

# IN PRAISE OF MODERNIST CIVIC SPACES IN CANADIAN CITIES

Derek Drummond

A prominent McGill architect proposes, perhaps heretically, that modern Canadian buildings such as Place Ville Marie and the Toronto-Dominion Centre have not only been enduring realizations, but impressive civic spaces, much more so than the heritage buildings of earlier eras that were essentially bereft of space and closed off to the public they were supposed to serve. The Old City Hall in Toronto is a notable example of buildings with well-designed facades and interiors that did little to provide exterior spaces accessible to the public. The New City Hall and Nathan Phillips Square across the street have become the focal point, and gathering place, of Canada's largest city. Similarly, in Montreal, Place Ville Marie became the signature building of the city and its most important civic space. In Vancouver, Arthur Erickson's New Courthouse is not just a courthouse, but a modern symbol of a world city. Derek Drummond praises modern architecture and the legacy of civic space it has created in Canada's cities.

Selon un éminent architecte de McGill aux vues sans doute hérétiques, les édifices canadiens de l'ère moderne comme la Place Ville-Marie et le Toronto-Dominion Centre constituent non seulement des réalisations qui passeront le test du temps mais aussi d'impressionnants espaces civiques, bien supérieurs sur le plan architectural à nombre d'immeubles patrimoniaux étriés et inaccessibles au public censé en bénéficier. L'ancien hôtel de ville de Toronto est l'exemple même de ces bâtiments aux belles façades dont l'intérieur n'offre à peu près aucune ouverture sur l'extérieur. En revanche, le nouvel hôtel de ville et le square Nathan Phillips, situés juste en face, sont devenus des lieux de rassemblements privilégiés de la métropole canadienne. À Montréal, la Place Ville-Marie s'est de même imposée comme symbole et principale place publique de la ville. Et à Vancouver, le nouveau palais de justice d'Arthur Erickson témoigne de la modernité d'une ville internationale. Derek Drummond fait ici un vibrant éloge de l'architecture moderne et de l'héritage qu'elle lègue aux grandes villes du pays.



Contrary to what heritage groups, New Urbanists, and many architectural critics today would have us believe, modern architecture and planning have provided Canadian cities with their most lively and animated civic places. While these pressure groups and critics admire and lobby to protect our older buildings they, at the same time, tend to disparage anything to do with the buildings of the modernist movement. But, on closer examination, it is not the older historic structures but the modern buildings and projects that have contributed most of our vibrant urban public spaces.

There can be no question that there were plenty of fine buildings built in the 19th and early 20th centuries in

Canada that are worthy of care and preservation but these buildings seldom, if ever, contributed interesting and lively public spaces to the urban infrastructure. They were often impressive, with well-designed facades and interiors, but did little to provide equally interesting and well-designed exterior spaces accessible to the public.

Our Canadian cities have tended to be street-oriented rather than place-oriented. Unlike European cities where important buildings tended to be sited on an existing square or plaza or to create a new publicly accessible place as part of the design, important buildings in Canada tended to be simply located on a street.



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Hoads of office workers enjoy the generous space of the TD Centre on their lunch hour. Mies van der Rohe's renowned five towers rise above the plaza, which has also been enhanced by Joe Fafard's wonderful bovines in bronze.

Compare, for example, Toronto's old City Hall and the new City Hall. The old City Hall, designed by Edward J. Lennox and opened in 1890, was dramatically sited on the axis of Bay Street and although set back from Queen Street the space created was more for effect than for use by citizens. In comparison, the present City Hall, opened seventy-five years later, is a modernist project by any definition. The architect Viljo Revell set the buildings at the north end of a large, well-designed civic square. Eventually named Nathan Phillips Square, it has become the city's centre — a focal point for civic events, political rallies, demonstrations and, during the winter months, skating.

Like Toronto's old City Hall, Montreal's is street-oriented. Designed by H. Maurice Perrault and opened in

1878, this rather pompous building sits directly on Notre Dame Street. Although a stone's throw from Place Jacques Cartier, there was no civic space directly associated with the building. The problem remains today. Montreal lacks a truly civic space the equal of Nathan Phillips Square.

