

ings as a group, defining what types of drawings are found in it, and giving the main lines of evolution in drafting techniques. There is much to learn here, although I would have preferred the discussion of the drawings to have been detached from a more commonplace discussion of the style of the buildings. For the most part, the style of the buildings and the style of the drawings are two separate issues, and conjoining them here produces less rather than more than the sum of their parts.

Turning to the catalogue entries themselves, they too contain a great deal of useful information, but they might well have been more forceful had a consistent methodological approach been adopted. Catalogue entry 6, for example, begins with a long discussion of the history of the Congregational church of Saint John as an institution, and it makes only glancing references to a design by John Cunningham that in the end was not built. In other instances, such as catalogue entry 8, a facade elevation for a private dwelling, the discussion focuses on both the drawing - which happens not to have been executed - and on the typology of Saint John houses of the period. Both interesting topics, but possibly of greater utility to the reader had they been less intermingled. In almost all the catalogue entries, for example, one has to look very closely indeed to find out whether a building

resulted from the drawing in question, and even more closely to see if the building survives.

One of the most valuable aspects of the book are the biographies of the dozen architects who give structure to the selection of drawings. These appear to have been carefully crafted, even though the architects themselves are not a remarkable lot. All of Saint John's architects worked in the architectural styles one would expect them to be using in the appropriate decades. The architects were also essentially conventional in their rendering techniques. Entry 21, for example, a finely wrought commercial front of 1877, is precisely the high Victorian Gothic design that one would expect for the date in any major North American city, and the same could be said of its rendering technique. We are told that the store was in fact built in this manner, although unfortunately there is no photograph to document it.

One would be most interested in knowing whether or not this representative sampling is exceptional for a provincial capital such as Saint John. Did Saint John have a more active architectural colony than comparable cities? Was the status of the architect particularly high in Saint John? Or was it the high status of the act of building that has created such an extensive legacy of Victorian drawings in the city? My guess is that Saint John is in fact slightly richer than average in

its remaining drawings, although ironically, the number of surviving buildings from the drawings in this book is no more than a handful.

The ultimate question of such a book is how does it advance the history of architecture? The exhibition undoubtedly had the effect of raising the consciousness of Saint John inhabitants to the built environment they have or once had. Even though nearly all the drawings are just from two institutions, nonetheless the exhibition performed the useful function of making a coherent group of otherwise isolated documents. In addition, Saint John now has a thorough study of forty-two of its core buildings, and the catalogue itself will serve as a basic document for the preservation of the city's architectural heritage. Quite a set of accomplishments for an ambitious exhibition.

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