

Confederation Centre Of The Arts: A 1960s National Historic Site

by Geneviève Charrois

...“[The Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building] is a tribute to those famous men who founded our Confederation. But it is also dedicated to the fostering of those things that enrich the mind and delight the heart, those intangible but precious things that give meaning to a society and help create from it a civilization and a culture.”

Prime Minister L. B. Pearson, Opening Ceremonies for the Confederation Centre of the Arts, October 6, 1964

Charlottetown’s Confederation Centre of the Arts is a cultural complex that was built as a memorial to the Fathers of Confederation. It was conceived to commemorate Canada’s origins and its development as a nation, and to inspire Canadians by providing a suitable location for celebrating their heritage through the arts.

On June 3, 2003, this showcase of Canadian culture became a national historic site, based on three primary attributes:

- The Confederation Centre of the Arts exemplifies Canadian cultural complexes of the 1960s dedicated to the performing arts, many of which were built to mark Canada’s centennial celebrations.
- It showcases a number of technological advances of its time; and
- It is a superior example of Brutalist architecture in Canada.

A Cultural Complex From The 1960s

In the 1950s, the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, more commonly known as the Massey Commission, pointed out, among other things, the shortage of performance halls in Canada. This set the stage for an unprecedented increase in arts-related initiatives. The plethora of planned celebrations commemorating the centennial of Canada’s confederation and the events that led up to it (such as the first Conference of the Fathers of Confederation in Charlottetown in 1864) drew attention to the lack of suitable venues for cultural events and gave rise to the construction of a Canada-wide network of new cultural centres for the performing arts during the 1960s.

The Confederation Centre of the Arts project first saw the light of day during this ebullient era. The Fathers of Confederation Memorial Citizens’ Foundation, with all the provinces and territories represented through its 16 members, was established on May 12, 1961, to garner Canada-wide support for the project’s merits. Taking to heart the Massey Commission’s recommendations for architecture, the Foundation launched an architectural competition for a structure that would stand as a memorial to the Fathers of Confederation. The winner of the competition was the renowned Montréal architectural firm Affleck, Desbarats, Dimakopoulos, Lebensold & Sise.

The Centre’s official opening on October 6, 1964, in the presence of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Canada’s then-Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson, was, for Charlottetown, the culmination of a year that commemorated the centennial of that first gathering of the Fathers of Confederation. Among other things, it was the first memorial ever erected in their memory and the first building whose construction was paid for—in the main—by the 11 Canadian governments together.

Planning The Design

The Confederation Centre of the Arts is strategically located in the heart of Charlottetown. It sits adjacent to Province House, itself a national historic site dating from 1847 and the location of that first Conference of the Fathers of Confederation in 1864. It is built on the site of Charlottetown's last market building, which burned down in 1958, and an abandoned post office building (which was demolished to make room for the project).

One of the challenges facing the architects in designing the Centre was to devise a plan that would blend in with the scale of the surrounding urban fabric. To accomplish this step they separated the building into visually distinct

components whose proportions were in keeping with those of Province House. The end result was four distinct pavilions, each with its own character, while projecting the impression of a unified whole: a theatre, a museum/art gallery, a memorial to the Fathers of Confederation (Memorial Hall) and a library—with the gallery, library and theatre arranged in the shape of a horseshoe around the memorial. All are connected by an interior pedestrian concourse and exterior plazas.

In developing the design according to the competition guidelines, the Montréal architects paid special attention to the close relationships between the buildings' functions, their accessibility to one another and the possibility of isolating specific areas. Drawing on their collective experience (the firm could already lay claim to having designed the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver), the architects used the functional requirements for a single building as a starting point. From there, they carved the space into visually separate yet functionally interconnected units without compromising the architectural integrity of the overall project.

Technical Features

At the time of its creation, the Confederation Centre of the Arts—a multi-purpose cultural complex with a hall dedicated to the performing arts—was considered state-of-the-art in terms of its technology.

