

Middle-Aged Modern: The Challenges Of Recent Heritage

by James Ashby

For Canadians of the baby boom generation, it may be difficult to think of the homes, schools, and shopping centres from their youth as heritage buildings. However, as time passes we are coming to realize that this period in our history was one of extraordinary growth, optimism and change in Canada, and that these buildings and landscapes reflect the values of that era. This was highlighted in the recent negative reaction to a new building at Trent University in Peterborough. Architect Ronald J. Thom's 1960s campus is considered a masterpiece of modern Canadian design. The debate about its stewardship is evidence that owners and institutions need to proceed with extreme sensitivity as they struggle to accommodate continued use and renewal. For the heritage community, the buildings of the modern era are an emerging issue and one of increasing urgency. This article focuses on the architectural legacy of the 1950s to the 1970s in Canada and its particular challenges for heritage conservation.

In Canada, it was immigration, economic growth, and urban expansion that characterized the post-war era. During this period, Canadians embraced modernity: a faith in the future that was unfettered from the past. A new generation of Canadian designers, along with émigré architects and a few international luminaries, found unprecedented opportunities to explore new ideas. They adopted the principles of the Modern Movement, a design philosophy that advocated a break from historic tradition, embraced technological and social change, and achieved a new aesthetic vision. The buildings and landscapes from this period in Canada reflect both international currents and regional explorations in architecture and urban design.

The legacy of this period is extensive and incredibly varied. Examples of the expansion of our transportation infrastructure are Montréal's celebrated Metro system, Ottawa's railway station, and airports in cities such as Winnipeg. There were bold new urban complexes exemplified by the Toronto-Dominion Centre and Robson Square in Vancouver. Civic monuments included modern city halls in Edmonton, Hamilton, and other cities. A host of notable new academic communities sprang up, including Simon Fraser University and Toronto's Scarborough College. Performing arts facilities from the period include Toronto's O'Keefe Centre, Montréal's Place des Arts and Ottawa's National Arts Centre. There are remarkable places of worship, such as the Church of the Precious Blood in St. Boniface. There were internationally recognized experiments in urban planning, like Toronto's Don Mills. Centennial projects proliferated, among them the celebrated Habitat '67. In addition, there were cold-war defence structures, sports facilities, industrial buildings, and even drive-in theatres. During the post-war era, modernization changed the way Canadians lived. In fact, virtually every community in the country was transformed to some extent.

With the passing of time, we are beginning to view these familiar places in our communities with a more critical eye. In some cases, these bold experiments failed to create humane environments. On the other hand, we admire some modern buildings for their courageous, confident, and expressive design. We are beginning to understand that while these places are not very old, they embody cultural values that reflect unprecedented optimism. The recognition of the significance of these buildings is evident in the activities occurring across the country. In Vancouver, Docomomo-BC has produced a CD-Rom that documents modern architects and their buildings. (Docomomo is an acronym for "Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement"—an international advocacy group. There are three working parties in Canada: British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec.) The Winnipeg Architecture Foundation has been recording interviews of architects who practiced during the post-war period.

The most recent Doors Open event in Toronto celebrated modern heritage as its theme. Docomomo

Québec recently participated in a symposium on Place Ville-Marie, which is under threat of alteration. In Halifax, *Atlantic Modern: The Architecture of the Atlantic Provinces, 1950-2000*, edited by Steven Mannell, has just been published. These are just a few examples of the growing interest among the professional and academic communities—and the general public—in the built heritage of the modern era in Canada.

The question for the heritage community is: Do we need to think differently about the buildings and landscapes of the modern era with respect to conservation? Our conservation approaches in Canada were originally developed for earlier heritage places, such as the Halifax citadel. In recent years new approaches have emerged to address a broader view, one that includes industrial heritage sites and cultural landscapes like Saskatchewan's Claybank brick plant or Ontario's Rideau Canal. Can these same conservation approaches equally apply to the built heritage of the modern era, exemplified by Lethbridge University in Alberta or Montréal's Place Bonaventure? To answer that question we need to identify and examine those particular challenges or issues that arise with the buildings and landscapes of the more recent past.

One major challenge is the greater risk of alteration and demolition. Many modern buildings have yet to be identified, designated, or legally protected. This lack of recognition is related to the general lack of public understanding of and appreciation for Modernist designs. Buildings from this period are often perceived as ugly, cold, or impersonal—although this perception is beginning to change. Exacerbating this negative impression is the fact that many of them are too young to have benefited from a good maintenance and upgrade plan. When these buildings reach about forty years of age, they are often shabby and run-down. In some cases it is the limited life span of the building materials themselves that makes these structures more susceptible to alterations.

