



THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

Ideas, Art, Architecture

Douglas ORD

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The slow transformation of Ottawa from lumber town to fairy-tale capital of turrets and crocketed spires is one of the central, if most unlikely, stories in Canadian architectural history. Ottawa's picturesque, neo-Gothic character is unique in the western hemisphere, and against all odds – bureaucratic indifference, political meddling, budget freezes, kickback scandals, aesthetic and cultural conservatism – the public buildings that dominate the city's core especially along Wellington and Sussex Streets, are the work of some of Canada's most inventive architects of the last 125 years. Among them are Thomas Fuller, Thomas Stent,

Ross and MacFarlane, Ernest Cormier, Ernest Barrott, Arthur Erickson, John A. Pearson, John Lyle, Douglas Cardinal and the Montreal firm of Rother, Bland and Trudeau.

With the completion of a new building for the National Gallery of Canada in 1988, Moshe Safdie, the Israeli-Canadian-American architect could be added to that distinguished list. Almost twenty years later, Safdie's design for the National Gallery still ranks, arguably, as one of his most widely-recognised, successful and accomplished works. For those who follow Safdie's career – and there have been several book-length studies and many articles including *Moshe Safdie: Buildings and Projects 1967–1992* (1996) and *Moshe Safdie* (1996) – the National Gallery commission proved to be the first of a long series of large-scale Canadian projects including the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1985–1991), Ottawa City Hall (1988–94), Vancouver Library Square (1992–95) and Toronto International Airport Terminal 1 (opened 2004).

The construction of Safdie's National Gallery of Canada building also proved beneficial to the fortunes of the Gallery itself. Built to replace a temporary facility, it had the effect of rejuvenating an institution in trouble as a result of systemic problems that included diminishing attendance and declining real term budgets. By the early 1990s, the reinvigorated Gallery had emerged as Ottawa's cultural showpiece. But at that very moment, a series of controversies brought the era of celebration to an unexpectedly early end. Criticism of the Gallery's acquisition of Barnett Newman's painting *Voice of Fire* (1990) and its exhibition policies, especially Jana Sterbak's *Meat Dress* (1991) and Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata's thirty-five sheds constructed at the gallery's edge, led to negative publicity in the local press. Fallout on Parliament Hill forced the Gallery to re-examine its mandate and pursue a less contentious, more politically-savvy agenda.

Exactly why acquisition policies and art practices that scarcely raised an eyebrow in other cities across Canada, aroused a storm of indignation in Ottawa is a difficult question. But one explanation, or at least the beginning of an explanation might lie in the very success of the Gallery building itself. One could say that the brilliance of Safdie's design had the effect of drawing power to itself. The elegant, spectacular spaces of the Gallery made it the preferred site of Prime Ministers' meetings and dinners and celebratory events of all kinds. It became the embodiment of a socio-political status quo, that by its very nature is uneasy and wary in the company of contemporary art's critical spirit.

This, at least, is the view of the Toronto-based critic Douglas Ord, as he explains in the introduction to his recently-published, densely-written, copiously-referenced tome. It was the sudden difficulties faced by the National Gallery in the early 1990s that prompted him to think seriously about contemporary art in the

context of the Gallery as a place and an institution. This led to a fellowship at the Gallery and over a period of seven years to the conception, research, writing and publication of a book on the subject. To his surprise, Ord found himself preoccupied not so much with contemporary art in the National Gallery, as with the architecture of the building itself, and in particular what he describes as "a sacralization linked not so much with art...as with the unified Canadian nation-state." Ord found qualities in the architecture that suggested themes at the heart of the National Gallery as an institution, and by "drawing inferences and following leads as they appeared," he became more and more interested in the relationship of Saffdie's design to the institutional culture of the Gallery. His investigation "became one of not only reading more carefully the patterns that I had discerned within the building itself, but of looking more systematically into the institution's past, to see whether my initial sense of comparable pattern there was justified."

