

Reviews Recensions

Sandra Alföldy

The Allied Arts: Architecture and Craft in Postwar Canada

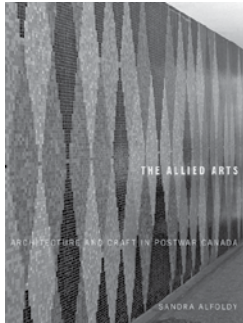
Montreal/Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2012

227 pp. 11 colour plates, 52 b&w illustrations

\$39.45 (paper), \$95.00 (cloth)

ISBN 9780773539600 (cloth)

9780773540033 (paper)



CRAFT HISTORY AND THEORY is a growing and fast expanding field. In recent years, a number of international exhibitions and books have helped bring attention to the careers of overlooked practitioners, as well as recover disregarded facets of the contributions of well-known artists and institutions (as seen, for example, with the prominent *Bauhaus: Workshops for Modernity* exhibition at MoMA, or the more recent Sonia Delaunay exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, which featured impressive—but largely underappreciated—

textile works).¹ Similarly, a number of scholars have developed a rich body of writing on craft that builds on the theoretical insights of approaches as diverse as feminism, postcolonial/decolonial theory, “new materialism,” object-oriented ontology, actor-network theory, and many others. Sandra Alföldy's latest book, *The Allied Arts: Architecture and Craft in Postwar Canada*, constitutes a significant and sophisticated contribution to this recent scholarship.

As Alföldy reminds us from the outset, “architectural craft”—sometimes designated as the “decorative arts”—has long suffered from negative stereotyping about being merely “ornamental” (read: as subordinate or accessory, as a *paregon* of architecture).² For centuries, craft has also been marked by gender inequalities and was inserted within an academic and ocular-centric hierarchy that placed it beneath “fine arts,” leading to craft's frequent elision from history books. Alföldy's *The Allied Arts* helps to challenge and correct a number of such presuppositions and oversights within the discipline. The book is focused on a series of specific questions, such as the initiatives of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC) to promote the inclusion of monumental craft into public spaces, as well as the professionalization of interior design and craft education in Canada (3). *The Allied Arts* is concerned with a very broadly conceived postwar period: most works discussed are not from the 1940s and 1950s, but from

the late 1960s to today. The volume is organized into a series of chapters that offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the interlocking relationships among materiality, scale, form, ornament, and identity. As such, *The Allied Arts* further develops and complements her other publications, such as *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada* (2005) and the more recent *Craft, Space and Interior Design: 1855–2005* (2008, co-edited with Janice Helland).

In her examination of Canadian “national identity,” Alföldy is informed methodologically by such classics as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and admits it is quite difficult and even inadequate to try to pin down a precise notion of “Canadian-ness” when it comes to postwar craft practices. The book's ongoing critical concern with wider notions of identity is very useful, as it allows Alföldy to engage judiciously with the canonical historiography of modern and postmodern architecture in Canada (encapsulated in the widely circulated textbooks by Alan Gowans and Harold Kalman) and to undermine a narrow, style-based paradigm of architectural modernism. Various other important and timely issues, such as the co-optation of Aboriginal crafts by official institutions and the potentially detrimental effects of imposing settler categories of value, are also addressed throughout the book in order to challenge those grand nationalistic narratives. The book also ventures—particularly in the section on “materiality”—into a thoughtful discussion of famous texts, such as John Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Adolf Loos's highly problematic essay “Ornament and Crime,” and Gottfried Semper's *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*, that, years after their publication, continue to define, both consciously and unconsciously, some of the terms and attitudes used to describe craft's relationship to architecture.

Some of the strongest arguments come when Alföldy delves more deeply into the work of specific Canadian

craftspeople, some of whom she has had the opportunity to interview. Her discussion of the work of Eleanor Milne, the country's first female "Dominion Carver" (she later renamed herself "Dominion Sculptor"), is particularly interesting. Alfoldy recounts how this artist, who produced an impressive series of Gothic-inspired relief panels for the Canadian Parliament building, refused during a 1998 interview to enter into a discussion about gender, "concerned that a feminist revisioning of her artistic contributions would be too reductive" (116). This type of reaction, which one finds in interviews with other successful women artists, designers, and architects (it surfaces, for example, in Mary McLeod's 1997 interview with Charlotte Perriand, one of Le Corbusier's close collaborators³), is very successfully problematized and nuanced by Alfoldy, by posing various questions related to the gendered aspects of craft education and professionalization, and by analyzing more specific works by Milne herself. This facet of the book greatly enriches the research, as does the impressive amount of archival material gathered by Alfoldy over the years. Other interesting practitioners interviewed and discussed throughout the book include Suzanne Swannie, Brian MacKay-Lyons, Jack Sures, Carole Sabiston, and Mariette Rousseau-Vermette.

