

Wood, Glass and Stone

A new book showcases the character and excellence of Canadian architecture.

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**Up North:
Where Canada's Architecture Meets the Land**
Lisa Rochon
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Lisa Rochon has written the definitive guide to Canada's contemporary architecture, a well-illustrated, thoughtful tour of the best of what she sees as the emergence of a distinctively Canadian style. Up North. That's where we Canadians live. North of the Americans. In the cold, cold north. Up north, where the cottage meets the rock, the tree and the lake.

It is a strong thesis—actually for Rochon a manifesto—that the essence of modern architecture in Canada derives from an intimate dialogue between a building and its setting. The built interpretation in space and material of the particulars of place reflects the realities of our northern landscape and the distinctiveness of our cultural and political life. “Behind Canadian architecture, the North is always there, the wilderness always pulling us towards it.” This thesis serves as the carriage linking a series of essays, interviews and analyses of the country's modern architecture, the common lineage of the very diverse styles described.

Rochon finds the origins of contemporary Canadian modernism in the school of architects practicing in Vancouver in the late 1940s. The newly opened up, lushly forested, steep slopes of West Vancouver were home to those first honest contemporary expressions in wood and stone, interior and exterior, that mark so much of what is to follow. Rochon takes us on a guided tour of several of those houses, the first of many such tours through the course of the book, and

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it is a testament to her crisp prose and the fine, generous photography that we can happily walk through so many. These West Coast modernists—Bert Binning, John Porter, Ned Pratt and Ron Thom, and more—drew their inspiration quite directly from Frank Lloyd Wright, whose radical expression of landscape was the genesis of most that is unique in North American architecture, and a welcome alternative to a starker European modernism.

Two of the undoubted geniuses of modern Canadian architecture spring out of this fertile Vancouver landscape, Ron Thom and Arthur Erickson, and Rochon gives each of them the

haps in unconscious support of Rochon's central thesis. What after all is the classic definition of a Canadian—someone who can make love in a canoe. The lineaments of many a canoe flow through this book.

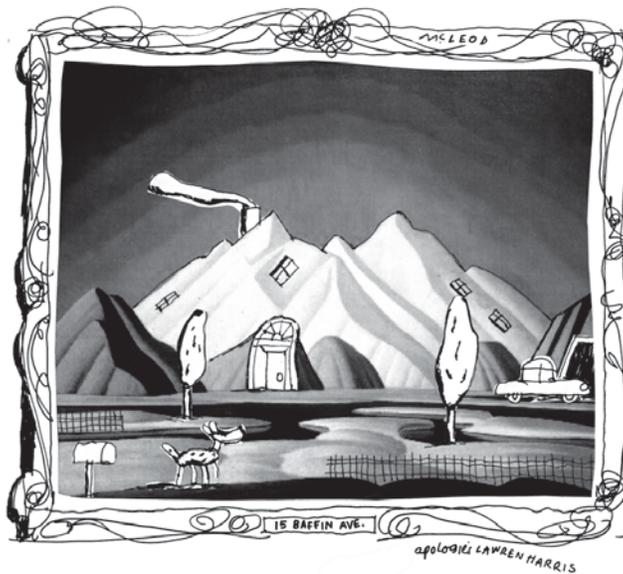
Arthur Erickson is the other resonant presence in the book, with a reach and personality almost equivalent to Wright himself. The broad, confident scale of his two great university projects—the mountain-top site of Simon Fraser University and the University of Lethbridge, stretched across a coulee—confirm that architecture can be an integral, almost geological, addition to a landscape, not just a supplicant.

Concrete, the power of liquid stone spanning awesome spaces, is the appropriate response to the awesome scale of Canada. Rochon shares her visit with Erickson, now in his eighties, and conveys the extraordinary spirit of this remarkable man.

Rochon also visits with Frank Gehry, someone who it is truly possible to describe as the world's greatest living architect. (Frank Lloyd Wright would so describe himself when in the witness box on one of his several divorce hearings, justifying the claim in that he had sworn to tell the truth.) Gehry is the most genial of men, blessed both by a genuine humility but also, I suspect, by the fact that fame came to him relatively late in life, when he was already well formed. What Rochon teases from him is unlike anything

I have read in other interviews: the history of his hard-won childhood in Timmins and Toronto, the difficult relations with his father and family, and the blessed role of a few key Canadian institutions—the Art Gallery of Ontario, Bloor Collegiate and the Palais Royale.