Obviously, the intention of such an endeavour is not to produce (impossible as this might be in practice) an objective, balanced account of the National Gallery as an institution, a work of architecture, or even as a collection. The opposite occurs: the defence of an *a priori* subjectivity or "intuition" as he describes it and the bringing forward of an understanding of what the implications of that perception might be. To his mind, the National Gallery as an institution and the National Gallery as a building are both representative of a traditional, idealist view of art – art as a realm of transcendental universals – a view which, he argues, is decidedly out of step with the main currents of contemporary art. While some would see this as no bad thing, or at least something that could be accommodated in a pluralistic age, Ord sees this as problematic. It tends to limit the manoeuvrability of the Gallery as an institution, binding it too closely to the ideologies and practices of power and keeping it from its true function: making a space for and encouraging the critical practices of art.

Whatever one might think of Ord's general thesis, this book is testimony to the fact that it has motivated him to go where no man (or woman) has gone before; in this case deep into the vaults and tangled history of the National Gallery itself. Beginning with the appointment of Eric Brown as Director in 1913, Ord offers his readers a sustained account of curatorial policy over the course of the 20th century. In his view, the appointment of Brown was not by accident and it was a critical move with consequences apparent to this day. Brown, like his champion and chairman of the Board of Trustees, financier Sir Edmund Walker, was a Christian Scientist and from Ord's perspective, this as much as anything else explains his rise to the top and subsequent career. Despite his talent, Brown did not come to the job with obvious credentials. Ord writes that: "Throughout his

tenure at the National Gallery...Brown was faced with the challenge of making both his experience and his artistic program fit his prior commitment to Christian Science and his parallel claim that 'art has a purpose and a mission greater than that which it now holds, its purpose is spiritual and its mission the good of humanity'." At first this goal was pursued through the purchase of European historical art in London; however by 1914 this policy was already coming under attack by Lawren Harris amidst the first foreshadowings of the cultural nationalism of the 1920s. Although Harris, as is well known, faced sustained opposition to his plan to create a national art movement, we are told here that both Brown and Walker were extremely sympathetic since they believed that art could be used as a "unifying and refining force" encouraging and sustaining a sense of nationality. As evidence, Ord points out that during the 1920s Brown actively supported the Group of Seven and their activities through purchases and their inclusion in exhibitions abroad in London (1924, 1925) and Paris (1927).

While Brown and Walker's Christian Science beliefs suggest a natural link between the two men, Ord extends his religio-ideological-motivational speculations to explain the cooperation and accommodations of Brown and Harris as well. He suggests that Brown's support for Harris was based on the ease with which his transcendental metaphysics could find common ground with Harris's belief in theosophy. Similarly, both men had little difficulty responding to or promoting a nature-based nationalist iconography. The effect of the Brown-Harris dialogue was to strengthen the Gallery's commitment to Canadian art and, correspondingly, the promotion of the idea that a primary function of the gallery and of art itself was to support the Canadian project of self-identification and unified statehood. Unfortunately, at least from the point of view of our own time, that ideology was not open to the insights offered by new movements like Futurism or Cubism. It also neglected the modernist impulse to make art a non-objective, form-based, internationalist practice which was opposed in principle to the tendency of national, ethnic or tribal-based cultures that separated humanity into carefully defined, mutually-antagonistic groups.

In Ord's view, the anti-modern, nationalist culture established at the Gallery by Brown was not successfully challenged until the appointment of Jean Sutherland Boggs in 1966. Brown's immediate successor at the Gallery was H.O. McCurry, a former Assistant Director and also, perhaps incidentally, another Christian Scientist. McCurry, who stayed in the job until 1955, was an adept manager but had little inclination to change direction. His more dynamic replacement Alan Jarvis resigned under a cloud in 1959 only four years into the position. Retrenchment followed with the appointment of Charles Comfort, a *bona fide*, if aging member of the pre-war generation of ardent nationalists. Despite the conservative, generally

