

COLOURED BRICK IN YORKVILLE*

The Yorkville Town Hall, a polychromatic brick building which once faced Yonge Street a few blocks north of Bloor in Toronto, was designed by the Scottish architect William Hay in 1856. It is a key monument for the understanding of High Victorian architecture in Toronto and also an interesting example of the influence of advanced British taste on architectural practice in the colonies through the medium of influential emigrants from the United Kingdom. Designed as a multipurpose commercial complex as well as a civic centre for the then newly incorporated Yorkville, it was a distinctive landmark which identified the small and independent community. The most distinctive feature of this landmark was the use of polychromatic brickwork. Hay had come to Canada in 1846 as G. G. Scott's Clerk of Works for the Anglican Cathedral in St. John's, Newfoundland. He returned to the British Isles, and subsequently emigrated to Canada West. In designing the Yorkville Town Hall he was apparently influenced by the recent publication of G. E. Street's *Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages*, although he must also have been familiar with Butterfield's unfinished London Church, All Saints, Margaret Street. The Yorkville Town Hall was unfortunately destroyed by fire in 1941 but the original drawings offer an opportunity to study an unusual and important design by a major architect of the time. The drawings reveal William Hay's adaptation of British architectural tastes to the Canadian situation and also show his influence on later Canadian architecture, particularly on the career of his apprentice Henry Langley who may have executed some of the drawings.

Yorkville was a small village just north of Toronto when it was incorporated in 1853. It was notable for the Red Lion Inn (1808-1888), J. G. Howard's 1841 Yorkville Spire on St. Paul's and the Potters Field ("... for those whose friends declined the use of St. James or other burial grounds.")¹ Mr. Bloor had established a brewery just north of the 1st Concession Road (now Bloor Street), and in conjunction with Sheriff Jarvis "... entered into a speculation on land, projecting a laying out of the village of Yorkville which narrowly escaped being Bloorville."²

One of the first concerns of the newly established Yorkville Town Council was to appoint a committee to locate and purchase a block of land for a market.³ There were delays but land was finally purchased,

*I would like to thank Professor Douglas Richardson of the University of Toronto for his advice, encouragement and assistance.

divided into lots and the lots leased to various businessmen. A design was then required for the shops; a project for a building with a council room was conceived from the beginning as a multi-use complex and town centre. This had also been true of the first Market Hall on Front Street in Toronto. A committee was appointed but there are not many details about the requirements for the buildings. On 27 March 1856 the Council minutes read:

The committee appointed to procure plans for a Town Hall have produced one from Mr. Hay and one from Mr. Sheard, after much discussion the one from Mr. Sheard with some slight alterations was unanimously adopted.⁴

Joseph Sheard's drawing for the Yorkville Market Block seems to have disappeared. Sheard's reputation was high, his Romain building was erected on King Street that very year and was "... at that time considered the most handsome business block in the city."⁵ It is very curious therefore that William Hay's rejected design was revived and built at a later date (1859-1860), but before we speculate on this matter the plans themselves should be considered.

There are eleven sheets of drawings by Hay for the Yorkville Town Hall and market block project in the Langley collection in the Baldwin Room of the Toronto Public Library. Ten of them are numbered and number ten (Fig. 2) is of the front elevation as it was constructed. Number one, *Plan of Basement* is the only one signed in ink by William Hay; all ten are signed in ink by William McGinnis who was the builder hired to erect the building.⁶

The unnumbered sheet is also a front elevation (Fig. 1). It is signed by William Hay but only faintly and in pencil. It differs in a number of details from the other one and it is possible that it was the original presentation drawing done by Hay in 1856. It shows Hay's close involvement with the research and ideas of his British colleagues, especially G. G. Scott and G. E. Street, as published in their books and in the *Builder* and *Ecclesiologist* between 1854 and 1856. The design reflects the most current interests in the revival of medieval architecture closely following suggestions that were then emerging regarding: constructional polychromy, distribution and choice of colour, use of local materials, employment of rounded arches, asymmetry and picturesqueness,

some concern for siting and silhouette, and the appropriateness of this style for public buildings. Furthermore, this design, when compared to other drawings by the same architect, shows his "fence-sitting" position with regard to constructional polychromy, a posture closely akin to that of his previous employer G. G. Scott.

What we have referred to as the presentation drawing (Fig. 1) however was not the basis for the actual building. The final building was based on the numbered facade drawing (Fig. 2) which was not signed by Hay and may have been done by his apprentice Langley at a later date. One detail that suggests that it is later is that the actual coat of arms of the town of Yorkville is represented above the rose window. In the first drawing (Fig. 1) it is of a different shape vaguely resembling the coat of arms of the city of Toronto. Also the tower has been reversed in order to be seen from the street that entered Yonge St. It is possible that its actual position on the site had changed or was unknown in 1856.

