

Shorter Articles

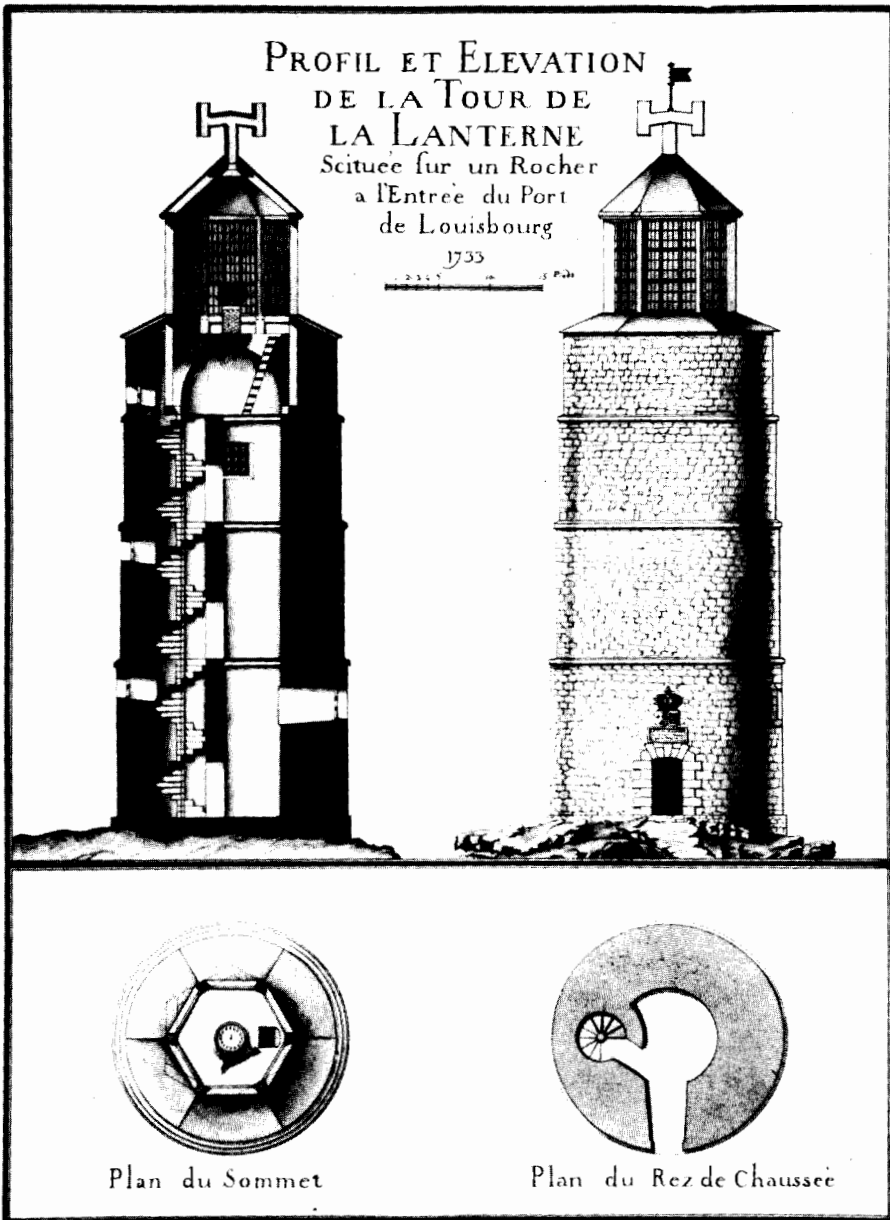
Architectural Records and Archives in Canada: Toward a National Programme

by JAMES KNIGHT¹

Archival institutions ought to be collecting architectural records for reasons which transcend the popularity of the history of architecture or the current preoccupation with heritage buildings. The need for shelter and the propensity to order space are universal preoccupations of humanity. Building, at the heart of the human experience, is a fundamental social and cultural activity requiring and expressing organization, intelligence and aesthetic sensibility.