Gehry and his family left Canada for Los Angeles when he was 17. Despite Jean Chrétien's generous reissuance of citizenship, is it fair to claim Gehry as one of our own? The extravagance of his style, the stretch of his fame, his insistent passions, seem somehow foreign. But the man is not. The reflective, cheerful, modest man Rochon meets, with the declared love of hockey, fits



space and time they deserve. Ron Thom always seems most comfortable with a smaller, domestic or collegiate scale. Massey College at the University of Toronto, his masterpiece and perhaps the most perfect architecture in the country, is a tight cluster of buildings crafted in every detail, an exquisite care he carried through to his best known subsequent projects, the Frum House in Don Mills and Trent University. Though Thom was a troubled genius, it is his sensibility to materials and the subtle introduction of light that seem to have most resonance with the current Canadian modernists. “A building has to make love to a site,” Ron Thom would say, per-

well here at home. I knew Gehry well, if briefly, just as his fame was beginning to explode. We once spent a glorious afternoon driving in my clapped-out convertible around the Grange and Kensington Market, his old Toronto neighbourhood, remembering the way the delivery trucks would fling live carp out of their tanks into the store, scales flicking in the morning sun. We've all seen those fish in his buildings ever since.

Gehry as an architect is an original; his work emerged with the shock of the new to find an immediate resonance, as if the world had been waiting for it to happen. While Rochon deftly portrays the anthropological structure of the tightly linked Canadian architectural community—who worked for whom, who was influenced by whom—she also makes time for the other solitaries. Douglas Cardinal, whose curving brick St. Mary's Church in Red Deer is for me the most moving of buildings, gets the attention he deserves.

Up North is as much history as anthology, and she takes us through the glorious explosion of large-scale modernist architecture that occurred around the time of Expo 67. In Montreal, Moshe Safdie's Habitat and I.M. Pei's Place Ville Marie signalled the emergence of a confident country. In Toronto, that period saw a rush of original modern building of the highest quality—Toronto City Hall, the TD Centre and Commerce Court, Ontario Place and the Ontario Science Centre, the Eaton Centre—a legacy that gave the city a whole new sense of itself. Erickson's Robson Square had the same effect in Vancouver. It is the period between then and now that represents something of a lost generation in most Canadian cities. The brave new world of affordable housing projects, best achieved by the firm of Diamond and Myers, petered out through lack of funding. The suburban explosion Rochon rails about at the start of her book seemed to numb the best design instincts in a relentless rush of ordinariness. Budget cutbacks, and the never distant meanness of spirit that is the obverse of our kinder, gentler nation, did the rest.

What then gets exciting in *Up North*—and is I suspect the stimulus for Rochon writing this book—is the steady, confident emergence of a contemporary Canadian architectural excellence into the mainstream of new building. A group of perhaps 20 architects—generally not soloists but in true Canadian-collegial style almost all multi-architect partnerships—now in mid-life, are beginning the production of a breadth and quality of new architecture that has not been seen for several decades. Good architecture takes good clients. An acknowledgement that good design matters seems now to have permeated all public and many private agencies, not just sophisticated patrons.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate the essence of this new style is to take a short walk through the University of Toronto campus, whose wonderful transformation, deftly provoked by former U of T architecture dean Larry Richards, presents some of the best work of the firms leading the Canadian architectural renaissance: Diamond and Schmitt's Bahen Centre for Technology, Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg's Woodsworth College, Hariri Pontarini's McKinsey & Company headquarters building, and many more. In all can be

seen the clear verticals and horizontals of classical modernism, the space compression of Wright, the careful stone, wood and glass of Thom, the civility of Diamond. A recent list of the best buildings in the world by U.S. architecture critic C.C. Sullivan premiated a new house by Hariri Pontarini, one of the most prolific of those new firms, and commented that "the best new houses in the world are now designed in Toronto ... The sleek materials-first modernism the designers espouse puts the world of 'custom home' builders to shame."