When Nelson Mandela visited Montreal after his release from prison he was invited by the mayor to give a public speech. Expecting tens of thousands to witness this historic moment it was decided to hold the speech outdoors — and lacking a civic square the search for a suitable place began. The solution: he spoke from the rear of a flat-bed truck in what was then a parking lot behind City Hall and the old Court House. When Pierre Elliott Trudeau lay in state there, the line of mourners wound through the parking lot behind City Hall. When

Charles de Gaulle famously spoke from the balcony of City Hall, most of his adoring throng was off to one side in Place Jacques Cartier, rather than directly below.

It was this lack of civic space, a centre of gravity, in Montreal that played a role in the eventual building of Place Ville Marie. One of the features of the proposal to undertake such a comprehensive commercial development that attracted the developer William Zeckendorf was the opportunity to create a new centre of gravity for the city's business community as well as to provide a large outdoor plaza that could be used for civic events. This opportunity was made possible by the availability of a large piece of land one block south of St. Catherine Street — Montreal's main shopping district.

All of the land bounded by Cathcart, Dorchester, University and Mansfield Streets was owned by the

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Canadian National Railways, with the exception of the venerable St. James Club on the corner of Dorchester and University. Eventually, with the help of Mayor Jean Drapeau, the land was expropriated and the clubhouse torn down, but not before Zeckendorf offered the club the top floor of the cruciform tower of Place Ville Marie, including a private elevator, in exchange for the property. The club membership, made up of elite members of the city's anglophone establishment who, to say the least, were wary of dealing with Zeckendorf, turned him down — worried about the indignity they would suffer if on their way to dinner they were to meet the cleaners in the public lobby of the building.

Once such a large parcel of land was assembled the architect, I. M. Pei of New York, was able to conceive of a project that consisted of one 42 storey tower and two smaller office buildings arranged on the site so as to create a plaza of considerable size. Beneath the plaza and above the parking was a retail shopping centre which could be entered from Cathcart a short distance from St. Catherine Street.

The major tenant was eventually to be the Royal Bank of Canada who made the difficult decision to move from their magnificent head-office building at 360 St. James Street. Built in 1928, designed by New York architects York & Sawyer, it was an impressive structure with a splendid lobby but

Canadian cities, it was a classic street-oriented building, bordering directly on the sidewalk.

Place Ville Marie eventually did become Montreal's *de facto* civic space. Shortly after it opened in 1962 Zeckendorf and his architect were delighted when a fervent group of young nationalists held a noisy public rally on the plaza to protest against the CNR's treatment of French Canadians. The Royal Bank might not have shared their enthusiasm but probably were delighted when in 1968, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, at the height of "Trudeaumania," held an election rally on Place Ville Marie that drew tens of thousands of curious Montrealers. By then there was no doubt that the plaza of

The impact of Place Ville Marie extended well beyond the Montreal city limits. Where sufficient land could be assembled new office buildings would now include a public outdoor plaza of some sort as well as a level of retail shops beneath the plaza. Many of these plazas were too small to make a meaningful contribution to the overall civic space infrastructure but in at least one case — Toronto's Toronto Dominion Centre — the scale was similar to that of Place Ville Marie.

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ingful contribution to the overall civic space infrastructure but in at least one case — Toronto's Toronto Dominion Centre — the scale was similar to that of Place Ville Marie. Designed by the renowned modernist architect Mies van der Rohe for Fairview Corporation and the TD Bank, and officially opened in 1967, it eventually consisted of a series of five towers on a plaza beneath which was an extensive retail shopping level — a first for Toronto. Both the towers and the retail level have proved to be a very successful investment for the developers. The plaza, which in agreeable weather attracts hoards of office workers to enjoy their picnic lunches on the lawns amongst Joe Fafard's wonderful bronze bovine sculptures, has been a delightful addition to downtown Toronto.

Commerce Court — nearby in Toronto on a smaller site and by the same architect — includes one of the city's tallest buildings and a courtyard defined by a series of buildings, some with cafes on the courtyard level. The highlight of the courtyard is a beautifully designed reflecting pool which in fine weather is surrounded by appreciative citizens.