The Allied Arts concludes with a series of cogent and very timely methodological and historiographical interrogations. For instance, Alfoldy wonders how, in this time of so-called "postdisciplinarity," we might address the complex legal and economic ramifications for contemporary craftspeople working in tandem with architects on large-scale projects and what kind of training may best meet such challenges. She also discusses the ways in which the Internet has created productive (albeit precarious) spaces for the discussion, visual documentation, and preservation of site-specific craft objects. Other ques-

tions related to technology also open up interesting avenues for reflecting on the more process-oriented craft practices.

Despite its many strengths, I do have certain questions regarding the closing proposals of *The Allied Arts*. In the concluding paragraph, Alfoldy mentions that her hope in writing the book is that her study of broader issues related to Canadian craft "will open up discussion in relation to postwar development in other nations" (181; my emphasis). While it is possible to delimit and organize one's research by looking at a specific nation-state and its various governmental policies, I believe that current scholarship on architectural craft would be much enriched by a more thorough and direct engagement with the transnational networks that connect practitioners and critics from different contexts. Too often, scholars in one country seem surprisingly resistant to link their work explicitly with research being done elsewhere in the world. For instance, reading this book, one wonders: how much are post-1945 Canadian projects similar to, or different from, works produced under the auspices of the American New Deal? How has the Second World War, which led to an influx of immigrants, including artists and craftspeople in exile, changed the complexion of the art world? In another major segment of this book that focuses on the art-in-architecture "1% program," a bureaucratic model that was developed in Europe in the 1930s and later adopted in Canada and elsewhere, again, one wonders: how were Canada's initiatives in the Allied Arts similar to those of the countries that pioneered such a welfare-state system, in particular France? Might Canadian craftspeople's advocacy of a notion of the Allied Arts be a response to that of a "synthesis of the arts" then quite prevalent in the postwar years throughout the world? The work of specific artists and historians discussed also raises questions about the transnational movements to which

they belonged. For example, how is the historiography of Canadian modernism influenced by classic histories of architecture, such as Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*, that famously advocated a tempering of modern architecture's impersonal character via artistic and craft interventions? Or in what way did the colourful geometrical abstract art of American-born Eli Bornstein (whose Structurist relief for the Winnipeg airport, discussed in chapter 5, became part of a broader, truly global resurgence of Neo-Plasticism in the postwar years), which was also allegedly meant to humanize the sterility of the modern environment, become intertwined with the reterritorialization of the senses in the postwar years?

The Allied Arts also contains, in my opinion, a notable oversight. To be fair, I should say from the outset that due to space constraints, a scholar has to make difficult decisions as to what to include and what to leave out of a historical narrative. Nonetheless, one wonders why the book completely overlooks the place of architectural craft in religious settings. After all, the first awardee of the RAIC Allied Arts medal, French Canadian sculptor Armand Fillion, was himself a major part of the revival of religious art in postwar Canada (his relief sculptures can be seen in various churches and Catholic schools throughout Quebec). Why gloss over this question and not acknowledge the significant place of mainstream religious denominations in Canadian society and the development of Canadian craft? This type of exclusion is rather typical of postwar studies and is in no way unique to Alfoldy's book. While scholarship of the Medieval or Renaissance periods is rife with studies on the formative role of spirituality and religious patronage on the careers of artists, architects, and craftspeople, many historians focused on the twentieth century generally disregard (or, in some cases, considerably reduce) the part played by monotheist religious denominations in the growth of

modern artistic movements. Indeed, canonical accounts of twentieth-century art and architecture are premised on the growing secularization of society, which has resulted in a reduced interest in the role of religious institutions in sponsoring artists and craftspeople. This is unfortunate, since churches and temples continued to be a privileged vehicle for large-scale commissions for murals, stained glass windows, and relief sculptures well into this period.