Other differences suggest that another hand was involved. The details are bolder and there is less delicacy in the overall appearance as well as in the drawing technique. Of course it was common practice for an architect to hand over some of the draughting to an apprentice or employee. The design though has been somewhat changed as well. The rose window is considerably enlarged giving the building a more church-like appearance. The red and yellow bricks alternating over the windows outline the arches only and do not continue as horizontal bands. The position of the clock tower has not only been reversed, but the design of it has been changed. The door beneath the clock tower on the ground level is of wood and there is no longer a recessed area beyond the two arches next to it.

There are a number of reasons to think that Henry Langley was the draughtsman, beyond the fact that he was apprenticed to Hay at that time. The colourful drawings are very much like those he later did on his own and the facade closely resembles his later Primitive Methodist church. While Hay's teaching is evident in his work, it is intriguing to think that in copying the Town Hall design Langley adapted it somewhat to his own taste. Another reason to suspect that he may have had a personal interest in it is the fact that the revised design was built some years after the original had been rejected. This occurred at the very end of Hay's sojourn in Toronto just before Langley established an independent practice.⁷ However, if Langley did pursue

the Town Hall commission this is not reflected in the record of payments. For "painting and measuring" he received a mere \$6.00 directly from the town council and anything else he may have received was first paid to Hay. A William Langley did receive larger sums for a "lease" on two separate dates in 1860 but the reason for the lease is not clear nor is there any indication that he was a relative of Henry Langley.

Whatever the circumstances leading to the reconsideration of the design, the Council minutes of 10 October 1859 report its acceptance:

Moved... that the plan of the Town Hall drawn by Mr. Hay Esq., be adopted with the exception of the partition walls which are to be all on the ground....

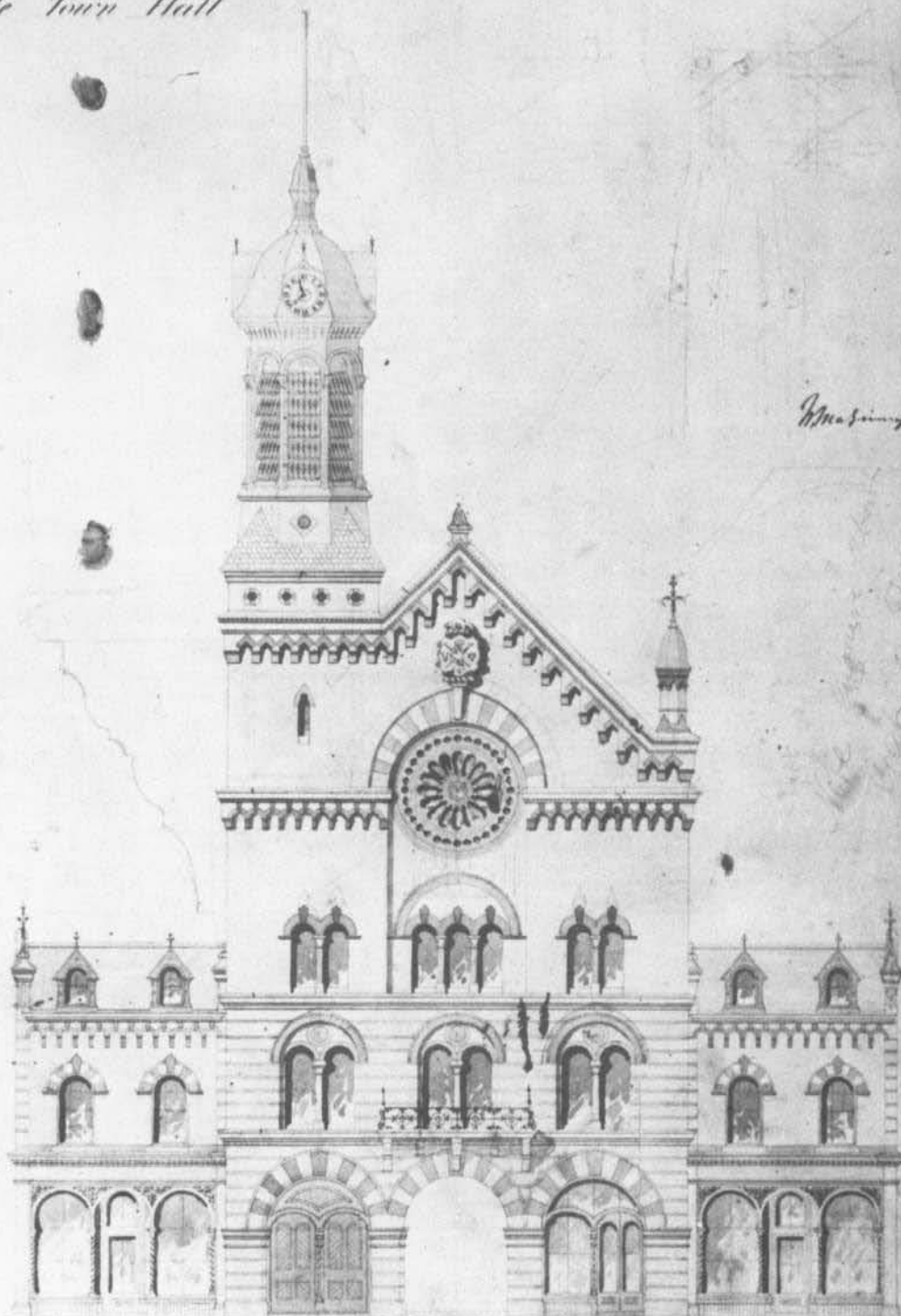
It is apparent that during the time that had elapsed adjacent shops had been constructed. There is a 16 January 1860 petition from Mr. Thom for "... compensation for the injury done to his building by the digging the foundation for the Town Hall." Mr. Thom was already fighting with the Council because they felt that the wood he had provided for the new sidewalks was deficient in quality, but that is another matter. It is not clear whether or not Thom's shop had been built according to Sheard's plans.