Another challenge is identifying and evaluating those places that are worth conserving. The volume of potential sites is overwhelming. The first question asked of any site being considered for preservation is: Why is it important? For buildings of the post-war era—a period whose heritage has not been extensively studied—this can be a difficult question to answer. While the situation is changing, there remains a lot of research and analysis to be carried out, and messages to be communicated. We also need to revisit evaluation methods developed to appraise nineteenth-century heritage; they are not always easy to apply to more recent heritage sites.

The urgency to document the built heritage of the modern era is another aspect that sets it apart. Not only are these buildings at greater risk, but we are losing a whole generation of people who were involved with building modern Canada. Every few months we read another obituary. As these architects, designers, and patrons pass away, not only do we lose their stories, but in some cases their architectural drawings, models, and records as well. The architects who are still among us have a lot to teach us about this dynamic period.

There is also the challenge of diversity in the heritage of the modern era. While it is tempting to make generalizations about modern architecture and the possible approaches to its conservation, the patrimony of the post-war era is broad and varied. Modernism valued the individual expression of the architect, and this resulted in a wide range of approaches and forms of expression. International Style, Expressionism, Functionalism, and Brutalism are among a few of the titles that architectural historians are using to describe different design approaches within the Modern Movement.

Other conservation challenges are related to the shortcomings of the modern era itself. In the post-war period, new utopian ideals emerged for how cities would function. The modern complexes that resulted,

however, are often in conflict with traditional settlement patterns, neighbouring streets, and adjacent buildings. Some modern buildings are inappropriate in scale for their surroundings. Furthermore, many of the 1960s complexes tend to focus inward, away from street-level activity. While there may have been a grand utopian vision, sometimes the building experiments failed. The challenge lies in determining how to conserve what is best, while at the same time connecting these buildings with their surroundings.

Modern materials and construction technology are also major considerations for conservation. Many of the innovative materials developed during World War II were marketed to the building industry in the years that followed (e.g. plywood and porcelain-enamelled steel), resulting in a whole new menu of building products. This new generation of building materials has created difficulties for materials conservation, as regards both repair and replacement. While heritage conservation professionals have methods for preserving traditional materials like stone, bronze, or wood, they are still developing techniques for handling modern materials like concrete or aluminium. Some people have even questioned whether modern building materials should be conserved, arguing instead that it is the aesthetic appearance of the building that is most important.

As these buildings get older, conserving the patina of age becomes yet another challenge. It has been suggested that modern buildings looked their best in the black-and-white photographs of their inauguration. Should we strive to have them appear as they did then, or should they be allowed to age gracefully? This is a question that is being hotly debated among conservation professionals.

What is encouraging about these numerous challenges is that they are forcing the heritage community to reconsider its preconceptions. In past years, the broadening of our definition of heritage to include industrial sites, vernacular buildings, and cultural landscapes has forced us to think about heritage conservation in new ways. Now, modern built heritage is having the same effect, in that it is re-energizing the field. Another benefit to the preservation cause is the interest the Modern Movement is generating among younger people. A growing fascination with the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s is evident in the retro appeal of many design trends of the era. A new generation of Canadians is focusing greater attention on the significance of these decades in our history. There are opportunities to re-engage the public, and to discuss the heritage values of this formative period in Canadian history.

Academics, professionals and others with a special interest in this subject will be meeting in Peterborough, Ont., in May at the first national conference on the built heritage of the modern era. *Conserving the Modern in Canada* will be held at Trent University and will focus on buildings, districts, and landscapes from 1945 to 1975. The challenges of documentation, evaluation, stewardship, and public education will be examined.

While the focus of this article has concentrated on what is different about post-war buildings and landscapes, it is helpful to be reminded of the similarities that exist between modern heritage structures and the built heritage of earlier eras. As much as the principles of Modernism may have focused on a break from the past, Modernism in Canada was as much about evolution as it was about revolution.

By embracing the legacy of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, we are linking the distant past with the recent past and the present. To quote Allen Cunningham's *Modern Movement Heritage*: "The purpose of conservation is not an end in itself, but a means of evaluating our inheritance and providing a platform for the future. In this respect modern architecture is not a special case, for it shares common ground with every other area of our culture which retains examples spanning thousands of years...."

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