

Essay for a publication about the new Art Gallery of Alberta (not used)

September 2009

The Continuum of Edmonton's Post-war Architectural Development

Since the Second World War Edmonton has produced some exceptional buildings that stand out from the ordinary. In fact, it has made architectural history from time to time, with innovative buildings that have been critically recognized in Canada and other parts of the world. This essay outlines the historical and geographical influences that have shaped Edmonton's notable architecture. It is arguable that Edmonton does indeed have a unique architectural identity, but if so, it is not pervasive. The moments of brilliance have been occasional, and are spread throughout the city, yet readily recognizable from a historical perspective. The influences that have set the stage for these architectural highlights include an on-going boom economy in Alberta that began with the discovery of oil in nearby Leduc in 1947. The opportunities that followed attracted many architects among which were a few who really stirred things up with their creativity and innovative thinking. The new Art Gallery of Alberta (AGA) fits into the continuum of special buildings that are bound to become distinctive architectural icons in their own time. In many ways the image of Edmonton has been driven by its architectural highlights.

Edmonton's Sporadic Architectural Development

Since the Second World War Edmonton's architectural advances have been the result of sporadic innovation, rather than the predictable advances of an architectural community led by a theory-based educational institution. Although Edmonton was home to a school of architecture in the 1930s at the University of Alberta, which produced a few of the leading practitioners in the post-war period, it was never a theoretical influence on architectural development or planning in this city. Director Cecil Burgess was not particularly interested in the emerging styles of Modernism and his influence was more apparent in Garden City planning for Alberta's rural communities such as Banff and Jasper. Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto and Montreal all benefited from strong theory-based schools that used their urban base as experimental ground. Edmonton's post-war economy attracted graduates mainly from the Universities of Manitoba and British Columbia, as well as Europe. They brought with them their appetite from International Modernism, both Europe-based and the West Coast Style. So Edmonton's architectural development was based on the skills and predilections of its practitioners rather than being directed by the influential teachers in university architecture departments as was the case in Vancouver and Winnipeg. Randall Stout and his Art Gallery of Alberta follow in this trend of idiosyncratic and irregular *monuments of change* where significant innovation is, from time to time, often introduced from the outside. Over the years, Edmonton has a string of architecturally innovative projects by both local architects and outsiders that have been strong influences on subsequent development.

An Ongoing Boom Economy

Without its on-going boom economy, it is not likely that Edmonton could have achieved its rich architectural heritage. In the post-war period, Edmonton led the way in terms of economic growth in

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Alberta. There was a great need to expand the existing urban infrastructure for a burgeoning population and explosive growth that doubled in the three years from 1945 to 1948. The 1947 oil discovery added to the pressure for urban expansion. The September 1948 issue of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC) Journal featured the works of five emerging Edmonton architectural firms. Architect Cecil Burgess writes “This issue... is the first considered attempt of a young and aspiring province to express itself in print in the sphere of architecture.”

Edmonton was being noticed nationwide. The development of the petrochemical industry brought new basic and secondary industries to the city by the 1950s, including a huge oil-refining component. Rising construction costs, material shortages, lack of skilled workers and labour unrest made it difficult to complete projects. It was reported in the Edmonton Journal on February 7, 1950 that Edmonton had the greatest per capita value of building permits on the continent. Maxwell Dewar and those in his City Architect’s Office were seriously challenged by the demands of urban expansion.

It is notable, that as the capital of the province, Edmonton was the home of the Provincial Architect, the practice of which designed most of the provincial buildings until the mid-1960s. There was a huge expansion of Alberta’s infrastructure at the time and there were not enough graduates from Canadian schools of architecture to fill the need for employees in the Provincial Architect’s Office (PAO). They turned to Europe, especially England and Germany, to fill the stools at the provincial drafting boards. Given the difficult economic times in Europe after WW2, the PAO was an attraction to many talented young architects. Gradually, the best of these architects went into private practice and their influence was felt over the coming decades. Youthful enthusiasm was pervasive and the Alberta Association of Architects initiated a notable annual design conference, the Banff Sessions. Richard Neutra, a leading modernist architect having immigrated to California in the early 1920s from Germany, was invited to attend the early Banff Sessions. The significance of this was the cementing of modernist ideals and influences from the International Modern Movement, very much part of university curricula at the time. Typically, Edmonton architects borrowed heavily from foreign sources and it would take several decades before anything resembling a regional style to emerge.