Although the building's design may in part be ascribed to Langley, the original conception was probably Hay's. The Town Hall was an unusual building in Hay's career and perhaps can best be understood in relation to his background. William Hay was born in 1818 in Scotland. In 1846 he went to work for Sir G. G. Scott who sent him to oversee the construction of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist at St. John's, Newfoundland.⁸ Before leaving Hay travelled about the British Isles hiring workers to take with him while becoming well acquainted with Gothic architecture. In 1850 he returned to Scotland and for the next three years little is known about his activities. It is likely that he had some contact with his colleagues and contemporaries in England and perhaps saw Butterfield's All Saints, Margaret Street in London that was then under construction. Designed in 1849 it was one of the first buildings to experiment with the use of coloured brick in patterns. Referred to by its detractors as the "holy zebra" it became the model building for the Ecclesiologists. Hay would have been aware of its existence,

Yorkville Town Hall

1870

Macdonald



Front Elevation

Scale 0 feet to an inch

Fig. 2. Plan for the Yorkville Town Hall, principal facade (nearly as built). (Photo: Langley Coll., Metropolitan Toronto Library Board)

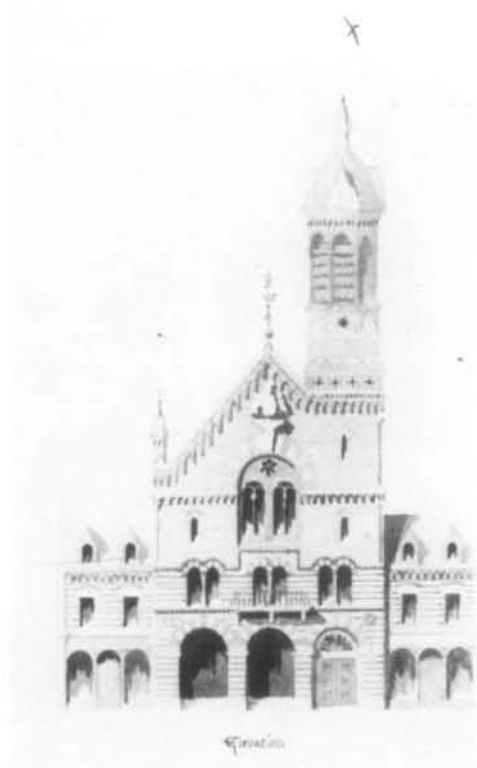


Fig. 1. William HAY, plan for the Yorkville Town Hall, project for principal facade. (Photo: Langley Coll., Metropolitan Toronto Library Board)

