

A HISTORY OF CANADIAN ARCHITECTURE

Volume 1 & 2

Harold KALMAN

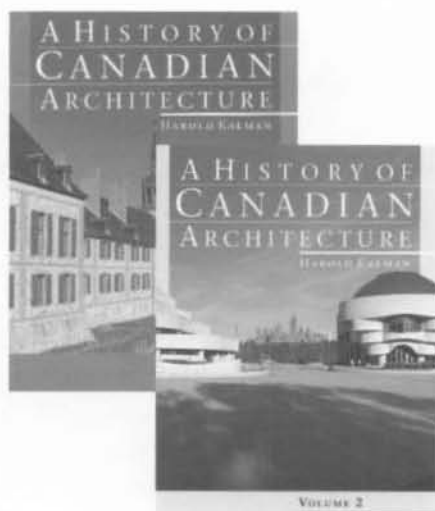
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When the eminent art historian Sir Joseph Burke visited Canada in 1974 he told me about the rigorous self-discipline required for his volume in the *Oxford History of English Art* series. The author of such a work of reference, he said, must adopt a conscious plan of attack, select primary sources with discretion, pick photographs carefully, articulate a clear methodological approach and above all, stick fast to these precepts from beginning to end. These challenges have been met and overcome by Harold D. Kalman in his *A History of Canadian Architecture*. Considering the scope and length of the two well-illustrated volumes, this was no mean feat. In addition to the sheer scale of the production, its preparation stretched out over more than a decade. Despite the length of time, a succession of research assistants and the uncertainties of grant funding, Kalman never lost his focus. If anything it became more acute as he progressed towards the end of Volume Two and his chronological cut-off point of 1992.

In many respects Kalman was uniquely well-equipped for the task.



Montréal born, Princeton educated, he has resided for long periods in Ottawa and Vancouver. He therefore combines the necessary transcontinental knowledge with a thorough training in European as well as American architectural history. In addition to his academic qualifications as a university teacher, public speaker, writer, photographer and critic, he made an early career decision to branch into architectural heritage consulting work. Academe's loss has been the gain of main street and market square conservation projects where Kalman has acted as advisor. Wisely his *A History of Canadian Architecture* embraces these "hands-on" experiences and uses them to enhance the book's personal aspect. Furthermore, Kalman's authoritative definition of the construction systems of the teepee, igloo, West Coast pit

house, *colombage pierroté* technique of old Québec, or Red River horizontal-framing device imparts a palpable texture or gritty three-dimensionality to his discussion.

Following Joseph Burke's analytic method, let me sketch what I assume to be the guiding principles behind Kalman's book: its chronological flexibility; its thematic organization; its reliance on stylistic analysis; and its political correctness. Taking the last point first, Kalman deals with *all* material north of the 49th Parallel from the dawn of human activity on this continent. He includes every kind of built-habitation, beginning with and paying careful attention to those of indigenous peoples. In short, Kalman traces developments from the long-house to the Bauhaus, to paraphrase a statement on the book's dustjacket. His all-inclusiveness is historically as well as politically correct, though it comes at a price.

A potential drawback to Kalman's approach arises from his contention that all buildings are equally important. In other words, by placing the fascinating vernacular houses of the East Coast cod fishery on the same plane as the church, the fortress, or the *seigneurie*, he argues against any division between "high" and "low" forms of architecture. Whatever one's personal position in this debate, the sheer weight of vernacular examples cited by Kalman tends to crowd out the "clas-

sics." To return to the cod fishery for example, he overlooks the one truly monumental surviving building of the type: the vast shingle-covered warehouse (the so-called "B.B.") of the Le Bouttillier firm at Paspébiac on the Gaspé peninsula. He seems to go out of his way to avoid the "grand."

In addition to his comprehensive historical coverage, Kalman has made the conscious decision to employ the dimension of time in a way not exploited by any other work of reference that I know. He discusses each example as it exists at the moment of writing: whether extant or demolished; whether serving its original purpose or not. Although the information runs the risk of quickly becoming dated, the rewards richly repay that risk. The descriptions possess a temporal immediacy, which complements the textural quality of gritty three-dimensionality already mentioned. The book proclaims architecture's ongoing relevance to society today and thus is of particular benefit to student audiences as well as to general readers who share Kalman's commitment to conservation.

With respect to chronology, Kalman adopts a flexible approach permitting him to move forward or backward in time in order to pursue various thematic issues based on building types or geographic considerations. In general I applaud his procedure which adds greatly to the liveliness of the

book. Ignoring any sense of confinement, Kalman moves with the greatest of ease from east to west, from the 17th to the 20th century, from Europe to North America. This feature, combined with excellent cross-referencing all along the way, proves how much Kalman is master of his subject and *architect* of his book. Inevitably there is the occasional backtracking and a few choppy transitions occur as the focus shifts from chapter to chapter. The drawback to Kalman's innovative kaleidoscopic approach, however, is that he sidesteps the tried and true method of artistic biography. With the possible exception of Ernest Cormier, he does not single out any architect for monographic treatment. In consequence, the sense of an individual's artistic education or stylistic development becomes lost. Again it may be a case of circumspectively avoiding even the hint that one architect is "greater" than another.

In keeping with this tendency to reticence, Kalman frequently characterizes things Canadian as cautious and low key; qualities he has adopted into his overall vision of the book. Because his history does not trumpet Canadian values, virtues or architecture, it gains in persuasiveness. Yet there are delightful moments, especially in Volume Two, when the critic's voice drowns out that of the scholar hesitant to pass a value judgment. At moments such as these I feel Kalman not only analyzes and describes this country's

astonishing architectural heritage, he also proudly *celebrates* it.