From a practical viewpoint, architectural records are indispensable when buildings, monuments, or cities are recycled, restored, or rebuilt. For example, when renovations are undertaken on a structure, the original plans may be crucial in determining which walls are load-bearing and which are not — information which can prevent miscalculation and save money. If an attempt is being made to restore individual structures or a group of buildings to their original appearance, architectural records may provide the only accurate guide. The authentic rebuilding of both central Warsaw after its destruction in World War II and of the razed fortress of

1 Literature on the subject of architectural archives is virtually non-existent. Many of the ideas discussed in this paper emerged during a conference organized by the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada, entitled "Architectural Records and Archives in Canada". The participants included Phyllis Blakeley (Public Archives of Nova Scotia), Roger Nason (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick), Louise Minh (Les Archives nationales du Québec), André Laflamme (Les Archives de la ville de Québec), Margaret Van Every (Public Archives of Ontario), Fred Hollingsworth (President of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada), Brian Speirs (Territorial Archives of the Yukon), Alan K. Lathrop representing the New York based Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, Martin Weil (restoration architect with Parks Canada and President, Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada), Hugh A. Taylor (Public Archives of Canada), Ernest Ingles (University of Calgary Library), Harold Kalman, architectural historian now residing in Ottawa, and myself. I sincerely thank all participants for their contributions and the Canada Council without whose support the conference would not have occurred.



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Plans of Louisbourg held in the Bibliothèque nationale and Archives nationales in Paris, and transcripts of these plans and accompanying documentation in the Public Archives of Canada played an essential role in the restoration of the razed fortress. (National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada)

Louisbourg, and the historically accurate rehabilitation of heritage buildings on Great George Street in Charlottetown would have been impossible had not such good architectural records existed.

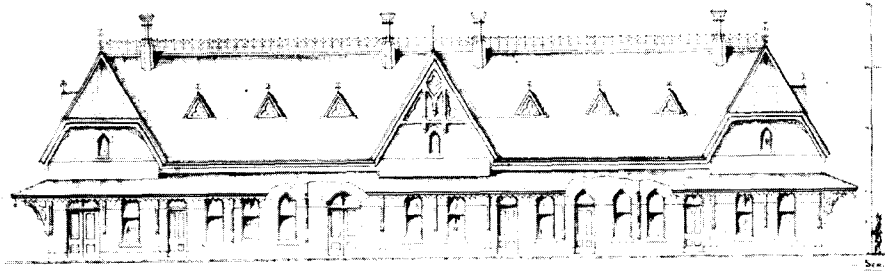
Archivists should collect architectural records for both their aesthetic properties and their intellectual value. Drawings generated during the creative process of building design often are no less works of art than the structure itself, and in an age when yesterday's creations are all too often discarded with thoughtless enthusiasm, these records can be expected to outlive that structure. Academic interest in architectural records ranges from that of the architectural and the social historian to that of the psychologist and sociologist. Working class housing was the subject of a recent study in social history² and several sociologists are examining the influence of spatial arrangements on human behavior.

The word *architecture* conveys many meanings. To the architectural profession it describes both the creative design of buildings and the buildings into which architects have had an input. According to this strict definition, a structure which lacks creative design is not an example of architecture. Since architects are involved with about one in fifty new buildings in Canada, those who adhere to this narrow definition claim that only a small fraction of Canadian buildings stand as architecture. *Architecture* as generally used and understood has a broader meaning, connoting the activity associated with the creation of buildings or the buildings themselves, regardless of their design qualities.

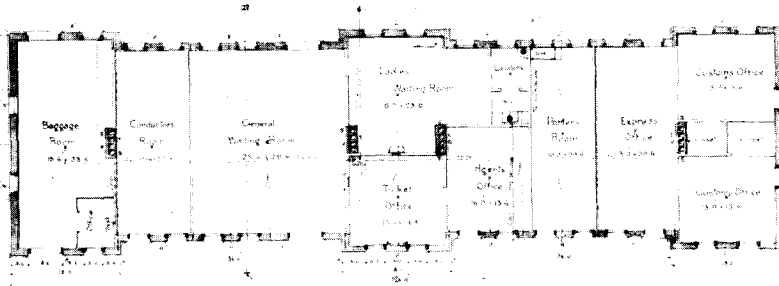
If the archivist assumes the responsibility to ensure a reasonably complete documentation of the activities of a society, then the broader definition of architecture ought to be adopted by archivists concerned with architecture. Archivists' sole preoccupation must not be with the grand and celebrated but must include the vernacular and the pedestrian. Collections in the various archival media should record and reflect such social phenomena as the suburban subdivision, the condominium complex, the shopping mall, the gas station, or the fast food emporium, for our society and civilization are mirrored in both the renowned and the commonplace.

