
Regionalism Redux: Originality and Architecture in western Canada

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In 1981 I published a collection of essays titled *Radical Regionalism*. In that collection were two essays that have relevance to the issue of regional architecture in western Canada. One was titled “On Originality” and the other was titled “Douglas Cardinal: Architect of the Spirit.” In the former essay I wrote, “In western Canada those who are seeking to be original in their art are those who are trying to create an indigenous form. The extent to which they are able to generate such a form is the extent to which they can be called original.” By original form I meant a distinct cultural expression or simply style. I went on to say that unless a culture created a distinct style that culture lacked originality and lacking originality it could barely be described as a separate culture. I answered the call to originality in the latter essay on Douglas Cardinal. In it I argued that the then Edmonton-based Alberta architect, Douglas Cardinal, who was of aboriginal background, offered precisely the kind of originality I was writing about. He inaugurated an architectural style that was indigenous because it was based philosophically and visually in aboriginal identities that had evolved in western Canada for thousands of years. His development of curvi-linear design and emphasis on circular patterns was meant to convey First Nations

traditions and worldviews about existence. No other architect in western Canada had created such a vision. He had created an original form, which gave western Canada a claim, of sorts, to distinctness as a culture. I say “of sorts” because his vision was not rooted in the settler culture that dominated the region, but in its oppressed minority, the original inhabitants of the region. So his work came to be read as an expression of that particular group, of his own cultural origins, rather than a reflection of the whole region and its general population. The great divide between aboriginal and settler societies and cultures made his designs a specific voice, not a general one. In order to understand more fully what originality means for western Canadian architecture in the 21st century, in particular in the age of the internet, we need to study how settler society in the region handled architectural values and identities.

Originality and Western Canadian Architecture: From the Edwardian Period to Late Modernism

In western Canada the dominance of an agrarian-based society lasted from 1900 to 1970. It ended with the rise of OPEC (1973) and the birth of a powerful oil and gas extraction economy, primarily in Alberta, but

also involving Saskatchewan, which also developed a separate mining economy based on potash extraction. Settler architecture arrived with the rise of an agrarian society and urban centers, like Winnipeg. In 1905 both Alberta and Saskatchewan became provinces. To announce their new political status they commissioned the construction of legislative buildings. These buildings were monumental in scale and reflected the British culture that dominated the region’s settler society, in particular, its elites. Manitoba, as the first province in western Canada (1871) had a head start on the other two, but the current Manitoba Legislative Building was begun in 1913 and completed in 1920. The style is “neoclassical” and the design is by the U.K. architect Frank Worthington Simon (1862-1933). The building is topped with a gilded statue of the Greek god Hermes. The Saskatchewan Legislative Building reflects a similar style. Built between 1908 and 1912 in what has been termed the analogous “Beaux Arts” style, which is simply the neoclassicism taught at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The Canadian architect William Sutherland Maxwell studied at that school, as did the architect of the Manitoba building. The Alberta Legislative Building was completed in 1913 and designed by Allan Merrick Jeffers and Richard Blakey and displays the same style as the other two prairie legislative buildings. The Beaux-Arts style was fashionable at the turn of the twentieth century. Jeffers (1875-1926) was an American from Rhode Island, who was the provincial architect for Alberta. The nationalities of the three main designers of these buildings, Anglo-Scottish, American, and Canadian are a reflection of the elite nationalities of the settler society. This elite championed the creation of an architecture espoused in Paris and based on Greek, Roman, and Egyptian motifs. This architecture had no roots in the region. Curiously at the same time these monuments to colonial political power and prestige were being erected in a late-frontier society, an indigenous form was being developed in the United States, called “The Prairie School.” Its leading proponent and architectural genius was Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) who espoused “organic architecture” that drew its inspiration from the geography in which the building was situated. The Prairie School was known for its horizontal style, especially in residential buildings, which were meant to express the terrain in



The Manitoba Legislative Building
Source: Government of Manitoba



Saskatchewan Legislative Building
Source: commons.wikimedia.org



Alberta Legislative Building
Source: Wikimedia.org



St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Red Deer, Alberta

Source: *openbuildings.com*

which they were located. The whole idea of working organically re-appeared in western Canada decades later with Douglas Cardinal, who trained in Texas. In his collected essays from the 1970s we find titles such as "The Human Organism versus the Mechanical Grid" and "The Indian Concept of Oneness." What we find in this earlier Edwardian period the first movement in a conflicted architectural trajectory—that of the imported styles fashionable in metropolitan and imperial centers eventually being challenged by indigenous creativity. Cardinal's architecture was an indigenous reaction to importation.