The Practice of Peter Hemingway Architect

If there is an Edmonton architect who can be recognized as having given Edmonton some regional distinction, it is Peter Hemingway. Hemingway’s illustrious career spanned from the late 1950s into the 1990s. He had been recruited from England by the Provincial Architect’s Office and remained there for a few years before he opened a private practice in the late 1950s with Charles Laubenthal. The partnership with Laubenthal lasted until 1969. Hemingway’s idiosyncratic work has been awarded with several Massey Medals, Canada’s highest award (now the Governor General’s Medals in Architecture). Several of Hemingway’s buildings have caught the public’s imagination like no others. He was a keen observer of the architectural world and many contemporary buildings of the time

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became influences for his projects in Edmonton. The swooping 1967 Peter Hemingway Fitness and Leisure Centre (originally named the Coronation Pool) makes historical reference to the sculptural work of Kenzo Tange and Eero Saarinen and has been designated as a Municipal Historic Resource and uniquely named in his honour. The 1967 Stanley Building on the Kingsway, adjacent to the Municipal Airport, was influenced by Eero Saarinen's 1964 John Deere Office Building in Moline Illinois with its Cor-ten (rusting steel) expressionism. Hemingway ventured into Brutalism with his exposed concrete 1970s Strathcona County Municipal Building in Sherwood Park.

Perhaps the most original and influential of Hemingway's buildings are his formalist pyramidal buildings, such as the iconic Muttart Conservatory in Edmonton's Cloverdale, along with several churches. The Muttart

Conservatory has become a public symbol, representative of the city itself as evidenced in the many views that are now available as tourist postcards. The continuing influence of Hemingway's pyramidal forms was to become evident two decades later in the 1994 Edmonton City Hall by Dub Architects. It is his pyramids that have captured public imagination and it is his pyramids that have been referenced in later work by other architects to the point that Hemingway can be credited with being the first architect to venture beyond international styles into the unintentional creation an Edmonton-based regionalism.

University of Alberta Housing Union Building – An Experiment of Some Consequence

By the late 1960s and 1970s, Edmonton began to feel the influence of outside architects that put Edmonton on the international architectural map. In 1968, a young Toronto firm, having recently worked and studied with Louis Kahn in Philadelphia, was hired by the University of Alberta to prepare its new long-range plan. Jack Diamond and Barton Myers proposed an innovative approach to campus planning that took into account livability in Edmonton's extreme winter climate. Their plan included an extensive series of pedestrian-oriented indoor streets, constructed on the existing street rights-of-way, raised one storey above street level to connect the campus buildings. Based on this plan, the University of Alberta Students' Union hired Diamond and Myers with Edmonton architect R.L. Wilkin in 1968 to design a 1000 foot long elevated indoor street that would be the core of a new student housing project, the Housing Union Building (HUB). This intriguing and innovative project had no precedent at the time and when completed by 1973, was published world-wide in architectural journals. The Architectural Review in their May 1980 issued reported, "This covering of the space between, or inside, buildings previously left open to the weather has brought forward interesting possibilities of social urban reorganization. Unconventional amalgamations of urban activities previously kept separate and articulated are now fused together and present the architect with new opportunities and a new building type." No building like this had been previously constructed in Canada and its influence was felt in Edmonton and across the country in the coming decades.

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Edmonton was again making architectural news and the attention it received would make a difference. The innovative HUB would have its influence on other parts of the world and in later Edmonton projects. In 1974, Barton Myers and R.L. Wilkin were commissioned to design the Citadel Theatre, a regional performing arts theatre complex, in Edmonton's downtown, close to Sir Winston Churchill Square. This is another remarkable and innovative building that received international attention in the architectural journals when it opened in 1976. With this project, the architects were committed to enhancing the downtown public streetscape environment and the Citadel was designed as a theatrical metaphor, with its huge glazed public lobbies as entertainment for the street. In addition, the Citadel was the first Edmonton building to offer substantial sidewalk protection in the form of permanent, broad and continuous canopies, designed as an integrated building feature.

The boom of the early 1980s and the rising voice of criticism

The early years of the 1980s were the second boom since WW2. Edmonton was experiencing a commercial renaissance. Numerous towers cropped up in the downtown and there was a massive and controversial redevelopment of the Alberta Legislature grounds, the denunciation of which was led by journalist William

Thorsell in a speech to the Alberta Association, Canadian Institute of Planners, January 29, 1981. "Most obvious ... are the tunneled (97 Avenue) entrances, brutalism in spades, totally overpowering the Legislature itself from the dominant vantage point which is behind the wheel of a car." Thorsell goes on to urge, "While we could easily indulge in nothing more than searing criticism of Edmonton's urban environment, we must do more. We must grasp an urban vision and bring it to bear on a mundane reality." By the 1980's it was becoming apparent that Edmonton's wealth and success were not bringing universally good design to the city. Thorsell lamented, "Today, even when we have the means, we usually lack the taste to use the means to good effect." During this period complaints of mediocrity and bad taste were not entirely untrue. There was a rising voice of architectural criticism in the city and it seems that architectural excellence at the time was in the hands of a few enlightened clients.