Buildings are such a prevalent cultural phenomenon that almost any document held by an archive is a potential source of information about architecture. For this reason, it is convenient to categorize architectural records as either *secondary* or *primary*. *Secondary records* comprise a broad range of documents through all archival media including diaries, newspapers, assessment rolls, probate records, city directories, maps, bird's-eye views, photographs, paintings and models. Although these

2 Shirley Spragge (Kingston, Ontario) described her study in a paper entitled "The Toronto Housing Company: A Canadian Experiment" at the annual conference of the Canadian Historical Association, Edmonton, 1975.



Front Elevation - being back



Ground Plan

This 1883 plan of the Grand Trunk Railway Station at Windsor, Ontario reflects the artistry of most nineteenth-century architects. The accurate exterior restoration of railway stations being recycled could be dependent on a detailed elevation such as this. (National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada)

types of records frequently contain valuable information about buildings, they are defined as secondary because their creation is not in itself an intrinsic part of the process of erecting a structure. *Primary records* can be identified as those generated in the process of conceiving and building structures, embracing documents created as tools for the planning and the execution of a building. Although for purposes of research in architectural history or for restoration work, primary and secondary records are both important, the variety of the secondary is so vast that this paper limits itself to a discussion of the primary records. Moreover, Canadian archival institutions appear to be more effective in the collection of these secondary records than of the primary, which to this point have been generally ignored.

Architects generate various types of records including the contract between architect and client, detailed notes about the personal tastes, habits, and even financial situation of the client, initial sketch plans, presentation drawings, cost estimates, working drawings, specifications, agreements with contractors and photographs. The more complex the building, the greater the bulk and variety of documents. Many consultants, contractors, sub-contractors and clients may become involved with one job.

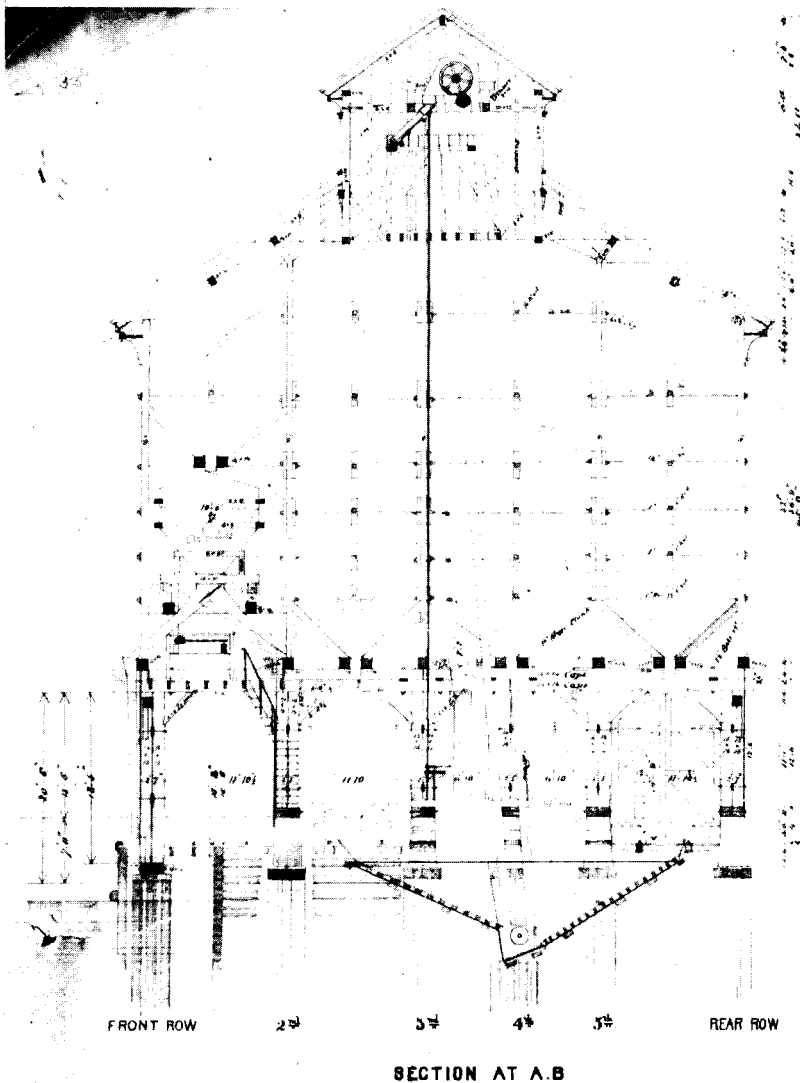
Architects are required by law to retain all documents for six years but, in practice, most keep them for about ten years before their destruction, usually dictated by high storage costs. However, drawings are an exception to this general rule, for they are held for longer periods. All drawings prepared by an architect remain in his property but cannot be used without the written consent of the original client. The architect holds copyright on all drawings until such time as they are published. In addition to documents generated in the process of creating a building, most architects have personal records including letters, drawings, and sketches frequently unrelated to architecture. To the architectural historian, this material is invaluable.