Flash-forward to the 1960s. We are in the late modernist period of architecture and the projected conflict has become real. In Alberta Cardinal builds St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Red Deer. It is 1968. In Winnipeg the Macau-born Portuguese architect Gustavo Da Rosa (1933-) designs the Winnipeg Art Gallery (1971) with its ship-like prow. Da Rosa had trained in the U.S. and moved to Winnipeg in 1960 to teach. Both buildings represent forms of originality that differed from the elite creators of the Edwardian period. For Cardinal it was aboriginality; for Da Rosa it

was his ethnic heritage based in a seafaring nationality. Both men represented minorities and neither building was inspired by the former American Prairie School. Western Canada was beginning to create architecture that was not linked to contemporary movements fashionable in other places. The general historical context for the appearance of Cardinal's work was the radical sixties with its anti-war and civil rights protests in the United States and the emergence of a Red Power movement.

In the case of Da Rosa the influences are less clear. In the jury's report the drawing used to illustrate his winning design includes the Manitoba Legislative Building in the background, which is the view from the prow of the building looking south to the legislative grounds. The juxtaposition of the two buildings is symbolically historic. The triangular site was perfectly suited to the ship design and Manitoba, while a prairie province, is the home of two of the largest fresh-water lakes in the world that take up a total of area of almost 30,000 sq. kms. At the same time a geographically-inspired building was designed for the University of Lethbridge by Arthur Erickson (1924-2009), Canada's

leading modernist architect. Situated in the coulees that run down to the Oldman River, the building (1969-1972) is a nine-level facility built into the landscape in such a way as to disappear from prairie level, while appearing in as horizontally bold design from below. As a western Canadian from British Columbia, Erickson was influenced by the dramatic geography features of his home province, from the vastness of the Pacific Ocean to its towering mountain ranges. Erickson's vision became enviro-centric with an emphasis on space and grandeur. Drawing on the natural landscape where the University of Lethbridge is situated, the building becomes a bridge across a ravine, a structure that brings together two similar formations to capture the prairie-like flatness that surrounds the river valley.

One could argue that the three late modernist buildings by three different Canadian architects cannot be compared properly with the single-function legislative buildings of the Edwardian period. One is church, another is an art gallery, and the third is a university. While the Edwardian buildings are all stone construction, the late modernist buildings use different materials—the church is built of brick, the gallery of Tyndall stone, and the university is of concrete. I believe this diversity and the diversity of its architects is integral to the indigenous moment in western Canadian architecture. Originality was not one-dimensional or singular; it was pluralistic and diverse. The sameness of the Edwardian buildings reflects the colonial mentality of its day and its desire for conformity. Canada in the late sixties was alive with the celebration of Canada's centennial with a strong emphasis on an emerging identity that was separate from its colonial ancestry. This nationalism, which carried on into the 1970s, was the ideological context that allowed architectural innovation to occur.

To respond to the issue of my argument comparing apples and oranges, I will broaden my argument from simply legislative buildings in the Edwardian period to Winnipeg's St. Boniface Cathedral, a powerful expression of Franco-Manitoban Catholicism designed by Jean-Omer Marchand of Montreal and built early in the twentieth century. The cathedral was an expression of a religious and linguistic identity that had been part of western Canada since the fur trade era. The cathedral's style is French Romanesque revival, which



University of Lethbridge, southern Alberta

Source: *University of Lethbridge*



The Winnipeg Art Gallery

Source: *National Gallery of Canada Magazine*



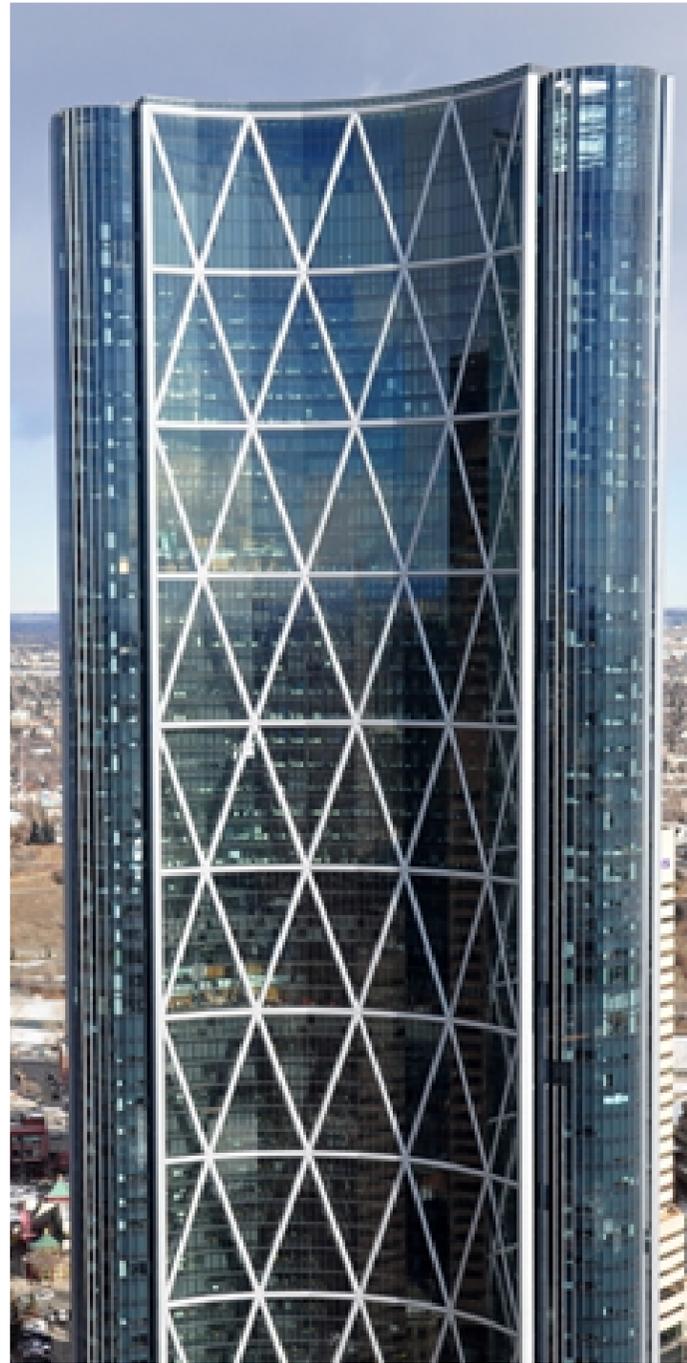
St. Boniface Cathedral, Winnipeg (1906-1968)