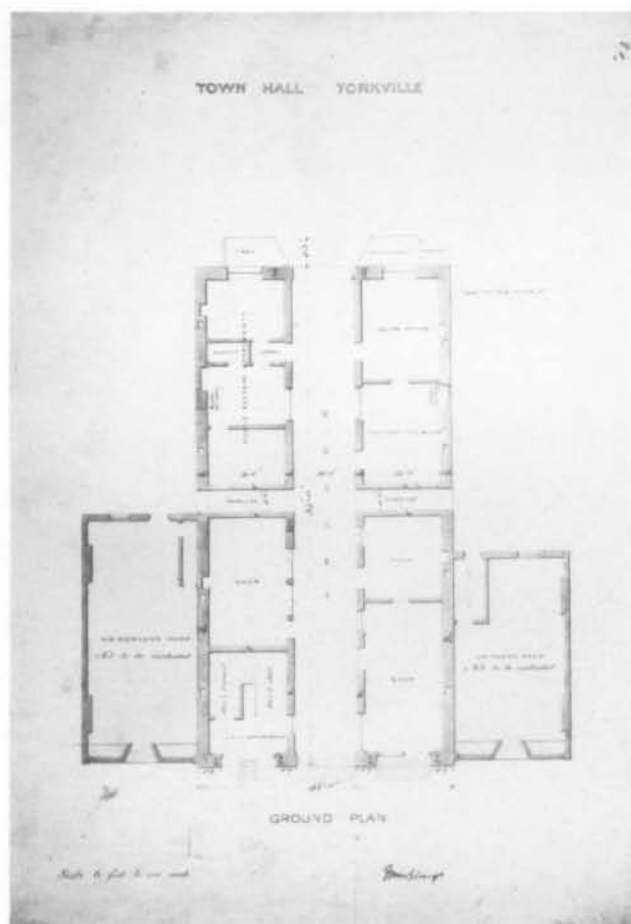


Fig. 3. Plan for the Yorkville Town Hall, ground plan. (Photo: Langley Coll., Metropolitan Toronto Library Board)

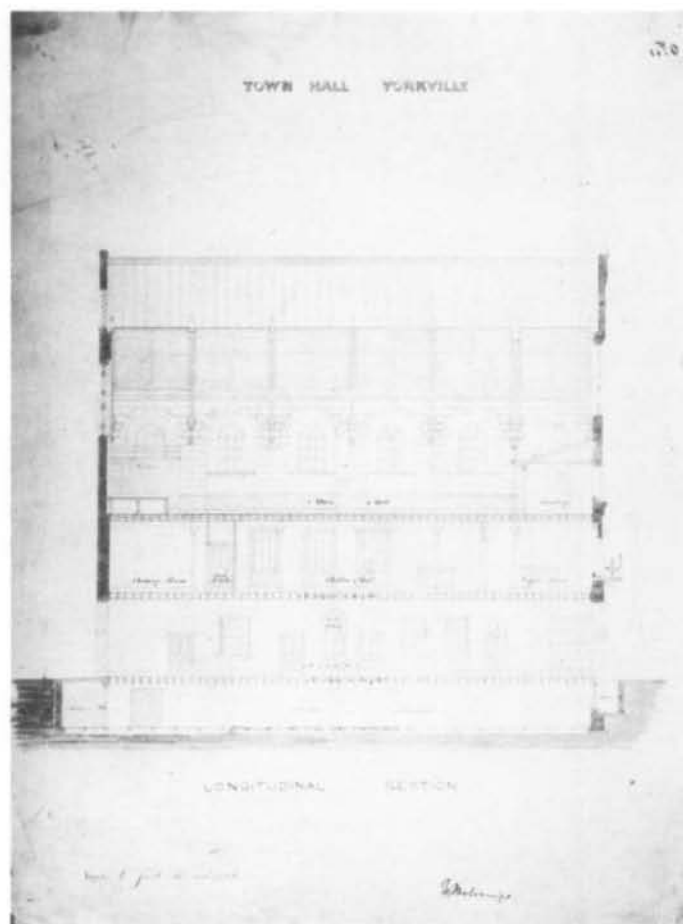


Fig. 4. Plan for the Yorkville Town Hall, longitudinal section. (Photo: Langley Coll., Metropolitan Toronto Library Board)

even if he had not seen it, and of the controversy over the use of colour which was then beginning.

In 1853 Hay returned to Canada and established his own practice in Toronto. His larger commissions were monochromatic Gothic Revival: Toronto General Hospital, Gerrard Street (1855-78), St. Basil's and St. Michael's College (1856). Gould Street Presbyterian (1855) and the design for the tower of Trinity College (1858). Polychromy did not appear to be one of his chief concerns.⁹

The year that Hay returned to Canada, George Edmund Street went to Northern Italy to study Gothic buildings and particularly to bring back ideas for the appropriate use of coloured bricks and other local materials in new buildings. He had had to defend his interest in Italian architecture when one of the strongest arguments in favour of the Gothic style was that it was native to England. One defense was his belief that the English did not appreciate the decorative possibilities of the brick and stone readily available to them.¹⁰ This "foreign" idea is more relevant to Yorkville than might be first supposed. Bricks were already being manufactured in the muddy gulch north of Davenport and Scadding reports that "Mr. Worthington... manufactured press brick and drain tiles of which Yorkville Town Hall was built."¹¹ The Council minutes record that there was at one point a discussion about changing the type of brick to be used but "white stack brick" was agreed upon. In the Council minutes of 14 March 1860 it was moved:

... that the Clerk do write to Mr. Hay the Architect informing him that the Council do not feel disposed to make any alteration in the Town Hall either with regard to the design or materials specified but leave the responsibility for the due performance of the contract with him both with regard to materials and time....