The City of Edmonton Aims for Excellence

The City of Edmonton, as a client, has from time to time risen to the challenge of design excellence. Over the years, the vision of Sir Winston Churchill Square as Edmonton's civic focus took hold. In 1980, with the economy in high gear, the City organized an international competition for a new City Hall to replace the modernist 1957 City Hall as the anchor of the Square. England's future star architect, Sir Norman Foster, was the lead juror. The competition garnered international attention and the level of response was impressive. To the surprise of many, Edmonton firm Dub Architects was the first place winner among the notable entrants. Their submission was a modern and elegant megastructure that faced the Square but ultimately was not realized. A new city hall would not be constructed until a decade later.

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The City was also the patron for a new Conference Centre (now the Shaw Conference Centre) that was built into the banks of the North Saskatchewan River valley and, uniquely, under Jasper Avenue, Edmonton's main downtown thoroughfare. This building, which 'cascades' down the river valley bank at the foot of 97 Street, was one of the first initiatives to reconnect the downtown with the River. This building was designed by architect James Wensley in 1979 and is a remarkable example of a regional design, with west coast overtones, in response to its unique site. The building hosts one of the more impressive interior spaces in the city, under Jasper Avenue, with sensually-sculpted, exposed concrete long-span beams not unlike architect Ron Thom's 1972 Faryon pedestrian bridge at Trent University near Peterborough Ontario and reminiscent of Bittorf and Wensley's earlier design for the Mayfair Park pavilions.

The Evolution of Northern Climate Design

In the early 1980s, the University of Alberta selected Toronto architects, Zeidler Partnership, with local associates Groves Hodgson Palenstein Architects and Wood & Gardener Architects, to design the Walter C. Mackenzie Health Sciences Centre, a 1.8 million square foot teaching hospital, based on their earlier innovative 1972 McMaster University Health Sciences Centre in Hamilton, Ontario. Zeidler Partnership had recently completed Toronto's memorable downtown shopping mall, the 1977 Eaton's Centre, and the U of A hospital bears the influence of these two mega-projects. The first phase of this Edmonton hospital was completed in 1983 and brought to the city not only a leading edge health care facility, but a continuation of Diamond and Myers' vision for northern climate weather-protected public thoroughfares. Zeidler's plan

included two climate-controlled atria, linear streets, each with the impressive proportions of Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. This building was a major step forward in Canadian architecture, published widely, and has brought to Edmonton some of the most memorable interior public spaces in recent times.

The 1980s was also remarkable for the development of the infamous West Edmonton Mall (WEM), until 2004 the largest indoor shopping mall in the world. Little can be said about its architecture but in terms of remarkable interior spaces, WEM carries on the ideas that were initiated by Diamond and Myers in their U of A Long Range Plan – a new kind of urbanism that defies climate and impresses us with the structural prowess of vast glass roofs. Again Edmonton was ground zero for this sort of experimentation that caught the world's attention. Architecture aside, the planning consequences of WEM have been at odds with Edmonton's downtown development since the beginning. Seen as a competitor, WEM has been much more successful in attracting consumers, seeming to draw the commercial life out of the downtown. Edmonton's commitment to the perpetuation of major cultural resources in the downtown, as well as encouraging recent residential growth, is now proving to be the

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antidote to WEM's attraction as Edmonton's primary consumer and entertainment destination.

The Evolution of Sir Winston Churchill Square

The 1990s was a deep recessionary period in Edmonton when the economy went into a tailspin by 1993. The provincial government made a vow to eliminate not only the deficit but also the provincial debt and as a result little was built until the end of the decade. Several remarkable projects did benefit from these lean economic times - Edmonton City Hall and the Francis Winspear Centre for Music. Thus was the start of an urban renaissance in downtown Edmonton.

A decade after the disappointing outcome of the 1980 Edmonton City Hall competition, the City hired winner Dub Architects to design a more modest civic building than had been previously proposed. The new City Hall was intended to become not only the centerpiece of the Sir Winston Churchill Square redevelopment, but also an icon to represent the city. Dub Architects' first design proposal did not meet with public support. The building's architectural plinth was topped by several large cones intended to illuminate the city room and the council chamber not unlike that of the 1996 Arthur Erickson Glass Museum in Tacoma Washington. This design motif received significant public derision and the architects were asked to explore other possibilities. Peter Hemingway's pyramidal buildings from the 1960s and 1970s had become public icons and when pyramidal skylights were proposed to top the new city hall, the public was supportive. The new City Hall has proven to be a worthy anchor for the city centre and, as a symbolic representation of the City, it is highly successful. As a public image, the idiosyncratic character of this building, with its pyramidal skylights and angled window treatment, are in keeping with the evolution of Peter Hemingway's influence and has nurtured an image of the city with an emerging regional architectural vocabulary, the influence of which can be detected in Randall Stout's AGA window and siding treatment.