Non-current architectural records are those which an individual or a company has neither practical nor legal requirement to retain. They may relate to buildings constructed six or more years previously; they may have been inherited from a preceding or parent firm, or from an architect who brought his records with him when joining a company; they may have been kept by an architect's family. These records have survived haphazardly, sometimes by pure chance, at other times by choice. In many instances, an architectural firm with a long history or complex genealogy is not conscious of the extent and nature of its non-current holdings; a family of a deceased architect may not be aware of what documents are stored in the attic.

In the United States a group of archivists at the Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota, concerned with architectural records of the nineteenth century undertook a programme of collecting the records of well-known architects, and architects whose work reflected a particular school or style. So little was found that their new programme calls for the retention of *all* primary documents from the nineteenth century. If the experience of collecting non-current architectural materials in the United States has application to the Canadian situation, it is unlikely that an extensive body of nineteenth and early twentieth-century material will be found.

In Canada an attempt must be made to gather as much early architectural material as possible. Locating these early records demands thorough and systematic detective work. Families must be traced.

Genealogies for architectural firms must be investigated. Construction companies which worked for architects must be approached. It may not be too late to unearth some good representative collections which pre-date the twentieth century.



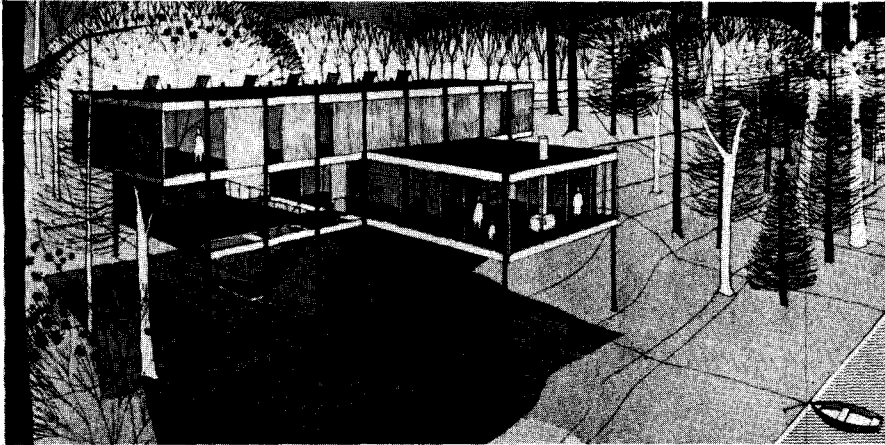
Plans of industrial architecture often describe function as well as form. This plan of an early Upper Canadian grain elevator at Hamilton, prepared in 1862 by the Great Western Railway, shows the intricate workings of the plant. (National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada)

Why has so little survived? First, because an architect is a businessman who must be cost-conscious to be successful. Obsolete records are expensive to maintain; efficiency dictates that they be destroyed. Second, the building itself, not the documents generated in order to construct it, represents for the architect the fruit of his professional labour. Unlike other artists, the architect's drawings and models are of little significance to him. Third, architects seem largely to be forward-looking, *avant-garde* individuals whose inspiration has been directed traditionally toward new ideas, new shapes, new forms to meet the rapidly changing demands of society. Finally, architects seem to lack a well-developed historical consciousness. They are often surprised to learn that archives exist and are astonished that these institutions have some interest in their records.

If tomorrow's archivists and researchers are to avoid the situation facing their predecessors, today's archivists must decide which recent records are worthy of retention and which are not. Haphazard survival must be supplemented by a deliberate national acquisitions programme. Because Canadian archival institutions have acquired so few primary architectural records, because almost no institutions have established priorities, begun programmes, and selectively acquired material, and because so much needs to be done, the definition of a national strategy for the management and collection of architectural records of more recent origin is urgently required. A national strategy might consist of the following elements: a definition of the general categories of primary architectural records for which acquisitions opportunities exist; decisions about how to best utilize the limited capacities of archival institutions in Canada to ensure the rational co-ordination of efforts; and an agreement on the broad responsibilities of various types of institutions, archival and architectural.