But it's the BCE Place in Toronto that has upped the ante. Its great civic place is not a plaza but an interior gallery of staggering proportions. The complex, designed by the American architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in 1990, has a magnificent lobby that serves as a pedestrian link between two parallel streets. In the 1980s and the 1990s we became used

to office buildings with impressive atrium lobbies but the BCE atrium is better described as a crystal cathedral. Designed by the architect/engineer Santiago Caltrava the galleria is 380 feet (116 metres) long and 85 feet (26 metres) high — truly a spectacular space. What is even more astonishing is that it is not lined with shops — it merely links the various parts of the building complex at the ground level. The shops are below, as is the entrance to the Hockey Hall of Fame.

These modernist projects, in contrast with the typical office towers of earlier days, offer so much more, not only to the people who work in the buildings but to others as well. The only similar dramatic interior places in the past were to be found in the grand railroad stations of the early 20th century. Just down the street from BCE Place is Toronto Union Station, built in 1927 by architects Ross & Macdonald, Hugh Jones, and John M. Lyle, featuring a lavish concourse 250 feet (76 metres) long and 88 feet (27 metres) high. As it now serves commuter lines as well as the intercity train service it is an extremely animated space during rush hours. Its potential for further use is obvious, should it be splendidly restored along the lines of Union Station in Washington, DC or Grand Central Terminus in New York.

Other building types have also seen the development of grand interior spaces in recent years. Take, for example, retail shopping centres. Department stores were once the most impressive buildings on our main shopping streets across the country but they have fallen on hard times. From the outside they seem to have survived — still large, impressive street-oriented buildings — but unless the interiors have been completely redesigned they are struggling. Shoppers have come to expect more than five or six floors of windowless spaces cluttered with tables, bins and racks of goods for sale. The spatially spectacular suburban regional malls have spoiled them, as have downtown malls



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The soaring atrium of Toronto's BCE Place, "an interior galleria of staggering proportions," writes Derek Drummond, "better described as a crystal cathedral."

such as Eaton Centre in Toronto and Portage Place in Winnipeg.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact that Eaton Centre, completed in 1977, has had on developers, architects, and Toronto's shoppers and visitors. Designed by Eberhard Zeidler, it linked an Eaton's department store on Dundas with Simpson's department store on the south side of Queen Street with a galleria parallel to Yonge Street that is 866 feet (264 metres) long and 125 feet (38 metres) high. This multi-

level shopping centre with 1.6 million square feet of retail space with a subway station at each end is Toronto's number one tourist attraction.

In Winnipeg, Portage Place, a downtown upscale shopping centre designed by IKOY Partnership, which runs for several blocks along Portage Avenue, is accessible both from the street level and from the city's above-street pedestrian circulation system. It was a controversial project in that it drew almost all of the pedestrian traf-

fic off the street and into the mall with the effect that the street-oriented shops across the street lost most of their drop-in business. The city plan-

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ners required the ground floor shops in the mall to have an entrance off the street; they complied, but keep it locked.

Originally Eaton Centre's relation to Yonge Street was similar. The elevation consisted mainly of parking and service entries with the unfortunate consequence that there was little pedestrian traffic on the west side of the street. Recent renovations have provided access to shops from the Yonge Street sidewalk — and a definite improvement to street life in the area.

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Since the early 19th century various governments have erected legislative buildings to house their various functions. Whereas the earlier ones in Halifax, Fredericton, Charlottetown and St. John's were relatively restrained, the later ones became rather more expansive and expensive. The Parliament Building in Victoria, completed in 1897 by the

English architect Francis Mawson Rattenbury, the Legislative Building in Edmonton, 1912 by R. P. Blakey, and the 1920 Manitoba Legislative Building in

Winnipeg by Frank Worthington Simon are all examples of large scale, formal buildings seemingly designed to impress rather than to welcome the citizens. Like the other legislative buildings of the same era (Toronto, Quebec City) they were set in park-like environments, often formal gardens, with a scattering of statues of past leaders. They do not tend to instill a warm feeling of ownership or attachment in the hearts of the citizens.