While many attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to redevelop Sir Winston Churchill Square itself were not successful, the arts district development was progressing. The downturn of the economy in the 1990s was, in

fact, the stimulus for design and construction of the Francis Winspear Centre for Music, designed by Cohos Evamy Architects. This music performance facility was wisely located on the eastern edge of Sir Winston Churchill Square and completes the cultural campus that includes the 1960s Stanley Milner Library, the Citadel Theatre, City Hall and the new AGA. Appropriately, the Winspear Centre design draws upon influences from the earlier Citadel Theatre across the street, with its lobby glazing that faces the Square. Generally, the Winspear Centre is modestly designed in the prevailing Post-Modern Style of the 1990s. It is more understated architecturally than the other buildings on the Square, primarily a reflection of budget constraints at the time.

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Post 2000: Edmonton's Emerging Architectural Identity

Post-war development, especially after the 1970s, that included the iconic but not architecturally remarkable West Edmonton Mall, noticeably transferred economic power from the downtown to the suburbs. There have been many attempts to revitalize the downtown, including a new Downtown Plan in the early 1980s, and numerous plans to redevelop Sir Winston Churchill Square, the infrastructure of which had become increasingly unable to support the numerous downtown summer festivals. The City finally followed through on its commitment to reinforce downtown as the heart of the city with Sir Winston Churchill Square as its primary urban design focus. A competition was organized in 2000 and the redeveloped Square, designed by HIP Architects with Stazny Brun Architects, was opened in 2005. This spurred the redevelopment and upgrading of nearby commercial properties and became the setting for the final project that would complete the Sir Winston Churchill Square redevelopment - the Art Gallery of Alberta.

With completion of the AGA, Edmonton will have a remarkable urban focus that reinforces its commitment to centralized arts facilities in a strong and imageable downtown core featuring a central urban plaza. There are few precedents for such a comprehensive urban design initiative. Unlike most Canadian cities where cultural facilities are not so concentrated, Edmonton has been insightful enough to focus its major municipal cultural facilities around the Square. Sir Winston Churchill Square, and its surrounding arts district, stands out as an exceptional model of focused downtown planning in the face of rapid post-war suburbanization. Downtown Edmonton is currently experiencing strong residential growth that is supporting a new and sophisticated commercial infrastructure, remarkable for its counterbalance of the suburban development that was, until recently, a threat to the survival of downtown as the heart of the city. Edmonton is maturing and developing urbane facilities to attract downtown visitors and residents alike.

The AGA - A Step in the Evolution of Edmonton's Architectural Legacy

Randall Stout has designed the AGA to be the latest in a string of buildings that did not emerge out of a tradition of design or urban development theory, but rather it has appeared as a respectful iconoclast – a rebellious 'foreigner' - not unlike the legacies surrounding the projects of Hemingway and Diamond and Myers. The assertive and rebellious nature of the new AGA has been tamed by respect for its place in the context of Edmonton's downtown in general, and Sir Winston Churchill Square specifically. It brings technical innovation never before seen in Edmonton. It carries on the tradition established by Myers and Wilkin's Citadel Theatre to animate the street with metaphoric theatre, the actors of which are the people who will use this multi-use public building. It respectfully completes Sir Winston Churchill Square with a site-specific response to planning and circulation, opening up to Edmonton's underground pedestrian system via the Churchill LRT Station. It has become another candidate for an icon that represents the city.

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The AGA is part of the current downtown renaissance and is at the forefront of a surge in architectural and urban design projects that will reshape the centre of metropolitan Edmonton, bringing urban amenities long missing. The intent is to reinforce Edmonton's image as a capital city with revitalized downtown governmental, commercial and residential neighbourhoods and a renewed connection to the North Saskatchewan River. Edmonton has never been consistently on the Canadian architectural map. Every decade or so, remarkable and sometimes spectacular buildings make the news. There is a long history of innovation that quietly makes its impact on the architectural world. What really makes a difference is when Edmontonians are aware of and debate their architectural legacy. As the Edmonton community becomes more aware of its legacy and more demanding for quality urban design, perhaps future innovations will not be as infrequent.