lackluster record of these years, Ord points out that the quarter century from 1940 to the mid-1960s was marked by some significant accomplishments including important acquisitions of early work by Canadian modernists such as Paul-Émile Borduas. The early 1950s was also the era of the Massey Report. Parliament's response to the document led to increased funding and a higher profile for the Gallery, including a design competition (later compromised) for a new Gallery building. But the nationalist tenor of the Massey Report also precluded any meaningful recognition and response to the rise of New York as the world capital of contemporary art. In Ord's view, this indifference to American developments on the part of the National Gallery was self-defeating and the inevitable legacy of Brown's idealism and self-conscious nationalism. It reflected a self-righteous and narrow-minded "Canadianism" that left the National Gallery an artistic backwater by the mid-1960s.

The arrival in Ottawa of Jean Sutherland Boggs, the Canadian Harvard-trained art historian brought north to run the gallery in 1966, promised better things. In fact, it proved to be the case. Boggs lost little time in bringing the Gallery into the complex world of the late twentieth century and in gathering a host of new curators into the institution to help her. New arrivals included such (now) well-known figures as Brydon Smith and Pierre Thériault, both of whom were to make important contributions to the work of the Gallery. Still, as Ord demonstrates, Boggs' achievements (over two terms: 1966-1976 and 1982-1987) were stubbornly realised in the face of complex artistic and political struggles. It was only with great difficulty and the direct support of Pierre Trudeau that the National Gallery, so often-planned and so long-awaited, became a reality.

Like prologue and epilogue, this book begins and ends with an analysis of the National Gallery building. This is partly a question of form. In recounting the genesis of his project, Ord locates it first in his experience of the building and consequently, at the end of his investigation, it is fitting that he should return to the starting point and see it anew in the light of his findings. But Ord returns to the building for another reason. Not satisfied with demonstrating the persistence of the idealist/nationalist current instituted by Eric Brown in the culture of the National Gallery, he is intent that we should recognise similar values in the building itself. The "ritual" spaces of the entrance ramp and great hall are seen to act against the critical practices of art as Ord understands them to be. As evidence he points to the presence in the design of Euclidean geometries (octagons, star forms); he finds formal and experiential links with symbols or notions of "Canada" in the architecture of Parliament Hill and views of surrounding nature. A sense of the sacred is conveyed by an architectural language that itself recalls a host of ancient types from gothic cathedrals to mesopotamian temples to the metaphor of Jacob's Ladder. From these connotations he spins an elaborate and involved hermeneutic:

'Jacob's ladder, Jacob's dream' adds a crucial, if historically dubious, moment in early Judaism to the list of possible associations with the ramp.... This would seem to be quite the weight of analogy for the National Gallery of Canada to assume.... Soft-focus references to 'Jacob's ladder, Jacob's dream' notwithstanding, then, what is the content of the 'ritual', the 'ceremony' into which the architect of the National Gallery of Canada was asking visitors to enter?.... What does seem clear is that the 'ritual' along the length of the ramp that the visitor can see, has little or nothing to do with art, as this term came to be understood in the twentieth century...the Colonnade ramp...is aestheticized in a way that provides a focal point for a new conflation: one that blends the symbolic and institutional iconography of the Canadian nation-state with the generic structures, rituals and experiences of religion.... Such a state...is one profoundly foreign to...contemporary streets and technologies.... But what has any of this got to do with art, or for that matter with the actual history of the institution...for these are as much as invisible throughout this process. Nevertheless, there is, built into the structure of the Great Hall itself, an implicit resonance both with the history of the Gallery as an institution and with a peculiar pattern in Canadian art history during the twentieth century. (p.22)

Perhaps. Despite such ingenious displays – and there are many in this book – in the end it is not entirely clear what Ord or his general argument has to gain from “proving,” if that is the right word, the existence of some deep-rooted correspondence between the traditional values of the National Gallery as an institution and the artistic ideology which underscores Safdie's architecture. It is certainly the case, as Ord concedes, that Safdie professes no such self-conscious intent. In view of this, perhaps the suggestion of such a possibility would have been enough.

