

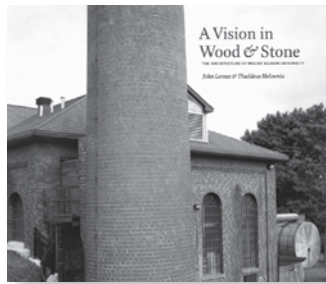
John Leroux and Thaddeus Holownia
*A Vision in Wood & Stone: The Architecture
of Mount Allison University*

Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press Ltd, 2016
234 pp.
\$65.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9781554471409

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The cover of *A Vision in Wood & Stone: The Architecture of Mount Allison University* features the university's 1931 central heating plant designed by C.A. Fowler & Company. A utilitarian structure of brick with a steel frame, it is a vision in neither wood nor stone; however, the photograph, composed with the plant's great cylindrical stack at centre, carefully cropped on top and bottom and seeming to obscure a view of the boiler's house behind it, sets the tone for a book about an evolving cultural landscape. Indeed, while universities and colleges can be extraordinary environments, places that facilitate and represent intellectual ideals, they are also everyday places and succumb to more mundane pressures like producing economical and reliable heating.

This book derives much of its success from the collaboration of a renowned photographer, Thaddeus Holownia, with an architect and art and architectural historian, John Leroux. The two had worked together before on the book *St. Andrews Architecture 1604–1966* (also Gaspereau Press, 2010) and continue in *A Vision in Wood & Stone* to complement each other's strengths. Holownia is known for his large-format and deeply detailed photographs that often explore the evolving and altered landscape, including built landscapes marked by structures such as the former Radio Canada International transmission station towers (once seen from Mount Allison) and Irving gas stations. As a photographer and professor of Fine Arts at Mount Allison, Holownia no doubt knows the



campus with an intimacy matched by few. Leroux, for his part, signals from the first sentences of the book how Holownia's photographs support his history of the place as "a richly layered landscape of beauty, history and consequence" (13). Leroux is the most prolific architectural historian in New Brunswick, counting over a dozen titles authored, including a survey of the province's architecture with Robert Leavitt, Stuart Smith, and Gary Hughes (*Building New Brunswick: An Architectural History* [Goose Lane Editions, 2008]) and an architectural history of another New Brunswick campus (*Building a University: The Architecture of UNB* [Goose Lane Editions, 2010]). He thus writes with a deep knowledge of place and context. Having trained and practiced as an architect and art historian, Leroux evinces his passion for both buildings and art. His text nicely weaves together clear and engaging architectonic description with a strong sense of atmosphere.

This book examines the buildings of Mount Allison University as material evidence of the institution's responses to social, cultural, economic, and educational changes over a period of 175 years. It details the physical and social transformations of the university from its Methodist origins as Mount Allison Wesleyan Academy in the early 1840s (with an imposing Neoclassical edifice designed by Samuel C. Bugbee) to university status in 1886 (with its eclectic, Neo-Gothic Centennial Hall by Fairweather and Teed of 1884 still affirming its Methodist affiliation); through the world wars

and reconstruction (which resulted in great expansion in student enrolment, and by the 1960s, a modern master plan by Brown, Brisley & Brown) to the recent opening of the Purdy Crawford Centre for the Arts (Zeidler Partnership Architects, 2014), which reaffirmed the prominence of fine arts education at Mount Allison. We learn how buildings rose to meet new or well-established interests and educational imperatives or were built to replace those lost in numerous fires (especially over the first hundred years). Building campaigns resulted in some outstanding structures, including Brown, Brisley & Brown's 1965 Mount Allison Chapel (Leroux describes it as "not only the most beautiful Modern building in New Brunswick, but one of the most architecturally inspirational as well" [160]), in addition to some underwhelming buildings, like the three men's residences opened in September 1959 on extremely tight budgets and scheduling requirements (135).

The discussion of the three men's residences (Bennett House, Bigelow House and Hunton House), which were substantially renovated in the early 1980s and given metal mansard roofs and brick masonry veneers (137), exemplifies one of the important contributions of the book. By looking at the longer life of the institution and evaluating the buildings both at their inception and as the campus evolved around them, Leroux and Holownia draw attention to the importance of heritage to university campuses. In the rush to improve and update in Postmodern guise the hastily constructed modernist residences, large abstract murals by Lawren P. Harris were demolished, underlining a lack of regard for the heritage of modernist buildings, which could have been more sensitively renovated. Another of Harris' ceramic tile murals, Leroux recounts, was only barely saved by former head of the Fine Arts department Virgil Hammock, who stopped contractors from shattering the tiles during the renovation of the Avard-Dixon Building in 1994 (201). The 1959

Avard-Dixon building had included a bold concrete block, glass, and panel façade and had joined the slightly earlier Physics and Engineering Building in heralding the use of International Style modernism at Mount Allison. In his assessment of the 1994 renovation, with its sandstone façade, square windows, hipped roof and gabled dormers, Leroux argues that while the “new stone skin may have appeared to better align with the visual language of the campus’s brand, a pluralistic mix of styles and materials would have been much more in keeping with the architectural narrative of Mount Allison” (201). Leroux’s often impassioned text, buttressed by Holownia’s carefully composed photographs, urges readers to look thoughtfully at their own environments and appreciate the buildings and landscapes, regardless of style or age.

A Vision in Wood & Stone is meticulously researched. The text not only introduces readers to the buildings of the campus and the important benefactors and university leaders who raised the funds to make them a reality, but the architects and contractors involved in the design and construction. We learn for instance that the Mount Allison Wesleyan Academy Building helped pave the way for Samuel Bugbee to launch a successful architectural career in California in the 1860s, and that Mount Allison administration relied heavily on two firms at crucial moments in its modern development, C.A. Fowler & Company from the 1930s to the 1960s and Brown, Brisley & Brown from the 1960s to the early 1980s. While the book is tightly focused on Mount Allison, references are occasionally made to other architects and institutions (e.g., McKim, Mead and White, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Eliel and Eero Saarinen), setting the campus within a larger architectural discourse. Leroux writes in an accessible manner, explaining, for instance, different architectural fashions and styles. This makes this book a useful

primer for those being introduced to architectural history in Canada from a regional perspective.

The book is beautifully designed, with a consistent black and white format that allows Holownia’s contemporary photographs to flow well with the historical images. It is lavishly illustrated, and includes some aerial photographs and the occasional site plan (one from 1929 and one from the late 1960s). However, site plans in each chapter would have helped the reader unfamiliar with the place and would also have underscored the fact that this is a history not just of individual buildings but of an evolving campus, and would have reinforced the idea of the campus as layered (perhaps palimpsestic) landscapes.

Easily overlooked as everyday environments yet often designed with high ideals in mind (Mount Allison is described as a kind of modern Acropolis [20; 32]), campuses are unique places worthy of close scrutiny; they are sites of some extraordinary buildings and have played important roles in Canadian social and cultural history. While Canadian campus plans and buildings have seen attention in, for instance, *The Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, few have been the subject of sustained historical monographs. Leroux and Holownia’s book offers an excellent model. ¶

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