

# BEYOND TROPHY ARCHITECTURE

Policies for true architectural quality

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In 2003, the Visual Arts Section of the Canada Council for the Arts revamped its grant programs in support of architecture; in 2004, the section will consider ways of improving architectural commissioning at the federal level.

How will we go on about it? We want to encourage the development of architectural quality: but what, exactly, do we mean by quality? We want to team up with other federal departments and agencies: but what kind of partnership will we be seeking? Ultimately, these questions are of interest not just to policy-makers, but to every Canadian architect truly committed to our art form. We are making our views explicit so as to allow the community to react.

A balance is being sought between government-sponsored projects that produce architectural jewels, and other initiatives that set these jewels into the mainstream of Canadian life. We want Canadian architecture to shine at its brightest in the most visible buildings of our major urban centres, but we also want to see it glow in a quieter and more sustained way in communities across the country. In other words, we will seek to support extraordinary architecture but also, excellent architecture in ordinary life. Behind this position is the firm belief that artistic excellence is not a luxury one indulges in times of prosperity; it is something much simpler and much more necessary.

Concretely, this philosophy calls for building a broad portfolio of strategies in support of artistic excellence in the architectural commissioning process. Because the Canada Council for the Arts has to establish these strategies in partnership with other federal departments and agencies, it is impossible to foretell exactly what, this portfolio will include. A rough picture of what it may contain can be sketched by looking at some of the most interesting experiments conducted in Canada and abroad over the last 20 years.

### **1. Competitions: great visibility, perverse side-effects**

The practice of state-sponsored architecture competitions was revived with François Mitterrand's Grands Travaux – the Opera-Bastille, the Grande Arche de la Défense, and the Très Grande Bibliothèque, among others. The projects were meant to bring out the best in contemporary architecture of the time, thanks to a high profile competition, well-chosen sites, and comfortable budgets. At the time, the *Grand Projets* took the lion's share of the architectural press, and they allowed for a reassessment of the role architecture plays in the making of a national identity.

Architecture competitions flourished in the wake of these *Grands Projets*: the IBA competitions were launched in Berlin to produce not just a few significant dots over the urban landscape, but entire neighbourhoods of high-quality, contemporary urban buildings and spaces. Competitions became a norm for cultural facilities built in the province of Quebec. The process was especially productive in regional centres. Most often, the winning schemes offered a contemporary reinterpretation of a vernacular motif – as happened with Dupuis & Letourneux's playful variations on the theme of a local fishing trap, the *fascines* on their façade for Rimouski's regional museum. The simple device allowed for instant identification of the community with its new museum building; it reconciled tradition and modernity, and gave the community a sense of really being of its own times. The architecture of the museum became a spearhead for a collective desire to revitalize the city, while the project itself helped launch one of the better young firms in the province. In the United States, the National Endowment for the Arts promoted competitions for medium-sized public buildings with its 'New Public Works' grant

program: grants of \$50,000 were awarded to pay the extra costs an architecture competition would involve, relative to a normal commissioning process.

The advantages of the competition process are quite obvious: it puts the pursuit of artistic excellence at a premium, in the eyes of those who commission the building, those who will use it, and those who will live by it; it helps launch the careers of promising young architects and it brings cutting edge architectural research out into the public sphere. All the thinking that would have unfolded along the commands of an imaging program can be done at a scale of 1:1, in real materials and construction details: there is no easy escape, artistic research is conducted in the thick of the architectural medium.

The disadvantages of competitions must also be considered: a widespread use of competitions might enslave young firms to pro-bono work for the first years of their careers – hardly a healthy choice for a professional community that already suffers a great deal from a low public appreciation of the value of its services. Too many competitions might also lead people to find it quite normal to pick and choose from different ‘models’ on display for every new public building they need – as they pick and choose a pair of shoes, or a piece of furniture in a store. In other words, a continual opening of the design process to public appreciation can waste the very substance of this process – flattening it down to a mere question of styling, making it a consumer good among others.

Such perceptions put serious architects at a disadvantage on the field, and they put serious architecture at a disadvantage on the political checkerboard. If architectural competition were mistaken for beauty contests, if the population mistook good public buildings for trophy architecture, then the belief might spread that good architecture is a luxury one may, or may not be able to afford. It would become what one indulges in when the times are rollin’ and what one disregards when the going gets tough. It would be the worst position architecture could possibly hold on the nation’s political checkerboard.

All things considered, it would thus appear that competitions are a necessity, but not a sufficient condition for bettering federal processes of architectural commissioning. They work best when they are a part of a larger portfolio of policy action: their perfect companions would be those strategies that connect architectural excellence to deeper policy actions, and more substantial efforts at building the nation we really want.

