
Canadian Centre for Architecture, An Appreciation

ADOLF K. PLACZEK

Avery Librarian Emeritus

RÉSUMÉ

La fondation en 1979 du Centre Canadien d'Architecture fut un événement sans précédent dans l'histoire de l'architecture. C'est grâce à l'intelligence et à la prévoyance de son fondateur Phyllis Lambert, architecte, historien de l'architecture et défenseur de la sauvegarde des monuments historiques, que le cca fut créé et réalisé. L'organisation du Centre Canadien d'Architecture est unique. Tout en étant une institution autonome, il remplit plusieurs fonctions qui jusqu'à maintenant faisaient l'objet d'institutions disparates: centre de recherche sur l'architecture, bibliothèque, archives, musée. La richesse des collections du cca, livres, dessins et estampes, photographies et archives est étonnante. Elles s'étendent de la première édition imprimée à Florence

en 1485 du *De re aedificatoria* de Léon Battista Alberti et des dessins originaux d'architectes tels que Nicholas Hawksmoor, Pietro Bracci et Mies Van der Rohe, jusqu'aux dessins et gravures des derniers édifices d'Arata Isozaki et Michael Graves.

Grâce à la richesse de ses collections et à ses activités multiples d'envergure nationale et internationale, le Centre Canadien d'Architecture pourra promouvoir la connaissance approfondie de l'architecture et de son histoire chez le grand public, les architectes et les chercheurs. En outre, avec toutes ses ressources, le cca sera en mesure d'influencer le développement de l'architecture à l'avenir.

For imaginative things to happen, there has to be an agent, a catalyst, a Big Bang! It is thus altogether apt to begin this introduction by naming in Shakespearean fashion the true begetter of the Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), or as she probably would prefer to be called, the founder: Phyllis Lambert. And if the creation, or founding, of the cca was not a Big Bang, it was certainly an important event for architectural history, architectural study and architectural appreciation. And it was Phyllis Lambert, architect, architectural historian, preservationist and writer, famous among other achievements, for the vital part she played in the Seagram building, who dreamed up the cca and brought it to reality.

What then is this cca that was so hopefully and imaginatively founded and started in 1979? At the time it seemed to be such a great dream to be realized from such modest beginnings. Now, however, it can be appreciated and celebrated as an institution of extreme importance: truly the Canadian Centre for Architecture. The name itself is

felicitous: it can just as easily and properly be called the Centre Canadien d'Architecture without losing the precious acronym cca by which the Centre is now so widely known. Indeed, this bilingual acronym fixes the cca firmly in its place: Montréal, and makes it indeed a *Canadian Centre*, a Centre *Canadien*. What was also hopefully and imaginatively envisioned in 1979 was a *Centre*: that is, in the mind of its founder and, following her, of all those who like myself had the honour of participating in the Centre's early years, an independent and autonomous institution for architectural research and for the accumulation of architectural writing, architectural drawings, architectural archival material—all of this together, the source material of architecture. The emphasis is on "independent and autonomous." The cca now has one of the major architectural libraries of the Western world. But unlike the other architecture libraries, such as the Avery Architectural Library of Columbia University, the library of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris or the Library of the Royal Institute of British Architects, the cca is not under

the governance of any other organization, neither of a university nor of an *école*, nor of an architects' institute. The CCA is centred entirely on its own aspirations. It also has its own superbly conceived and executed building which itself shows how a new library *cum* study centre *cum* museum can be designed. Or should one say study centre *cum* library *cum* museum? Here the three are one, one creative unit which will, by its powerful new presence and mission, and the immense richness of its holdings, attract scholars, architects, designers, critics, and indeed promising students, and will, indeed, attract the whole range of those concerned with architecture.

The third world to be stressed in the designation CCA is of course *Architecture*: architecture as a public concern. This definition, not only for its institutional activities, but also for its collecting and acquisition policies, sets the CCA apart from the other libraries of architecture, and considerably widens its scope and range. Social, economic, managerial, engineering and urbanistic aspects are considered in conjunction with the vast amount of primarily architectural literature published through the ages. An examination of recent acquisition lists will confirm the amazing breadth and depth of what has been brought together for this library of public concern and, again in Phyllis Lambert's words, of architectural literacy. Since 1979, a collection has been built that in many respects equals those of the other great architectural libraries of the world. What has been acquired, both through the immense generosity of the founder and through the indefatigable dedication, skill, scholarship and zest of herself and the CCA's remarkable staff, makes the CCA in many ways almost unique: from a few books (and periodicals, of course) to a vast—and still growing—library. There they all are, the great books of architecture—beginning with Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* published in Florence in 1485 and the first edition of Vitruvius' *De Architectura* printed in Rome between 1486 and 1492, through the epochal treatises of the Renaissance, the folio editions of the glorious eighteenth century, the many, many books of the multi-faceted nineteenth century, on to the latest tracts, in which even Post-Modernism seems to have become old hat.

Together with a library of such scope there must be an archive of original documents. The CCA's collection is likewise most remarkable and is likewise divided into three departments: Archives, Prints and Drawings, and Photographs. The CCA possesses (or is it the other way around?) a whole treasure-house of original drawings such as the

collection of drawings by architect and sculptor, Pietro Bracci, or the album of drawings by Nicholas Hawksmoor for Lord Chief Justice King's home at Ockham Park to an outstanding collection of modern drawings by Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and even quite recent acclaimed architects such as Arata Isozaki and Michael Graves. The strong Canadian holdings, above all the archive of the office of Ernest Cormier, must be given special mention. Added to all this—and again, the CCA stands apart from most architectural libraries in that respect—a collection of architectural photographs of the very highest quality has been developed. While it is easy to distinguish an original drawing from a print, it is more difficult to define the difference between an *original* photograph and a *re-print*. The CCA's collection is remarkable, beginning with some incredible daguerreotypes of the 1840s. Speaking more generally, the importance to a great library of drawings, photographs and manuscript material cannot be over-emphasized. All great architectural libraries have come to recognize this just as the CCA did from its very inception, with dramatic success.

A distinguishing feature of a collection of such richness (and, to repeat, ever growing, not static) will be its function as a museum. Very consciously, not only in the design of its new building, but already in its original programme, the CCA was also to be a museum—this added role strengthening one of its functions as a study centre. A museum engenders exhibitions, and indeed some of the CCA's exhibitions have been beautifully effective and successful, above all *Photography and Architecture 1839-1939*. Exhibitions should lead to publications, as indeed did the great photography show, which resulted in a book that has become a classic in the field. Great hopes accompany the CCA publication programme which is gathering momentum.

To sum up, the CCA—library, archive, museum, study centre—must be viewed as a unit in its activities, in its staffing, as well as in its holdings. In its projected mission it will need the interest and support of the public, as well as that of the architectural and art historical professions, of governments, and of the private sector. Its assignment is, after all, "architecture as a public concern." The CCA is now ten years old, and it is amazing how much has been achieved in these ten years. And now, with the new building, on to an equally successful second decade!

176 W. 87th Street
New York, New York 10027