Street's *Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages*, was first published in 1855 and very likely made its way to Toronto shortly after. Certainly the Yorkville Town Hall bears some relation to a number of the illustrations in the book.¹² The horizontal bands of contrasting colours of stone or brick, the asymmetrical placement of the tower, the penetration of a flat facade with arched windows and rose windows are all shown and admired in the book. Even the alternating red and yellow bricks in

patterns over the windows might have come directly from Street's illustrations except that his windows are pointed and show an ogee arch which Street says must have been introduced to Venice from the East and is a "... most vitiated perversion."¹³ Street felt that brickwork could be used to advantage in the exteriors and interiors of public buildings as well as in churches. His major contribution to theory though, was his emphasis on honesty in all construction. While Ruskin had admired the colourful veneers of tile and marble on Italian buildings, Street admitted their beauty but condemned all sham:

There is... a degree of real or apparent weakness which is not at all satisfactory in this system of incrustation, and I thought how much more noble such work might well become, were it to be inlaid only where no strong work was required to be done — as for example in the spandrels of arches or within arches.¹⁴

Writing on the churches of Lubeck in the *Ecclesiologist* Street advises:

... red brick, good outside or inside a church... should never be plastered, save where it is intended to introduce paintings of some kind more brilliant than the colour of the bricks.¹⁵

Of particular concern was the use of polychrome brick in town halls. Street admired the New Town Hall of Hamburg designed by Scott (which may in turn have been influenced by Street's book). In writing about it he gives a description of the balcony and the window, the latter in the form of a circular medallion. The design is derived, he says, from older architecture of North Germany but there also:

... are many features which recall the Domestic Pointed of Italy. We congratulate Mr. Scott on the felicity with which he has combined such diverse motives.¹⁶

It too, is polychromatic: "Scott intends availing himself of the polychromatic material in the exterior with white stone, red granite."¹⁷

While Street's writings influenced both Hay and Scott, Scott's publication of 1856, *Remarks on Secular and Domestic Architecture present and*

future, expresses in more detail many of the ideas which might underlie the Yorkville Town Hall design. Scott is very articulate, if also curiously apologetic, about his reasons for reviving aspects of the medieval style and about its appropriateness for public buildings in the Victorian era. He writes:

I am no medievalist; I do not advocate the styles of the middle ages as such. If we had a distinctive architecture of our own day worthy of the greatness of our age, I should be content to follow it; but we have not... we have in architecture committed the fatal error of adopting the style of the ancient world instead of our own.¹⁸

Another "fatal error" according to Scott was "... considering ecclesiastical and secular architecture as so distinct that the same person cannot practice both."¹⁹ He had much to say about town halls and how some of the forms for the "new class" of public buildings in his own day had prototypes or at least worthy models in medieval towns:

Few things surprise me more than the neglect which pointed architecture has met with among the builders of Town Halls. Next to churches, the finest of medieval structures existing are, perhaps, the town halls of Flanders, Germany, France and some of the free cities of Italy... What character would a fine Hotel de Ville give to one of our great seats of manufacture or commerce... and, even the little market house of a country town, with the hall in its upper story would in our style become a very charming building. I have often thought while looking at the queer structures one sees of this kind, how sweetly their essentials could be translated into a really national style and what an ornament they would become to the towns which they now disfigure.²⁰

The English were not alone in their interest in the design of town halls. The Yorkville design appears to follow closely, at least in layout, the recommendations of the Frenchman Viollet-le-Duc. To him public buildings seemed at odds with contemporary social conditions. He suggested that:

In an Hotel de Ville there would be required open space, office rooms, large assembly rooms, easy approaches and secluded apartments with good ventilation and lighting everywhere. On the ground floor there will be an entrance hall, a wide vestibule communicating with the various office and committee rooms, opening on a flight of steps comparatively wide and easily ascending, conducting to the first story — the grand hall for fêtes and public meetings.²¹

In the Yorkville Town Hall the ground floor is divided into separate apartments for police offices, housekeeper and, as it was part of a commercial or market block, some of the rooms were “shops” to be leased (Fig. 3). The assembly hall is upstairs and has a balcony outside the front windows; balconies were found on public buildings in medieval times and Viollet-le-Duc thought them functional: “Addresses are not infrequently delivered to crowds assembled outside in the square fronting the Hotel de Ville.”²²

Unfortunately the Yorkville Town Hall does not face a public square and the balcony was probably intended to be decorative rather than functional. In the original design it looks rather like those on the *piano nobile* of Venetian palaces as drawn by Street. In fact it may never have had a balcony since the photograph in Eric Arthur’s book shows a platform with no railing (Fig. 5).

