

REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

**The Lost Craft of Ornamented
Architecture: Canadian Architectural
Drawings, 1850-1930**

Jean B. WEIR

Dalhousie Art Gallery, Dalhousie
University, 1983

96 pp., 2 colour, 67 b/w illus., \$10.00

**Percy Erskine Nobbs: Architecte,
Artiste, Artisan/Architect, Artist,
Craftsman**

Susan WAGG

McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982

99 pp., 4 colour, 30 b/w illus., \$12.95

The rise of a Post-Modern architecture over the past decade and the rapid growth of public interest in architectural preservation have sparked a broad renewal of interest in the traditional vocabulary of architecture. It is a vocabulary in which ornament plays a predominant role and thus the appearance of Dr. Jean Weir's *The Lost Craft of Ornamented Architecture: Canadian Architectural Drawings, 1850-1930*, is timely. In this catalogue of an exhibition which sought to bring to light "for public consumption" a representative portion of "the volumes of architectural drawings stacked, filed and hidden away in numerous archival collections,"¹ Dr. Weir presents nearly ninety works by some twenty-three architects whose practice was wholly, or at least significantly, Canadian.

The remarkable variety of styles and the multiplicity of ends which architectural drawing must serve are well illustrated by the selected works, which include everything from full-scale working drawings by Frederick Cumberland, to David Dick's

miniscule elevation sketches, to a J.W. Hopkins presentation drawing containing a vignette of nineteenth-century street life. As a reflection of more recent practice, works by John Parkin and Ron Thom are also included. Indeed, were it not for the at times murky quality of some of the reproductions and the unfortunate loss of detail as a result of the extreme reduction necessary for the reproduction of many of the drawings, Weir's discussion and the accompanying illustrations could serve as a useful primer on the subject.

Architectural drawing, however, is not Weir's sole concern. As the catalogue's double-barrelled title suggests, architectural drawing is linked to the phenomenon of ornamented architecture. Weir suggests that they share a common origin in the early nineteenth-century transformation of architecture into a professional practice in which drawing achieved a new importance as a means of communication between architect and client and between architect and builder. This assumed link between ornament and drawing is further underlined by what Weir suggests is the common circumstance of their demise. As she observes, "the art of manually executed drawing ended when the use of ornament was eliminated by International Modernism and when mechanical methods of delineation were generally adopted after 1940."²

While this is a thought-provoking thesis, it remains, in the context of Weir's discussion, insufficiently developed to be convincing, particularly as it ignores the increasing tendency throughout the second half of the nineteenth, and into the early twentieth century, for architectural theory and criticism to oppose or qualify the use of ornament.

Weir's discussion of ornament suffers from other limitations as well. In what is perhaps a necessary attempt to sidestep discussion of what often seem the bewildering succession of schools and styles characteristic of nineteenth-century architecture, she postulates the existence of a unified stylistic period "characterized by the prominent use of ornament, rather than structural elements to achieve architectural distinctiveness."³ However, in an unfortunate muddle of art historical nomenclature, this stylistic period is referred to as the "early modern ornamented period" or even as the "early modern style,"⁴ an appellation which more usually serves to describe the early production of Le Corbusier than of Charles Barry.

More regrettable, though, is the restricted concept of ornament underlying the discussion, a concept limited almost exclusively to the monochromatic carved stone facade. While occasional reference is made to "carpenter-made" wood ornament, such revolutionary developments as the introduction of new building materials, particularly cast-iron, and of the impact of the industrial mass production of ornament, are almost wholly neglected, despite the presence among the illustrations accompanying the text of works embodying and reflecting these new concerns.