## **2. Exemplary projects: connecting architecture and nation-building**

Excellent examples of this other approach can be found in Latin America, where more fragile economies often preclude the possibility of architectural competitions *à la Mitterand*. In Bogota, an enlightened mayor used architecturally significant buildings as a means of giving a greater sense of reality to deep-seated social, economic, infrastructural, and environmental policy actions affecting the entire metropolitan area. The projects were conducted by Mayor Enrique Peñalosa, a Duke-educated economist who previously served as economic advisor to the President of Colombia. In Bogota, he followed a primarily economic agenda: he wanted to strengthen the city's tight network of low-capital businesses by providing them with the basic infrastructures they lacked. This meant, for the most part, better transportation options for those who did not own a car, a better delivery of the basic read-and-write skills to the children of low-income neighbourhoods, and a better support for healthy family and community life. He had the most unglamorous of all possible agendas, but he managed to translate it into a few suggestive and memorable promises: he pledged that in Bogota, the people would be treated as well as the cars if he were to be elected. Once in power, Mayor Peñalosa created a comprehensive circuit of bike paths, taking great care in providing quality landscaping. He rode a bike to work, created no-car days, instituted a bicycle-riding festival that was quickly attended by a million people in a single day, and succeeded in making the population see the strong connection between a lofty economic strategy, a new urban landscape, and a particular quality of life. He also commissioned schools for low-income neighbourhoods to Rogelio Salmona and once again the solid, enhancing constructions were immediately associated with the deeper economic effort they were enabling and for which they stood.

Canada is filled with success stories showing that government agencies which do not have architectural quality as their primary mandate can indeed do wonders, and that strictly political decisions and economic measures can indeed translate into beautiful and significant buildings.

For instance, a change of tone in the relations between First Nations and the federal government led to a transformation of the commissioning process for school buildings in the Rockies. Marie-Odile Marceau, an architect who was working at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, enabled First Nation bands to entertain a standard client-architect relationship with some of the best architecture firms in the west: the Patkaus, Acton Johnson Ostry, Henriquez and Partners, Kobayashi & Zedda. This movement coincided with the political affirmation of the First Nations and to some degree the new buildings gave a concrete expression to what was otherwise an essentially political shift. Today, almost twenty years after the beginning of the movement, the buildings still act as beacons for a change of tone in the relations between First Nations and the central government; the beauty and comfort they bring to the community is more than skin-deep.

Another example could be found in the Kyoto Accord: Peter Busby holds that the objectives of the Accord could be met by solely reducing the energetic cost of new constructions. He and others have generated yet another wave of extremely creative, built experiments. They seem to captivate a good portion of the general public: tourists make long detours to visit the few green buildings open to the public, and visitors to Open Doors Toronto queued to climb up to the Mountain Equipment Coop's famous green roof. Unfortunately, the Kyoto Accord still reads as a policy move: efforts could still be made, to let the Canadian public see this commitment not in terms of a necessary economic sacrifice, but as a physical, palpable and enjoyable cultural gain.

There is something to be learned from these experiments: when a government performs important but next-to-invisible policy actions, it often sets the stage for certain kinds of buildings to be built and, given a good design, these buildings will make for the most

lasting and convincing testimony of its actions. A well-designed building is worth a thousand press releases.

Already, the new structure that is being set in place for the choice of the Canadian representative at the Venice Biennale encourages critics and curators to have a deep, structural look at the Canadian realities that inspire and motivate contemporary architectural research. Moreover, the new grant program in Support to Practitioners, Critics and Curators of Architecture also encourages the architecture community to examine the best of our contemporary production in a more incisive manner. Among other projects, Jim Taggard will tie the history of Busby + Associates to the development of the green movement in Canada, while Tracey MacTavish will investigate changing governmental practices in the North, in relation to a new generation of building experimentation.

The Canada Council for the Arts may do even more: in addition to promoting architecture competitions, it may investigate possibilities for taking a pro-active role, that is, engage a dialogue with federal partners whose 'invisible' actions may generate a series of meaningful and outstanding constructions. It may establish strategic alliances in order to allow for artistic excellence to flourish in the few spots where it is most likely to do so. Strategic alliances may be struck on a one-time basis, but they may also develop into much more solid lines of communication and collaboration as happened in the Netherlands.

### **3. Strategic alliances: deep-seated commitments to architectural excellence**

Europeans have been quick to realize the potential of complementary action between the agencies that condition the shape of the built environment, and those that promote architectural quality. To date, the Dutch certainly deserve applause for integrating high-quality architecture into the larger fabric of political life.

Rob Docter, now director of the Berlage Institute, was among the initiators of this effort which began to take shape in the early nineties. He initiated a series of meetings with all

agencies whose action had an architectural component. An inter-ministerial working group was set up to supervise the implementation of a national architecture policy. In 2000, the actual policy document was finally presented to the Netherlands' Lower House of Parliament by the State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, the State Secretary for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, the Minister of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, and the State Secretary for Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries. The policy called for nine Major Projects to be undertaken including, among others: an urban design scheme for a ring of important cities in the western part of the country; a rapid rail link, possibly in the form of a magnetic train; redevelopment of sandy-soil areas, liberated by a reorganization of the pig industry; a new museum; public/private and private housing projects such as the Yavah Island development.

Many countries are developing similar integrated plans to make governmental commissioning more conducive of true architectural quality: a visit to the European Forum for Architecture Policy website ([www.architecture-forum.net](http://www.architecture-forum.net)) gives a measure of the variety of efforts undertaken.

Time will tell how Canada manages to put architectural quality on a more solid footing. One thing is certain: no single solution will work. Competitions alone will not work, exemplary projects alone will not work, strategic alliances alone will not work. It is a mix of all of the above that is needed and the specific mix that Canadians end up setting into place will be tailored to our own realities and needs.