The case of Quebec—which, prior to the 1970s, used to be Canada's most overtly religious province—is particularly instructive. During the Second World War, the French progressive Dominican friar Marie-Alain Couturier, who was the editor of the influential journal *L'Art Sacré* and a friend of Le Corbusier, lectured at Montréal's École du meuble, led by Jean-Marie Gauvreau⁴ (which, as mentioned in passing by Alföldy, is where a number of famous Quebec artists and artisans taught or were trained). At the École du meuble, Couturier encouraged young Canadians to launch a formidable craft revival.⁵ He was also instrumental in connecting leftist artists—such as Fernand Léger, who also came to Montreal during the war—with the Catholic Church. Frère Jérôme (born Joseph Ulric-Aimé Paradis), a priest who taught art courses at the Collège Notre-Dame for several decades, is another major influence on many of Quebec's modernist artists and craftspeople, including Jean-Paul Mousseau and Claude Vermette, who later collaborated with architect Gérard Notebaert and produced a series of colourful ceramic murals for their alma mater. Many other well-known figures in Allied Arts circles, such as Clifford Wiens, Lorraine Malach, Charles Daudelin, and Étienne-Joseph Gaboury⁶ have produced truly remarkable works for Christian churches in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), while artists such as Joseph Iliu have contributed to some of Canada's important synagogues. Also notable, in the immedi-

ate postwar years, is the rise of the abstract stained glass window in both the religious and secular spheres, as seen, for example, in Marcelle Ferron's pioneering abstract work for the Champ-de-Mars and Vendôme metro stations. The book, I believe, would have been much enriched by a study of the momentous shift that Canada's religious landscape underwent in those years, and of the formidable cross-pollination between the secular and the sacred in this country in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite some of these limitations, anyone concerned with the history of craft and with the intellectual and artistic conditions of Canadian modernity, should read *The Allied Arts*. With its multi-layered narrative that is attentive to both individual objects and broader social questions, Alföldy's book will no doubt become a standard reference for students and scholars interested in craft and architecture in Canada. ¶

—Nicola Pezolet, Concordia University

1. Leah Dickerman and Barry Bergdoll, eds., *Bauhaus: Workshops for Modernity* (New York, 2009) and Adeline Souverain, ed., *Sonia Delaunay: les couleurs de l'abstraction* (Paris, 2014).

2. On this complex question, see, for instance, Jacques Soullou, *Le décoratif* (Paris, 1990) and Anne-Marie Sankovitch, "Structure/Ornament and the Modern Figuration of Architecture," *The Art Bulletin* 80 (1998): 687–717.

3. Mary McLeod, "Perriand: Reflections on Feminism and Modern Architecture," *Harvard Design Magazine* 20 (2004): 64–67.

4. See Cinzia Maurizia Giovione, "Jean-Marie Gavreau [sic]: Arts, Handicrafts and National Culture in Quebec from the 1920s until the 1950s," *Design Issues* 10, 3 (Autumn 1994): 22–31.

5. See Marie-Alain Couturier, o.p., *Art et catholicisme* (Montreal, 1941) and *La forme humaine dans l'espace* (Montreal, 1945). See also Jean-Philippe Warren's very relevant book for the underlying religious education of Paul-Émile Borduas and some members of his circle, *L'art vivant: Autour de Paul-Émile Borduas* (Montreal, 2011).

6. Some of these architects and craftspeople, in particular Malach, are discussed in a recent study by Susan Surette, "Canadian Ceramic Relief Murals: Studio Craft and Architecture—A Case Study of the Sturdy-Stone Centre Murals, 1975–1983," PhD dissertation (Concordia University, 2014).

Louis Martin, ed.

On Architecture: Melvin Charney:

A Critical Anthology

Montréal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013

483 pp. 350 illustrations, n&b et couleur
\$ 49.95 ISBN 9780773541825



QUI EST MELVIN CHARNEY et quelle est sa contribution originale à la pensée architecturale et urbanistique contemporaine au Québec? Par son travail méticuleux et rigoureux rassemblant les textes les plus marquants de l'architecte, accompagnés d'une iconographie regroupant 350 illustrations, photos, cartes postales, axonométries, plans, coupes et élévations, Louis Martin a mis en place, dans un ouvrage très étoffé, des fondations solides permettant de répondre à ces interrogations. Architecte oui, mais aussi penseur et critique de l'architecture, artiste engagé et pédagogue ayant donné son essor à une véritable école de pensée montréalaise, Charney a suivi sa propre voie qu'il est possible de retracer dans le livre de Martin. L'ouvrage comporte également en introduction des essais éclairants de George Baird et de Réjean Legault qui soulignent tous deux l'intérêt et l'impact de la démarche de design urbain que Charney a contribué à développer, et de Georges Adamczyk qui voit dans l'œuvre foisonnante et multiple de Charney (architecture, paysage, installation, sculpture, photographie, art public et écrits) une cohérence et une continuité exemplaires.