The contemporary architectural profession can be divided into three broad groups. In the vanguard are those few architects working on the frontiers of the art, developing new forms of architectural expression. These firms have consistently won awards and competitions and have had their work recognized by architectural publications. The centre group is composed of the professional practitioners who concern themselves mostly with buildings demanded by business. Finally, there are the architects employed by development companies designing such things as large housing projects and shopping malls.

The contribution and influence of the practices in the vanguard are disproportionate to their numbers. Consequently it is appropriate that archivists make serious efforts to establish a close relationship with them and to collect a full record by proper records management techniques. There is an apparent danger in this selective process: will today's measure of achievement be tomorrow's? Composers and painters not infrequently

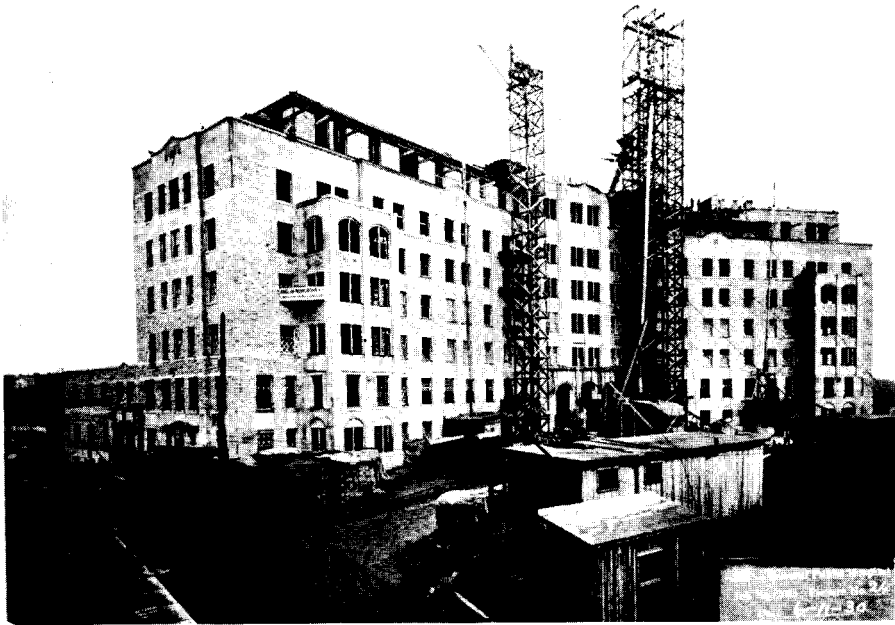
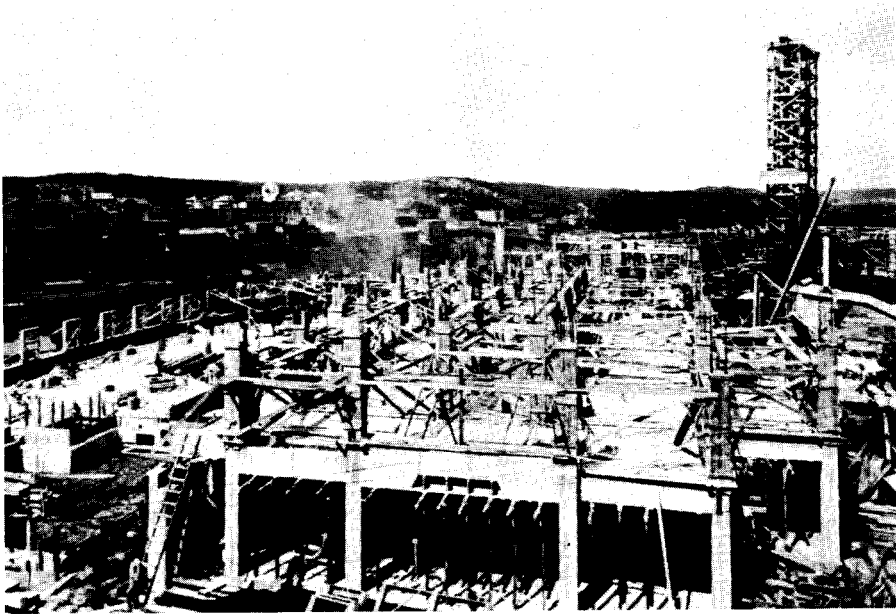


This presentation drawing for the house of Hart Massey in Ottawa shows the dramatic preoccupation of the modern architect with form and massing rather than decorative detail. If buildings disappear, architectural records become the only evidence for the historian analyzing the evolution of styles. (Massey-Flanders Collection, National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada).

have remained unrecognized or been rejected by their contemporaries. Does the same apply to architects? Probably not. Most architects who attain greatness are recognized in their day, often as young men. Unlike artists or composers who frequently create in comparative social isolation, architects create environments for people and they must be successful and recognized as such in order to continue creating. Without recognition, there are no commissions and therefore no buildings, whereas a painter of even modest means might create a great deal without the recognition or support of his contemporaries.