In attempting to find the sources for Hay’s design the “scientific” attitude of the revivalists must be understood. As one writer on this period has said:

Although they admitted their own ignorance at many points, the Ecclesiologists had a firm conviction that medieval architecture and its glories were not accidental. Ecclesiological research was always directed to discovering the principles which, it was supposed, guided medieval builders. For some strange reason, trial and error was not considered a method worthy of the Gothic architects. And so, tremendous time and energy were devoted to investigating the principles of... building through the inductive method.²³

A feature of the Yorkville Town Hall which at first appears to deviate from the general advice is the rounding of the arches. One motive particularly characteristic of Gothic architecture was the pointed arch. In fact Gothic had earlier been referred to more or less consistently, as "the pointed style." Scott, for one, includes pointed arches among his many recommendations:

The pointed arch makes, as a general rule, the best and most dignified covering for an opening, and being also the main feature of the style, should be used, where practical, in all Gothic buildings.²⁴

However an article appeared on rounded arches in the *Builder* of 1854. It was written by Mr. Petit who had travelled to France:

... to study styles preceeding the development of Gothic in the 13th century with the view of considering whether or not they contain the elements of a pure and permanent round-arched style.²⁵

He had rather hoped to find round arches because he thought they would be useful and attractive in contemporary architecture and because they would also show that the Romanesque style was based on Roman architecture and was therefore not barbarous. His search was successful and in the article he published a view of the Beaulieu Church Tower which did indeed have rounded arches.

The most topical aspect of the Town Hall design was the use of constructional polychromy. Butterfield's All Saints, Margaret Street, has already been mentioned as initiating the polychrome controversy. Designed in 1849 its red and black patterned brick had caused considerable comment. Colour was shocking and foreign but Ruskin, having admired the frescoes, marbles and coloured mosaics in Italy, had defended its use.

Street's interest in colour has already been discussed. Scott, too, was in favour of using it but he was a bit more cautious. He wrote:

I would... endeavour to give warmth and richness to the architecture by the introduction, *to a limited extent*, of materials of varied color.²⁶

But he warned:

Bad designs or bad carving are offensive enough; but bad colouring is utterly detestable and makes a building, which without it might be harmless, absolutely intolerable.²⁷

Furthermore, he was less than optimistic about the potential of brick: "No material will redeem a bad design but brick has a tendency to shew its defect to the worst advantage."²⁸ Still he recommended constructional polychromy and went into considerable detail about the nature of various colours and kinds of brick and how one colour should be relieved by another. "Red brick," he pointed out "... holds out against soot better" and can be cleaned with sand and water. He liked it best when used with yellow brick.²⁹

The dialogue about colour continued over a long period. In the *Builder* of 1854 an anonymous article appeared entitled "On Colour and its use in Architecture..." which gave the kind of advice that Hay appears to have followed in his design. In the article it was proposed that the use of the three primary colours should be taken into account in all good designs. Blue will be found in the sky (at least on good days), so in architectural monuments it is best to combine red and yellow. There are many arguments in favour of gold tones for background. In Hay's drawing the yellow beige wash which covers most of the facade falls into this category. But red should be used with restraint because:

... of all the colours, (red) is undoubtedly the most beautiful; ... but so are its dangers.... It is the colour which is most lovely in its tender bloom, becomes horrible and even frightening in its excess.³⁰

The pink wash on the drawing is used with a delicate restraint to indicate red brick detail over the windows and appears again in stripes across the front and in the interior of the Yorkville Town Hall (Fig. 4). There is something rather tentative and experimental about the design. Hay used little colour in his other buildings in Toronto and the remainder of his drawings show more assurance. It is perhaps also significant that some drawings by him are signed boldly in black ink and dated, and this is true even of one project which was never constructed. The drawings for the Gould Presbyterian Church, also in the Langley Collection

are more formal than those for the Town Hall, the pen lines are finer and the washes more subdued in colour. This is also true of a set of drawings of a proposed tower for Trinity College, dated 1858, now in the Trinity College archives at the University of Toronto.