Whatever the upside, the downside of Douglas Ord's heavy-handed quest is that it obscures as much as it illuminates. Ord's “thesis” rests on a consideration of just one part of the building – the entrance sequence and “Great Hall” – and the remainder of the building is virtually ignored. In a text of over 400 pages, ostensibly devoted to a deeper understanding of the architecture of the National Gallery, we find not a single plan nor a detailed discussion of the Gallery's general disposition, composition or form. Moreover the unceasing struggle to convince the reader of what could only ever be at most a tendency, leads to missteps and dubious assertions. It is difficult to take seriously the notion that Safdie's design is “a new conflation, one that blends the symbolic and institutional iconography of the Canadian nation state with the generic structures, rituals and experience of religion” when in full view of the Great Hall lies the reconstructed Centre Block of Parliament Hill. This neo-Gothic monument was widely understood in its time as a memorial to the dead of World War I. When Ord describes Safdie's

“sacral references” and “Platonic geometries” as “peculiar” and “radical” in the contemporary architectural context, one immediately thinks of the work of Louis Kahn and its enormous influence on Safdie and architecture generally. In addition, I.M. Pei’s exactly contemporaneous Pyramide de Louvre, with its transparent pyramid and spiral staircase, reiterates ratios and geometries old to architecture even in the age of Classical Greece. One is forced to conclude that for all of Ord’s insights, this is not a serious discussion of the National Gallery as a work of architecture.

In 1992, the Italian literary critic Umberto Eco published a short article entitled “Interpretation and History.”¹ The philosophy of deconstruction was at its fashionable height and Eco, a master of interpretative strategies, found himself in the unusual position of sounding a note of caution. He agreed there are innumerable meanings in a work endowed with aesthetic value, but wrote that: “I have the impression that, in the course of the last decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed.... To say that a text has potentially no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy ending.” While reading *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas, Art Architecture*, Eco’s comments often came to mind. They came to mind, because at some point not long into the book, I was struggling to follow Ord’s highly detailed and often meandering prose, and trying to sort out the mainline from spur-lines (which frequently pass through interesting countryside only to come to a puzzling and often unsatisfactory stop). It became evident that in Ord’s view, more is better than less. In the spirit of deconstruction, this book is a record of one person’s attempt to uncover the web of interconnections, alliances, choices and coincidences that produced and so constitute the National Gallery; and to follow them wherever they might lead. Not surprisingly, as Eco allows, not all acts of interpretation made in this spirit will have a happy ending. For example, the attempt to link Eric Brown with European fascism on the grounds that he was described as “the art dictator of Canada” seems at best gratuitous. More broadly, as one considers the merits of Ord’s interpretations, his neglect of existing historiography often seems obtuse or perhaps simply willfull. Yes, Eric Brown and H.O. McCurry were nationalists with a conservative, anti-modern bent. But as the architectural record of Ottawa in the 1920s and 30s shows, they lived in a society that was also artistically conservative and increasingly nationalistic and, yes, it was about them – but it wasn’t just about them.

Despite these reservations and criticisms, it is clear on balance, that Douglas Ord has written a worthwhile and stimulating book. This is because, as Ord understands, deconstruction at its heart is a response to a desire to create an opening to the complexity of the world around us, and especially to the potential offered by practices of art in all its forms including architecture. As Ord is fond of repeating, a crucial function of art is “the critical scrutiny of all other spheres

including the political.” This book has been written in that spirit, and on those terms it is a success. There is no doubt that, thanks to his research, all those who value and treasure the National Gallery have been led to a better understanding of its history and the role it has been called upon to play over the many years of its existence. Is this the final word on the National Gallery? I hope not. I hope that others will pick up and follow the many threads that are revealed here for the first time. And when they do, they will begin inevitably at that point where Douglas Ord, after a lengthy and frequently fascinating journey, has left us.

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Notes

- 1 Umberto ECO, “Interpretation and History,” in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan COLLINI (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23–43.