

Transcending the Real: Cultural Inflections of Canadian Sacred Architecture

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I. Regionalism and multiculturalism

Throughout history sacred architecture has been closely tied to the geography and identity of defined natural landscapes. In more recent treatments of the much-debated theme of Critical Regionalism, ritual and sacred space continue to be an illustrative touchstone. The regionalist focus might at first be thought of as antithetical to the idea of multiculturalism (which we are examining here at this conference), given its overt emphasis on the local and the particular. What I want to suggest, however, is that by its concern for relating specific contexts to the larger concerns of modernism and even what might be called an evolving “world architecture,” regionalism is in fact at the heart of a discussion of how multicultural contexts find built expression. In order to make that point, I wish to make reference to examples of modern Canadian sacred buildings that have a particularly intentional regional ethos that consistently address issues of topography, material, and context in a distinctively powerful way.

Toronto itself remains an especially appropriate venue for this discussion. At the end of April, Ramachandra Guha, the highly-regarded and influential historian of modern India, called public attention (once again) to Toronto’s celebrated tradition of multiculturalism when he tweeted, “Toronto’s multiculturalism is effortless and understated—whereas New York’s is more contrived and labored.” For Guha, whose writings on India address inter-religious relations in a multi-religious state, multiculturalism is tied up with bilingualism. Not unlike the Canadian model itself, Guha understands multicultural policy as interwoven with a certain bilingual status. As Guha writes, a foreign language is a window into another culture, another civilization, another way (or ways) of living in the world.

At an analogical level, I would argue that certain strains of regionalist architecture have the potential to be an essentially bilingual enterprise. In the most thoughtfully designed buildings there is often a clear attempt to relate discourses that are alien to one another—discourses such as the natural and the humane, the local and the universal, the traditional and the modern.

II. The Canadian regionalist tradition of sacred architecture

By way of illustrating the nature of an architectural bilingualism within a wider context, one could turn to certain Canadian architects who are leading figures in the recent evolution of modern religious building outside of the Western world, such as the Iranian-born Canadian, Fariborz Sahba or the Israeli-born Canadian émigré Moshe Safdie. The strong cross-cultural vein evident within the context of some of their ecclesiastical and spiritually focused works is also the legacy of some of Canada’s other leading modernist architects. In this regard I am thinking of leading examples of Canadian religious architecture carried out in the late 1960s and 70s by prominent designers such as Douglas Cardinal; Etienne-Joseph Gaboury; and Ron Thom. Equally important to this discussion of Canadian innovation with respect to modernist religious building following the Second World War are the experiments in Quebec by Evans Saint-Gelais and Fernand Tremblay and Paul-Marie Côté; or Léonce Desgagné and Paul-Marie Côté as well as the work by the Saskatchewan architect Clifford Wiens.

III. Shim-Sutcliffe's Religious Architecture

A core question can shape an entire creative practice. Behind the work of the Canadian architecture firm, Shim-Sutcliffe Architects, stands the question, "Is there a place for nature and the culture of the local within the modernist project?"¹ Seen against the background of regionally oriented works of Canadian architecture, Shim-Sutcliffe's engagement with architecture as a quest to address this very question comes into sharper focus. Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe's manner of investigating this question is strongly informed by their preoccupation with a corollary point of inquiry, namely, "the enduring question of light and its role in northern latitude." As a result, their design process overall is shaped by a self-conscious focus on research into "geomorphology, climate, and cultural history."²

These investigations mark their religious architecture with an overt motivation to address the nature of materials—especially wood and steel—as these may change through contact with light, water, and the demands of a particular topographical condition such as forested ravines or northern lakes and rivers. This is evident, for example, in their design for the Jewish Reform Congregation Bet Ha'am built in South Portland, Maine; their renovation of the non-denominational St. Catherine's Chapel in Massey College at the University of Toronto; and the chapel and retirement home recently completed for the Sisters of St. Joseph in Toronto, and the Fung Loy Kok Place of Worship (Daoist) also in Toronto.

Shim-Sutcliffe describe their architecture as determined by an allegiance to the Canadian landscape, in particular the territory located at the bottom edge of the rugged Canadian Shield—the stone "necklace" of ancient metamorphic rock left by retreating glaciers that wraps around Hudson's Bay. In the 1920s and 30s this landscape, with its geomorphic and mythological dimensions, was the focus for the Group of Seven who depicted this raw and rugged wilderness with a new vision of the land.

IV. Zygmunt Bauman: Transcending the Real

Brigitte Shim has described the aim of their work to situate itself between the "two extreme conditions of the unpredictable forces of nature and the controlled processes of contemporary fabrication." This summary statement suggests, I believe, something of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of culture as praxis, for it is the very pattern of activity that he seeks to describe. In his 1973 book *Culture as Praxis*, Bauman draws out the essential elements of what he calls "the notorious and unyielding ambiguity of the concept of culture." In his understanding, the generic idea of culture is a term coined "in order to overcome the persistent philosophical opposition between the spiritual and the real, thought and matter, body and mind." The means by which humankind overcomes these antinomies is the creation of meaningful structures that simultaneously embrace the given-ness of the natural, external, physical, objective world—and the subjective, interior, spiritual, intellectual life by which human beings create and sustain meaning.

In the variety of sacred spaces that are included in the corpus of modern Canadian sacred architecture, the evocation of the spiritual is made precisely through a sensibility for this interplay of the natural and the humane. Material is acknowledged as both a gift of nature, and an object for refined manipulation; and the natural elements of light, wood, and water become evocative of a meeting point between the ineffable and the material.

¹ Brigitte Shim, "Nature, Culture of the Local," *A+U Architecture and Urbanism* 11/458 (August 2008), 14-19.

² Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe, "The Craft of Place," in Kenneth Frampton, *Five North American Architects* (Columbia University and Lars Müller Publishers, 2012), 41.

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