

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

EXPLORING VANCOUVER 2

H. Kalman and J. Roaf (photography)
Univ. of British Columbia Press,
Vancouver
304 pp., 375 ill., paperback \$7.95

Harold Kalman's lively text and John Roaf's commendable photographs will certainly attract those with an interest in architecture to an "active participation" in the city-scape of Vancouver. The striking front cover, illustrating the Hudson's Bay Company Store ("Chicagoan," begun 1913) and Sear's Tower (tame post-Modernism, 1974) reflected in the smoked glass skin of the Pacific Centre ("Mieseian," 1969), a roll-call of the major commercial styles to be found in Vancouver, straightway whets the appetite and, as Kalman rightly exhorts in the "Introduction," reminds the pedestrian to "remain alert" for the myriad visual experiences of the city. On the back cover are schematic maps holding out the promise of many such sights, supported by the considerable variety of architectural designs obvious from a brisk march through the generously illustrated pages of the book.

The emphasis on the visual, essential in a popular guide, is sustained in a series of fine plates which precede the "Introduction" and in another group which separates the "Glossary" and "Bibliography" from the "Indices." These provide a remarkably good survey of the historical range, character and texture of Vancouver architecture and represent the only major addition to the first edition of 1974. Following the "Introduction" comes the first of six walking and four driving tours, appropriately starting in "Gastown," the original nucleus of the city, and ending atop Burnaby Mountain at the Simon Fraser University, its distant acropolis if not necessarily its chief temple of learning. The eager tourist is supplied with annotated maps of his impending itineraries and brief histories of the respective areas, written,

it would appear, with his impatience in mind. That is assuaged by a succession of informative and pithy commentaries on a selection of the more remarkable buildings situated along the various beats and served by Roaf's photographs which, as Kalman fairly claims, render the book "an illustrated record" for the stationary or distant student. This more scholarly side is continued by the data provided on the architects, dates and methods of construction, styles and sources and sundry points of architectural interest. The amateur can consult the "Glossary" when temporarily halted by a technical or historical term, loitering, as it were, along his literary route. He is then invited further into the realm of the professional student by a sensible "Selected Bibliography" on the history of architecture, the province and the city. Lastly he can retrace his steps through the "Architect" and "General Indices."

Exploring Vancouver 2 is a handsome and reasonably priced book. The University of British Columbia Press has produced a guide with a binding that permits full exposure of the pages and promises to survive many metres of exploration. Moreover it is still sufficiently small to be held in the hand or stowed, only briefly of course, in the mackintosh pocket. Given the obvious differences in quantity if not also the quality of architecture in the cities, it deserves to join the ranks of the "tall" walking guides published in the United States, beginning with Gebhard and Winter's *Guide to Architecture in Los Angeles and Southern California* (Santa Barbara, 1965 and 1977). In endeavouring to ensure that those architectural historians attending a conference in the "City of the Angels" did not overlook most of the fascinating buildings which intersperse its profligate freeways, Gebhard and Winter created an admirable format clearly adopted by Kalman and Roaf. Unlike their Californian progenitors, however, they

have limited the growth of this revised and enlarged edition. Apart from the groups of photographs mentioned above, and minor alterations to the text, the additional material comprises some twenty-two new buildings and a half-dozen new photographs. Nor, happily, is the list of Vancouver demolitions quite so gruesome, although that foe of the humane city, Mammon, still stalks the streets of Vancouver as elsewhere.

There exist, perhaps, some less positive differences between *Exploring Vancouver 2* and the latest edition of Gebhard and Winter's *Guide*. The uninitiated tourist of Vancouver does not enjoy the benefit of a resumé of the changing pattern of the architectural styles that have influenced its development over the last hundred years. His comprehension would also be enhanced by a fuller review of the planning policies operating in Vancouver since its incorporation in April 1886. As Kalman notes, the activities of realtors, from the directors of the C.P.R. upward, or downward, have largely determined its present appearance. Against their habitual severely restricted aims, some more enlightened officials and citizens' groups have fought, aided, in a wider topographical context, by the sublime forms massed by the "Divine Architect." One photograph absent from the book is that of the view of the central area from the Spanish Banks wherein the tower blocks, haphazardly placed and generally tawdry close up, almost seem to have been arranged so as to create a climax about the crest of Burrard Street: A Western San Gimignano, so to speak, basking in the gratuitous glory of the encircling mountains.