Let me now turn to Kalman's decision to rely on stylistic analysis as the primary criterion for the organization of his material. I do not wish to quibble with the usefulness of Gothic Revivalism, Palladianism, Neoclassicism, or Arts and Crafts as descriptive terms; rather, I contend that relying on them impedes the search for overarching strands or themes. The proliferation of hard-to-pin-down stylistic subcategories tends to chop up the very things that need binding together. Although stylistic terms are always carefully defined, the definitions will strike the more experienced reader as slightly simplistic. In this regard Kalman's departure from the lecture room has distanced him from the progress art history has made towards including other types of analysis in addition to stylistic periodization. To give just one example, the various overlapping nineteenth-century revival styles he diligently seeks to disentangle can also be collectively understood as manifestations of a single trend: the increasing proliferation of fashionable ideas through the medium of illustrated architectural books and periodicals.

Were I to single out one section of Kalman's history for special praise, I would choose the chapter on railroad architecture which introduces Volume Two. Kalman discussed this topic in the first volume and now returns to

synthesize with easy authority. We are lead through stations, railway hotels, engineering works, and we witness the evolution of a nationalist "château style" (ironically the brain-child of an American architect Bruce Price). A mere twenty pages of text manages to convey the impression of entrepreneurial daring, engineering skill, grandiose scenery, and a transcontinental vision. Following the rapid growth of the rail system we move from simple, vaguely Shingle-Style station houses, to grand château-inspired resort hotels, to Richardsonian Romanesque or Beaux-Arts classical railway terminus buildings. In the process, railroad architecture provides an ideal barometer of rising nationalism and a cross-section of North American stylistic trends. Unlike the deplorable "track record" in the United States where so many stations have been either demolished or turned into tourist traps, many Canadian buildings survive and still fulfill their original function.

I was a little disappointed that Kalman did not discuss the related topic of resort architecture in his chapter on architecture and the spread of the railway. Instead, the important category of getaway hotels and cottages for the rich (including railway magnates such as Sir William van Horne) gets shunted off to a section misleadingly entitled "the single family home." The studied rusticity of resort architecture's rough-hewn logs stretches

back to the eighteenth-century noble-savage concept of Rousseau and to the no-less-potent primitive hut theory of Abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier. Where better for this rustic primitivism to take root than the Canadian wilds? In fact, the Château Montebello on the Ottawa River east of Hull (fig.11.49) claims to be the largest such wooden structure on this continent. If similar buildings in the Adirondacks and American Rockies can attract serious scholarly attention and architectural emulation, why not their Canadian cousins?

In conclusion I would like to focus briefly on the final chapter of Volume Two, which deals with the 1980's, the most recent and hence most difficult-to-interpret period covered by the book. Here Kalman handles the contemporary so-called Post-Modern movement with the same equanimity as work carried out today by the mainstream Modernists. He seems to ignore the fact that a distinct shift has taken place over the past decade and a half. A quarter-century ago historians of Kalman's generation (and my own) believed that Modernism represented the culmination of architecture's quest for some ethereal pinnacle of perfection. But history should have warned us that human taste is nothing if not fickle, even at times perverse. In an unpredictable historical *volte-face*, architects and critics began to take a fresh look at classicism, especially the École

des Beaux-Arts variety. Why is Kalman so puzzled by the background and aims of the latest revival movement? I find Kalman's hesitancy paradoxical because he was on the scene at the birth of Post-Modernism.

At Princeton University Kalman studied under Donald Drew Egbert, an historian with a profound appreciation for Beaux-Arts architecture long before it became fashionable. Egbert's students - I speak from personal experience - could not have been further from the truth in their assessment of his ideas as anachronistic rather than prophetic. In his friend the architect Jean Labatut, recipient of the Premier Second Grand Prix of 1926 at the Paris École, Egbert found living proof of the virtues of the French Academic tradition. Teaching alongside one another at Princeton in the late 50's and 60's, Egbert and Labatut influenced such up-and-coming thinkers and practitioners as Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, Michael Graves, Peter Eisenman and Kenneth Frampton. In a recent conference on architectural education Alan Balfour, Chairman of London's Architectural Association, proudly described himself and fellow architect Francis Duffy as "two children of Jean Labatut." Last but not least, Robert Venturi paid glowing tribute to Egbert in an introduction to the great man's last work, *The Beaux-Arts Tradition in French Architecture...*, posthumously published in 1980. And

to make matters more relevant to this review, the contemporary work of such young Canadians as Peter Rose and Erik Marosi, two Post-Modernists singled out for mention by Kalman, owes much to the Princeton tradition they learned from their own teachers, Moore and Graves.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Kalman's educational background with Egbert, the final chapter in *A History of Canadian Architecture* takes a skeptical and somewhat ambivalent position on the Post-Modern movement in architecture. But when Kalman argues that "the 1990s greater respect for history may ... reveal a failure of nerve" (p.868) it seems to me that he forgets Egbert's warnings against determinist theories of all sorts. Yet this parting note of caution should not detract from Kalman's monumental and distinctly personal work of scholarship, discernment and criticism. It is one bound to raise Canadian architectural accomplishments to a place of greater international honour. If my claim for *A History of Canadian Architecture* is what Kalman might call uncanadian "grandstanding" (p.869), then so be it. To my mind this book not only *writes* history, it *makes* history.

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