Source: *University of Manitoba Archives*

found its inspiration in the French churches of medieval times. It was not done in the Beaux-Arts neoclassical style of the legislative buildings but it was a similar expression of non-indigenous cultural values. Its design supports my argument that the central feature of settler society was the importation of colonizing values and the rejection of regional originality.

Originality and Postmodernism

While the settler society promoted conformity and replication of mother-country identities in architecture, the 1960s represented an outburst of originality because of the historic forces at play—from political radicalism and the emergence of oppressed minorities to a strengthened Canadian nationalism. By the 1980s these forces had subsided and a new era of economic emphasis began, signaled by the North America Free Trade agreement. Then came a resurgent capitalist global marketplace with the demise of the communist economies of the Soviet Union and China. Technological innovation such as the internet added to the globalization of the world's marketplaces. In this new context the promotion of originality as a regionalist project no longer appealed or made sense. The region economically was post-agrarian and very much part of First World attitudes and pre-occupations. This orientation continued into the digital era of the twenty-first century, where instant communication became both innovative and all-powerful. Originality became a commercialized product that was marketed globally by corporate interests. If one had the money, one could hire the best in the world. As a result importation of architectural designs came back to prominence. A good example of this reality is expressed by the Bow Tower in Calgary that was constructed between 2007 and 2012. The wealth of the city is based on oil and gas revenues from traditional and oil sands extraction in the province. The tower was named after Calgary's main river, but that was the end of indigenous references, other than the two Calgary-based energy companies that inaugurated the project as their headquarters. The building was designed by Foster+Partners of the United Kingdom, an international powerhouse with projects around the globe. The building was meant to reflect the success and ambitions of Calgary's elite that had created a narrative for itself as "world-class."



The Bow Tower in Calgary
Source: the-bow.com

This emphasis on world-class status meant engaging the leading architects in the world. It also meant having the funds to pay for this status. At the same time that the Bow Tower was opened, the City of Calgary opened a pedestrian and cycling bridge across the Bow River. The Peace Bridge was designed by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. While stunning



The Peace Bridge, Calgary
Source: [shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

in appearance, the bridge was a reflection of the aspirational concept of Calgary as a world-class city. The bridge could have been situated across most any urban river in the world.

Regional architecture has come full circle from the Edwardian to the postmodernist period. What began as a cultural importation has returned to cultural importation and for similar reasons. A century ago western Canadian architecture was meant to express the dynamic colonization of the region and its roots in European identity and what the region's elite considered fashionable. There was a short period of originality during late modernism, but that originality was displaced by the globalized consciousness of postmodernism. Fundamentally, there have been two opposing forces in western Canada's regional identity—the forces of conformity and the forces of originality. One should consider conformity as the base or horizontal stream that, from time to time, is disrupted by a vertical stream of original creativity reflecting the indigenous history and geography of the region. Like predictions of volcanic eruptions, one can only say that an eruption of originality is inevitable, but its timing is dependent on historical forces beyond our control.

Notes:

- 1- The essay was originally the preface to my edited collection of Douglas Cardinal's writings. The book was titled *Of the Spirit: The Writings of Douglas Cardinal* published in 1977.
- 2- George Melnyk, *Radical Regionalism*, (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), 39.
- 3- For a discussion of the ideological manifestations of various socio-economic periods in the region see George Melnyk, ed. *Riel to Reform: A History of Protest in Western Canada*, (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1992).
- 4- George Melnyk, ed. *Of the Spirit: The Writings of Douglas Cardinal*, (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1977).
- 5- http://www.winnipegarchitecture.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Architecture-Canada_February_1968.pdf