Among the technological challenges was the requirement for a modifiable stage in the performance hall, known today as the Main Stage Theatre. It had to be possible to convert the stage from a traditional or open layout, with seats arranged in a semi-circle, to one with a proscenium, which requires that the space be centralized. To meet this requirement, the consultant, George Izenour, developed an adjustable system, which he described as the first attempt ever to structurally and mechanically modify an auditorium of this size to serve two such diverse layouts. Izenour's solution placed rectangular panels vertically along the walls to form a conventional theatre space. The panels could be moved to reduce the hall laterally as needed, to meet the requirements of a proscenium. He incorporated within the design the capability of lowering the first six rows of seats and the orchestra pit. This system is still in use today, except for the side panels, which now remain in place along the walls.

The performance hall's acoustics presented another tricky challenge. Translucent cloud-shaped sculptures, called baldacchino by their designer, Gérard Tremblay, were created to the specifications of acoustics consultants

David L. Klepper and Russell Johnson de Bolt of Beranek and Newman Inc. The baldacchino enhanced the auditory clarity in the room, balancing the sound throughout the space and reflecting the sound from the speakers. The side walls were designed as a system of adjustable slats, also covered in a sound-reflecting material.

Lighting the complex was equally daunting. The task of developing a concept for the building's lighting system fell to William M. C. Lam. In his design, Lam succeeded in enhancing the simple, monumental character of the Centre. He interpreted the architectural concept as emerging from the mezzanine level that, given the usual weather conditions in Charlottetown, is a high-traffic area most of the year. Not only was the effect attractive, it also emphasized the two-level horizontal circulation that is an important feature of the complex. The lighting remains outstanding after dark, especially in the area of the memorial that stands illuminated in all its splendour.

Brutalist Architecture

The Confederation Centre of the Arts, with its Nova Scotia Wallace sandstone exterior, is also noteworthy for its Modernist architecture of the Brutalist Style influenced by the work of architect Louis Kahn. Brutalism was the product of a second generation of so-called Modernist architects, primarily European, who after World War II and during the 1950s displayed great variety in design and strong individuality.

It was the work of Louis Kahn and the architects in England's New Brutalism movement that would popularize this new trend. The trend had itself been highly influenced by the later works of Le Corbusier (the term Brutalism originates from his "béton brut" meaning "raw concrete") and the work of avant-garde artists like Jean Dubuffet.

Brutalist architecture rejected the luminous, ethereal qualities of the International Style in favour of more monolithic forms with a focus on the rough beauty and strength of concrete. Walls in Brutalist architecture were usually load-bearing concrete walls whose surface textures played a predominant role in the design and accentuated the mass of the building. The rough surfaces of these buildings were set with very few windows, often sealed, emphasizing the feeling of an enclosed, protective environment.

Still, pure Brutalist expression was not devoid of more finely worked material, some with detailed surfaces and carvings (Charlottetown's Confederation Centre is itself just such a building, with its exterior of stone, rather than concrete, expressing a refined form of the genre). The layout plans of Brutalist buildings are often complex, typified by an external irregularity and by the overlapping of various masses. The style affords flexibility of layout, allowing diverse activities to take place simultaneously.

The Brutalist Style influenced the architecture of many civic and cultural complexes in Canada between 1960 and 1970 (the National Arts Centre in Ottawa is a case in point). Architecturally, the Confederation Centre of the Arts is particularly interesting. The walls are designed as solid, continuous surfaces up to the corners, where the windows are situated (a few windows also figure high in the walls of the gallery/museum). This window arrangement is ideal for activities taking place inside the complex, because the solid walls, so vital in the performance hall, also provide excellent spaces in the gallery/museum, while the windows afford the requisite indirect natural light in the exhibition rooms.

This apparently functional choice also creates very interesting spaces, where the beauty and monumental nature of the rooms are enhanced by the uplifting effect of the windows in the corners. The memorial, whose glass roof consists of a series of skylights set in a pyramidal diamond shape, is unique in the complex—striking, while at the same time well suited to its setting.

For those of us working toward the preservation of our modern heritage, and indeed for all supporters of this worthy cause, the heritage designation of this important building of the Modernist style (coming several years after the first national designation of a Modernist building—the Binning residence in West Vancouver) augurs well for the future. It can be expected that other cultural institutions with high-quality Modernist buildings will now be encouraged to put forward other examples of this architectural legacy. It is also an indication that Canadians are ready to acknowledge the architectural works created during this exuberant period of their history when architects dared to introduce a new style of architecture and, in so doing, created masterpieces.

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Monolithic forms make up the Brutalist architecture of the Confederation Centre of the Arts.