Ignoring these important developments, Weir focusses instead on theoretical and critical attitudes toward ornament. Perhaps as a consequence of both the ambitious scope of her undertaking and of the present seminal state of studies in Canadian architectural history, this discussion devolves almost wholly upon critical and theoretical developments outside of Canada to which examples drawn from Canadian architectural practice are appended as a minor subtext. While Weir's plaint that "a history of Canadian architecture is badly needed"⁵ must be viewed sympathetically, the impor-

tant issue of the Canadian response to, and articulation of, architectural theory remains largely unexamined and undefined. Canadian architectural practice remains, as it were, lost somewhere between the widely separated extremes of an architecture based, on the one hand, upon the uninformed use of pattern books and, on the other, upon an informed and knowledgeable commitment to articulated theoretical positions and first principles.

These shortcomings underline the urgent need for studies in Canadian architectural history which, while perhaps necessarily of more limited scope, will examine these crucial issues. Thus it is that Susan Wagg's exhibition catalogue, *Percy Erskine Nobbs: Architecte, Artiste, Artisan/Architect, Artist, Craftsman*, is a particularly welcome addition to the literature.

In terms of the polarities of architectural practice outlined above, Percy Nobbs lies at the second extreme. Not only an accomplished architect, Nobbs was a writer, a teacher and the articulate spokesman of a well-defined attitude toward architecture and its allied arts and crafts. Wagg's study is useful not only in furthering the understanding of an important figure in our architectural history, but also in furthering the understanding of the growth and evolution of architectural thought in Canada.

Nobbs' formation as an architect in the Scotland of the 1890's under the tutelage of Robert Lorimer, a follower of William Morris and of the English Arts and Crafts movement, left its impression upon the young architect. Vitally preoccupied as it was with a concern for craftsmanship, the nuance of local building materials, and sensitivity to locale and to vernacular architecture, and embracing a humanistic concern with the social responsibilities of architecture, the Arts and Crafts movement was predisposed to the development of an in-

digenous architecture in a way that simple importations of style were not.

Brought to Canada in 1903 as the MacDonald Professor of Architecture at McGill University, Nobbs soon combined his professorial responsibilities with those of a professional practice that was to continue for more than forty years. In her sensitive analysis of Nobbs' diverse journalistic, artistic and architectural output Wagg traces the development of his strong commitment to the values and ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement as they took root and grew in the Canadian context. Whether in his adaptation of traditional French Canadian forms and building practices in his 1922 A.H. Scott house, in his proposal for handcrafted alternatives to commercial plasterwork in a 1904 article in *Canadian Architect and Builder*, or in his campaign for better housing for the poor as Co-Chairman of the Montreal Slum Clearance and Rehousing Committee during the Great Depression, Nobbs provided a constant demonstration in his career of what he referred to as the "amalgam of talents" necessary for the practice of architecture.⁶

It was an amalgam of talents which grew out of the interaction of three elements: the ideals and concerns of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, the particular demands and conditions of the Canadian context, and the unique personality of Percy Nobbs. In her portrayal and analysis Wagg has drawn not only upon the architect's extensive literary, artistic and architectural output, but upon interviews with family, colleagues and clients to produce a work that is not only of significant scholarly merit, but that is a highly readable and sympathetic portrait as well. However, in light of the large body of writing produced by Nobbs, and particularly as several pseudonymous articles have been attributed to him, a bibliography would

have been a welcome inclusion.

The catalogue contains a large selection of colour plates and illustrations of Nobbs' work. Some of these, particularly the plans and large-scale views, lamentably suffer from such a loss of detail in reduction and reproduction as to be almost wholly unreadable. This selection is, however, judicious and serves as a welcome visual correlate to the text, revealing Nobbs' abilities as an architect, planner, watercolourist and craftsman.

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Notes

¹ Linda J. MILROD, "Preface," in Jean B. WEIR, *The Lost Craft of Ornamented Architecture: Canadian Architectural Drawings, 1850-1930* (Dalhousie Art Gallery, Dalhousie University, 1983), p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, WEIR, p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23, n. 33.

⁶ Quoted in Susan WAGG, *Percy Erskine Nobbs: Architecte, Artiste, Artisan/Architect, Artist, Craftsman* (Kingston and Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982), p. 67.