The drawings for the Yorkville Town Hall, unusual in Hay's career, are an interesting illustration of the translation of current British tastes to Canadian soil. The building must also be related to the wave of High Victorian Gothic Revival buildings designed by architects from the British Isles in the 1850's for Canadian cities. The most obvious examples are University College by Cumberland and Storm (1856), and Fuller and Jones' Parliament Buildings in Ottawa.

Although it has not survived to our day the Town Hall was an important landmark and identifying feature of Yorkville although not everyone liked it. Henry Scadding who could see it from his window, in a house also designed by Hay, wrote:

The singular Hotel de Ville which in modern times distinguishes Yorkville has a Flemish look. It might have strayed hither from Ghent. Nevertheless as seen from numerous points of view it cannot be characterized as picturesque or in harmony with its surroundings.³¹

It had indeed strayed hither from a number of European cities but the surroundings eventually changed somewhat to be more in harmony with it. The Gothic Revival continued with the construction of St. Paul's Methodist Church (Fig. 6) at the corner of Yonge and Davenport and with the Firehall recalling the Town Hall in its patterns of coloured brick on the facade. The Town Hall also had to adapt to new uses as the village of Yorkville was soon annexed by the city of Toronto. One photograph taken after 1860 shows street car tracks in front of the building (Fig. 7) and another shows the middle doorway in use as entrance to the Street Railway Depot (Fig. 8). Between 1883 and 1907 the Council room served as a public library and later the building was used as the Armouries of the Yorkville Company of York Rangers. After the unfortunate fire and demolition of the building (1941-42) the original coat of arms was moved to the Fire Hall.

The Fire Hall is not the only remnant of constructional polychromy in the area. There are a number of store fronts and houses with bricks above the windows in patterns of contrasting colours. Some of these have recently come to life again with the removal of whitewash applied over the decades. Coloured brick survives as a hallmark of Canada's Gothic Revival although it has had to compete with the Classic Revival of the first half of this century as exemplified in the Public Library of 1909 and the Masonic Hall of 1919 that replaced St. Paul's, and now competes with the huge skyscrapers which line Bloor Street and encroach upon the once small village.

Anita C. Makler
 Graduate Student
 Department of Fine Art
 University of Toronto
 Toronto, Ont.

Notes:

¹ Henry SCADDING, *Toronto of Old* (1873; rpt. abridged, Toronto: 1966), p. 307.

² *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³ Yorkville Council minutes (typescript) 16 June 1953 #83. A petition signed by 103 inhabitants of the village "praying for the purchase of the block of land between Severns Brewery and West's houses for a market (deferred)."

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17 March 1856.

⁵ T. A. REED, "Toronto's Early Architects; Many fine Building still Standing," *JRAIC*, 27/2 (Feb. 1950), p. 46.

⁶ Council minutes, 28 November 1859 #449. William McGinnis had also built an Engine House for the Council 28 July 1857, #140.

⁷ Langley, who, as we have suggested, may have done some of the draughting, later became a popular architect in Ontario. Constructional polychromy was the hallmark of his style.

⁸ All the biographical information of William Hay is from F. H. ARMSTRONG, (unpublished ms.). It is interesting that REED says Hay was sent to oversee Government Buildings in St. John's, Newfoundland and Halifax, Nova Scotia, but does not mention St. John the Baptist.

⁹ Hay's most notable work after his return to Edinburgh in 1861 was his work on the restoration of St. Giles' Cathedral in that city.

¹⁰ George Edmund STREET, *Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages* (1st ed. 1855; London: 1974), p. 392.

¹¹ SCADDING, p. 307.

¹² STREET, p. 266, Fig. 44, North Transept of the Cathedral at Cremona, p. 308, Fig. 57, Palazzo Publico, Piacenza. Nearly all of the drawings show uses of constructional polychromy, or details recommended by Street.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁵ STREET, "The Churches of Lubeck," *The Ecclesiologist*, XVI (London: 1855), p. 35.