Many more firms fall into the broad centre group: the practitioners. Their number is greater, so it would seem less urgent to begin collecting in this area. There is a larger possibility that more records will survive by chance. However, since the work of such firms represents what is currently acceptable, an adequate sampling should be acquired, particularly of such documents as presentation and working drawings.

The final group is involved principally with large development companies. Given the accepted responsibility of preserving representative and significant documentary evidence, archives should collect not only documentation generated by professional architects, but also that generated by the *mega-builders* of our society—land development companies, the suppliers of mass housing, the builders of shopping centres, of office complexes, of fast food chains, and of other urban manifestations. Unfortunately, the archival profession has failed to come to terms with these giants whose impact on the built environment is matched by their



These photographs illustrate the construction of the General Public Hospital, St. John, New Brunswick in 1930. The top photograph shows a background streetscape now destroyed. The portfolio containing these photos also includes views of the original hospital built on the same site in 1862. (Alward Collection, National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada)

influence in economics, politics, and life styles. If history and other human investigation are not to be based on random scraps of evidence surviving by accident, researchers will need scientifically selected documentation describing not only examples of the work of these corporations, but, if possible, the entire articulation of their empire. The archival resources demanded by the collection of a *fonds* would limit repositories to a concentration upon one or two companies. Close inter-institutional co-ordination could prevent the wasting of resources and the limiting of evidence, and could ensure that each archives collected the records of a different type of company, such as a land development company, a condominium developer, or a supplier of mobile homes. The only hope that any archival institution has of receiving such collections, the only hope of making such an arrangement attractive to a company, would be by the offer of services including space and records management expertise. Only by this means will a major current collection be acquired, preserving provenance and documentary order, thereby providing a complete historical record of immeasurable value at a controlled cost.

A national acquisition programme for the archives of architecture will be a mammoth undertaking. If the programme is to be successful, it is imperative that responsibility be shared by many institutions. The following comments focus upon the mandate of the various types of archives in Canada relating to architectural records.

The mandate of the Public Archives of Canada encompasses material of national importance in both the private and public sectors. With respect to architecture most work has concentrated upon records relating to the construction of federal public buildings. Beyond this the criterion of national importance becomes somewhat elusive. Some architectural firms are identifiable because they have designed buildings in several provinces. Other documentation of national interest in architecture would include that which describes a national award-winning building, the total documentation of any national architectural competition such as that held for the Toronto City Hall and records relating to the buildings of such events as Expo '67 or the 1976 Olympics. The Public Archives of Canada should be concerned with the records of some of the *mega-builders* active in many parts of Canada, and should assume responsibility for national organizations such as Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, The Home Design Council, The Wood Council, The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, and The National Research Council, all of which have a close relationship with Canadian architecture.

Provincial archives should assume responsibility for the records of buildings erected by provincial governments, the records of architects whose work and reputation are centered in the provincial milieu, provincial housing authorities, the provincial associations of architects and the records of large development companies operating in the province.

The responsibility of the municipal archives should be parallel but with a local focus, and would include the collecting of building permits and assessment records, two important sources for architectural studies. Where municipalities do not have archives, the vacuum should be filled by the provincial archives.

Various universities have established programmes for the collection of architectural records, either as a resource for the teaching of architecture or the history of architecture. What the universities collect is dictated by academic requirements and could possibly conflict with the mandate of strictly archival institutions. However, since so much is available for collection, in practical terms this potential conflict of jurisdiction seems unlikely to occur.

This national programme for the collection of architectural records will require co-ordination, communication, and persistence. The Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada through its Archives Committee is attempting to supply these elements. Although the proposals may appear too ambitious, the work has already begun. Several archives have acquired significant collections in the past months, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada has pledged full cooperation, and some institutions are providing more resources for architectural records. These successes suggest that Canadian archivists have both the desire and the capacity to undertake and to complete a large measure of the objectives defined here.