Two other suggestions for the compilation of the "Introduction" to future editions may be offered here. The first is for the insertion of material on the economic, sociological and cultural reasons behind the increasing significance assumed by the city in both the Canadian and North American context over the last fifteen years. The second is a review of those talented architects who have

been or are numbered among its citizens. While Kalman's disinclinations to elevate "architect-designed buildings on a special pedestal" is understandable (and a guide-book so constituted would become an amputated and lopsided history of architecture), the text could bear a somewhat fuller treatment of the leading Vancouver-based architects and firms. The evident quality and independence of their best work sustains the author's contention that the local "buildings should not be judged on whether they are good Toronto or bad Toronto." When Vancouver was still a small but wealthy outpost of Empire, Samuel Macclure and his partner Cecil Fox (a pupil of C.F.A. Voysey) designed a number of fine houses (the five most important are listed by Kalman) that achieve a distinctive blend of contemporary American and English domestic architecture. More recently, Arthur Erickson, formerly in partnership with Geoffrey Massey, has evolved a sensitive and, where applicable, monumental interpretation of fundamental eastern and western architectural traditions in a series of public and private buildings. He has carried that more picturesque and imaginative, yet orderly style, to Toronto and Ottawa, nominally the financial and bureaucratic capitals of Canada; these days it is not only oil and natural gas that flow eastward! Indeed, one lacuna in this second edition is a photograph of Erickson's new Courthouse complex. Whatever the justice of his attempt to popularize the Law by integrating the Courts (and some government offices) into a bevy of attractive public spaces, the scheme is an intriguing inversion of the prevailing pattern of urban redevelopment. Where the norm is still for tall and impersonal structures, it is low, inviting and verdant; the great sloping glass roof and descending reflecting pools literally drawing down the sky and sun to the pedestrian level. Even if the edition could not have been delayed for a photograph of the Courthouse complex, others of Erickson's West Vancouver houses de-

serve inclusion, such as the Graham and Eppich houses. As to the firms, an appraisal of the McCarter and Nairne, and variously named Sharp, Thompson, Berwick and Pratt partnerships would, for example, broaden the account of the growth of Vancouver. Both have participated in this process with considerable success, the latter since the 1920's, mainly by localising current North American architectural fashions.

One Parthian shot regarding the overall estimation of the city afforded by Kalman: a description of the local environment and climate, or climates (the average annual rainfall is much higher in North Vancouver than elsewhere) would help the visitor or student to assess better "how well" local "designers have met these conditions," which he rightly considers to be basic to the just criticism of architecture.

Turning to the commentaries, additional information on the relative efficiency of the larger commercial structures would not have been misplaced. This would permit a more complete comparison of, say, the MacMillan Bloedel and Royal Centre blocks, to the advantage of the former according to the building manager, although he acknowledges the existence of maintenance problems deriving from the concrete construction and articulation. That is not to suggest that Kalman does not address himself to functional issues, as exemplified in a nicely ironic piece about the General Post Office, replete with an abandoned underground conveyor belt to the C.P.R. Station and an unused rooftop heliport. The factual material in the commentaries is consistently reliable and such alterations as could be proposed are relatively inconsequential. For instance, the term "Neoclassical Revival" seems less appropriate than "Academic Classicism" or even "Beaux Arts" to define the Merchants' Bank or F.M. Rattenbury's Provincial Court House (the first design for which newly discovered correspondence indicates was drawn in 1903 and not 1906.)

The selection of buildings, no less than terminology, involves personal preference and this reviewer would have been inclined to add some buildings to the present list. Among these are the suave, round-edged aluminum and glass office tower at 1090 West Georgia; the triangular brick B.C. Central Credit Union Building erected at one end of the False Creek redevelopment zone, between the approach roads to the Granville and Burrard Bridges; the "Mendelsohnian" Royal Bank at Granville and Broadway; the fortified glasshouse Imperial Bank of Commerce at the intersection of 10th and Sasamat (there are sterling Bank branch buildings in the city); and, fearful for its future, a modest but pleasantly quirky apartment block in the West End, Gilford Court, adjacent to the Sylvia Hotel. Nor is this reviewer as enthusiastic about the architectural quality of the domestic structures and use of space in the False Creek Development. Also he can add one more candidate for the "In Memoriam" section: the B.T. Rogers Coach House, bulldozed to "create" a parking lot for the restaurant which now occupies the Rogers mansion, with the prospect of yet another poorly constructed condominium in the future. To that category might also be committed the aborted embryo of Erickson's boldly elevated Federal Office project.

Finally, it should be stressed that the above remarks are more by way of suggestions for revisions to a third edition than criticisms of the second. Kalman and Roaf have compiled an admirable literary and visual portrayal of Vancouver's "urban geography."

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