¹⁶ STREET, "Description of New Town Hall at Hamburg by Mr. Scott," *The Ecclesiologist*, XVI (London: 1855), p. 119.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*



Fig. 5. View of the Yorkville Town Hall, ca. 1907. (Photo: Metropolitan Toronto Library Board)



Fig. 6. St. Paul's Methodist Church. (Photo: T. A. Reed Coll., Metropolitan Toronto Library Board)



Fig. 7. View of the Yorkville Town Hall in the 1860's. (Photo: Metropolitan Toronto Library Board)

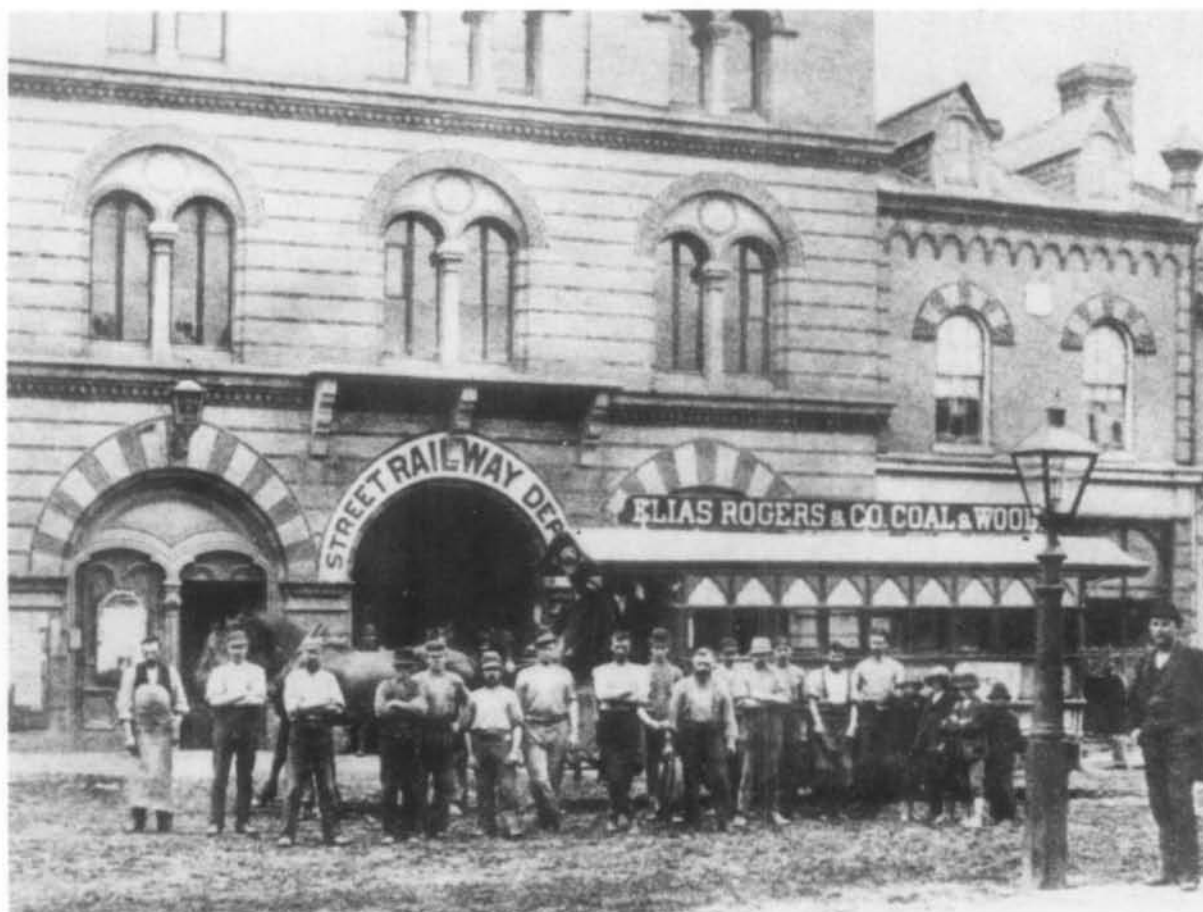


Fig. 8. View of the Yorkville Town Hall in the 1870's (?). (Photo: T. A. Reed Coll., Metropolitan Toronto Library Board)

- ¹⁸ George Gilbert SCOTT, *Remarks on Secular and Domestic Architecture* (1st ed., 1856 London: 1858), p. 191.
- ¹⁹ *The Ecclesiologist*, XIX (London: 1858), p. 17.
- ²⁰ SCOTT, pp. 201-02.
- ²¹ Benjamin BUCKNALL (trans.), *Discourses on Architecture by Viollet-le-Duc* (1st ed. 1889; London: 1959), p. 118.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ²³ James F. WHITE, *The Cambridge Movement* (Cambridge: 1962), p. 50.
- ²⁴ SCOTT, p. 30.
- ²⁵ PETIT, "Architectural Studies in France," *The Builder*, XII (Sept. 1854), p. 469.
- ²⁶ SCOTT, p. 198.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- ³⁰ Anon., "On Colour and its use in Architecture..." *The Builder*, XII (1854), p. 507.
- ³¹ SCADDING, pp. 299-300.