The obvious exception, however, is the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. The Main Block, originally designed by Thomas Fuller of Bath, England and opened in 1867, was destroyed by fire (only the magnificent library survived) in 1916 and was replaced on the same footprint by the building we know today, designed by John A. Pearson and

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J. Omer Marchand. Unlike the other legislative buildings, the Parliament Buildings (the Centre Block, the East Block and the West Block) define one of Canada's great and treasured public spaces — Parliament Hill. It is the site of the country's great public events on occasions such as the July 1st celebrations but more importantly it provides an impressive forecourt to our most important public buildings.

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Along with the legislative buildings, courthouses, have played an important role in our cities. John Ostell's beautiful courthouse on Notre Dame Street in Montreal, completed in 1866, and Vancouver's courthouse designed by Francis Ratenbury in 1900, are examples of early courthouses that no longer serve the judicial system. Montreal's is now an extension of City Hall while Vancouver's is home to the Vancouver Art Gallery. Both were set well back from the street but are rather aloof — arguably appropriate for a court. Compare these to the new Courthouse in Vancouver by Arthur Erickson. In contrast to the forbidding nature of the older examples the new courthouse has been designed as a welcoming space both within and on the entire site, providing downtown Vancouver with a stunning new cityscape.

Along with the Vancouver Public Library by Moshe Safdie, Erickson's courthouse provides the city with a signature building that helps to rein-

force Vancouver's image both in the minds of its citizens and potential visitors. Images of the buildings appear in marketing material developed to attract tourists to the city. Aside from providing civic places they contribute to civic pride.

From early times the image of some Canadian cities has been inextricably linked with one of their buildings.



Notman Archives, McCord Museum

Notre Dame Basilica and Place d'Armes in Montreal in the 1870s. From its opening in 1829, it could seat 3,800 people in a city of 25,000 souls. Still a site of gala weddings, state funerals and symphony concerts, Notre Dame remains a focal point for community as well as the church in Montreal, a revered house of worship enhanced by the space in front of it.

Three 19th century examples come to mind. In Halifax, the Town (or Garrison) Clock atop Citadel Hill has, since its construction in 1803, been a favorite of the citizens and visitors alike. In Quebec City the Chateau Frontenac, dramatically positioned on what is arguably the most picturesque site in North America, has since 1890 served as a symbol of the city. Designed as a grand version of a French castle by the American architect Bruce Price it has for over one hundred years been Quebec City's signature building, appearing in literally

hundreds of drawings and paintings, thousands of photographs and in almost all of the city's marketing material.

The Parish Church of Notre Dame played a similar role in 19th century Montreal. Still today one of Montreal's signature buildings, it was in the early years, as seen in drawings and paintings of the city, also its dominant building — a single building skyline. The initial impact of the building on the citizens must have been profound. When the church, designed by James O'Donnell of Boston, opened in 1829 there were

approximately 25,000 men, women and children living in Montreal and the new church could seat 3,800 of them. Although it lost its dominance on the skyline by the beginning of the 20th century it remains one of the city's most admired and visited buildings, as well as the site of gala weddings (Celine Dion) and state funerals (Robert Bourassa, Maurice "Rocket" Richard and Pierre Elliott Trudeau). A Montreal Christmas tradition is the Montreal Symphony Orchestra performing Handel's Messiah at Notre Dame.

In the last few decades of the 20th century Canadian cities, along with many American cities, became enamored with their skylines. Rather than featuring individual buildings in their promotional material they often featured images of their skyline. Dramatic views of Toronto's skyline, for example, taken from Toronto Island so as to catch the reflection in the water, appear regularly in newspapers, magazines, on television and on the internet. The skyline has become the city's signature.

Omnipresent on that skyline is the CN Tower — one of the tallest structures in the world when it was completed in 1976. Ten years earlier Calgary had built its tower, but with the competition from a series of tall buildings built in the past twenty years, which provide similar views, it has become superfluous.

But skylines and observation towers are basically of little interest to a city's citizens. What citizens crave are more lively animated places in their cities where they can go to enjoy themselves. Whether they are teenagers, the elderly, office workers on their lunch hours, or others, the need for these civic spaces is critical. In the last half of the 20th century these places have finally been developed in Canadian cities — mainly by creative private entrepreneurs and modernist architects. May the trend continue.

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