But if sleek materials-first modernism is the identifying stylistic manifestation of this new generation, Rochon wants to go further. She sees, in the organically framed schools of the Vancouver-based Patkau Architects, in the tiered houses of Toronto-based Shim-Sutcliffe Architects and the stark educational buildings of Montreal firm Saucier+Perotte, a uniquely Canadian sensibility, a sensibility founded on our distinct qualities of place and society. She

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quotes Wallace Stegner: "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from." For her, Canadian architecture respects not only the place of landscape and region—"In Canada the influence of region is paramount," she notes—but also of character. Rochon hears the echo of Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, the essence of Canadian character forged in the struggle against an unforgiving landscape, in the halls of the new architecture. And perhaps the low growl of Robertson Davies. "Cold breeds caution."

Rochon's take on our character as revealed in contemporary architecture is best expressed in the preface by Lise Anne Couture, a Canadian architect and co-founder of New York-based Asymptote—a firm doing fascinating new work worldwide. "The best of Canadian architecture often seems deceptively modest, yet it is confident and self-possessed, it is ambitious yet unpretentious, it is thoughtful yet uncontrived. It is about 'the way things are'; it is poetry about the everyday."

Such prim prose sends me screaming for a drink, preferably in the company of extravagant Canadians like Irving Layton, Mordecai Richler and that other unrepentant émigré, Leonard Cohen, who all resolutely refused to conform to such a straight-jacketed character stereotype. Imagine what they would have produced as architects! Let's be clear: in architecture as in literature, to be modest, unpretentious and uncontrived, even if confidently so, does not represent the full range of emotions open to our country, any more than Alice Munro, Jane Urquhart or Carol Shields comprise all its available writing styles. Indeed, one of the reasons Toronto in particular is experiencing what Rochon has elsewhere described as "the attack of the androids," the aggressive transformation of the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Ontario College of Art

and Design respectively by the foreign superstars Daniel Libeskind, Frank Gehry and Will Alsop, is the belief that such wilful, idiosyncratic and flamboyant talent does not—and should not—reside at home. So let's not put ourselves in that tidy box. Given many of the architectural personalities involved, they wouldn't fit anyway.

I am also not sure that Rochon's attributing to Canadian architecture a particular attachment to landscape can be taken as a uniquely defining national characteristic. Reading her book produced in me a running debate about whether the essence of what is emerging architecturally in our country is a response to Canadian place or to global *Zeitgeist*. It is a telling coincidence that both Moriyama's Canadian War Museum in Ottawa and Daniel Libeskind's Imperial War Museum North in Manchester use the same powerful palate of inclined, polished concrete floors, angled walls and tortured roofscapes. Again, having spent a lot of time working in Ireland recently I see clear similarities in the style and materiality—the careful use of wood, stone, light and texture—of their contemporary architecture. What may well be different is in fact the stark contrast of style between the U.S. and the rest of the modern world, a contrast of course experienced most strongly in Canada. Despite her occasional, reflexive anti-Americanisms—we really don't need George Bush in a book on Canadian architecture—Rochon correctly identifies that we are different and it shows quite clearly in our new building.

Canada prides itself on being a public country and to limit architecture to the wilderness or the campus, as the plaything of the rich or the purview of the university, is no way to live a public life. Architecture belongs in the city, where most of us live. The test of its contribution to that day-to-day life will be the design aspiration of the everyday building. Rochon despairs of so much contemporary urban development, particularly the stultifying sameness of the relentless tide of suburban building. She abandons hope—a little too facilely—of a role for good architecture in the suburbs, concluding that "Canadian architecture takes up a remarkable position. It occupies the middle ground between the fabulously dull and the fabulously sensational." She could be unambitious on both counts. The dramatic improvement in highrise residential design, notably in Vancouver but increasingly in Toronto, and the steady promotion of an urban design and architecture agenda by all major cities, is cause for hope. The best firms are already working extensively abroad. Whether Canada will produce a new superstar to compete at the world level with the famous international design names is another matter, but several might have that potential.

This is a book to be kept ready to guide any new trip to any new place in the country to check out the many, many buildings she has described, to share her delightful enthusiasm as she comes on a new treasure. But it is more than that. Whether you agree with it or not, Rochon has provided us with a basic thesis for understanding the explosion in excellence of new Canadian architecture that will become the standard for all those wanting to see the richness we find in the landscape of Canada resonate in the built environment, in the city or up north. ☐