

# Review Articles

## Good Clean Living: Calgary Modern 1947–1967

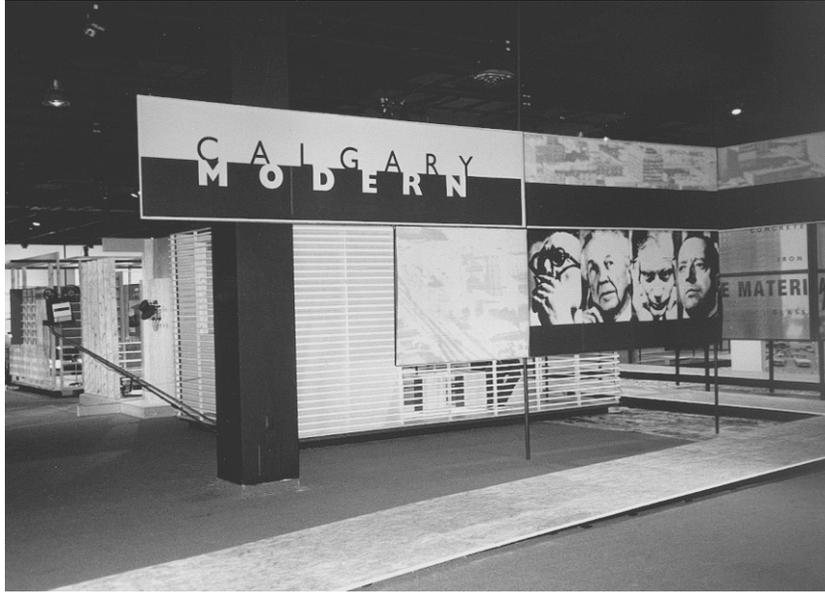
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**RÉSUMÉ** L'exposition *Calgary Modern 1947-1967*, tenue au Nickel Arts Museum de l'université de Calgary, porte sur l'architecture moderne au cours d'une période critique de croissance d'une cité dont l'histoire est largement définie par un modernisme progressiste et optimiste. L'exposition est bâtie autour de huit thèmes inter-reliés : une introduction, le bureau, le logement, la maison, la religion, l'éducation, le loisir et les infrastructures urbaines. L'exposition a été montée de façon intelligente et sobre ; elle est soutenue par une publication qui porte le même titre.

**ABSTRACT** This article reviews the exhibition *Calgary Modern 1947–1967* at the Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary. The exhibition examines modern architecture during a critical period of growth in a city whose history is largely defined by progressive, optimistic modernism. The exhibition is organized around eight related areas: introduction, office, housing, house, worship, education, leisure, and infrastructure. The article contends that *Calgary Modern 1947–1967* was imaginatively and cleanly designed. The exhibition is complemented by a publication of the same name.

The exhibition *Calgary Modern 1947–1967*, which ran from 4 February to 15 April 2000 at the Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary, was satisfying, visually appealing, and intellectually stimulating. Not many exhibitions lure me back for three visits – more than seven hours altogether – but then, in twenty or so visits since 1989, I have come to expect a lot from the Nickle. As they say in their ads: “It’s Your Nickle.”

*Calgary Modern* was conceived and created by a team of varied professionals with a healthy range of expertise, chaired by R. Douglas Gillmor, founding Director of the Architecture Program at the University of Calgary’s Faculty of Environmental Design. The eleven-member Calgary Modern Advisory Committee bristles with architectural and historical knowledge as well as design ability, and it shows. In the words of curator Gerald Forseth, an architect, the aim of the exhibition was to “sensitize a large audience to the importance of Modern architecture in a city whose history is largely defined by progressive, optimistic modernism.” But the organizers wanted to do more than tell a story of achievement. They felt a sense of urgency, because “most of the buildings



The entrance to the exhibition *Calgary Modern 1947–1967*, Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary. Visitors walked up the slight incline to the elevated walkways which continued throughout the exhibition with its many wall panel and airy room-like displays.

Photo courtesy Linda Cunningham

are extant, but under the threat of insensitive alteration or complete demolition.”

Although this review deals primarily with the exhibition *Calgary Modern 1947–1967*, I will also consider the accompanying catalogue, the symposium held in conjunction with the opening, and the oral archives programme. Together they make an impressive package that teaches us about far more than modern architecture in Calgary.

### **Why 1947–1967?**

Imperial Oil had drilled hundreds of dry holes in the Leduc area before 13 February 1947, when Leduc No. 1 blew in and the Alberta oil industry entered the big leagues. As Jane Kondo points out in her essay “Workplace,” new buildings attracted oil company headquarters and influenced the shape of the city. For example, the Barron building, named after Calgary lawyer J.B. Barron, not only helped to keep petroleum head offices in Canada but also ini-

tiated the development of the western end of downtown, away from the retail area in the original core. Naturally, the Barron Building, including Barron's very masculine penthouse, figured prominently in the exhibition.

In his "Curator Statement," Gerald Forseth explains why the exhibition covered a mere twenty years. "After 1967, in Calgary, new architecture increasingly incorporated concepts of historic reference, context, and fit rather than the refined individualism and theoretic design discipline so pervasive in Modernism." But those twenty years established "Calgary as an oil-headquarters city equal to Denver and Oklahoma City."

Oil money did not sit quietly. The money, excitement, and edgy uncertainty of an oil boom generated an extraordinary sense of confidence and adventure, which shaped Calgary. In his essay "Home," Jeremy Sturgess recounts how "Calgary became established [again] as a city of pioneers, and some of these pioneers, visionary but not necessarily sophisticated, risked cash on young architects with new, or at least fresh, ideas to build this city. The 'new' Modernism that inspired these architects was the means to express this entrepreneurial spirit."

For some Calgarians, "if you've got it, flaunt it," became words to live by.

Whereas the foothills landscape was a popular site for visionary building, houses built in established communities became the most ardent heralds of this new architecture. The opportunity to unabashedly flaunt new wealth and new ideology clashed with the more typical pretensions to reflect old money through architectural revivalism. Money could always be spent on versions of excess; it took more real courage than money, plus vision and risk, to hire an architect to venture into new expressions of living. ... Calgary, unfettered by history, was a primed canvas for these new ideas associated with modern architecture.

In the period covered by the exhibition, the petroleum industry took off and the population soared. Calgary became the most American of Canadian cities, the city with more Americans than anywhere outside the U.S. other than a military base. Calgary also began its continuing unfettered sprawl as the city oozed over the surrounding hills and valleys like an amoeba on steroids.

Clearly *Calgary Modern 1947–1967* covers an important period in Canadian urban and architectural history. Clearly the exhibition was driven by knowledge and passion. Does it work? Undeniably yes. Why? That is the important question.

### **Understanding Communications**

The success of the exhibition began with the commitment to draw an audience from outside the profession and the ranks of the converted. Instead of creating another inward-looking exhibition, architectural historian Geoffrey Simmins



Careful design and mounting of wall panels provided information. At the same time, good sightlines beyond the panels meant that visitors never had a claustrophobic feeling. It was as if there were windows everywhere. Exhibition design helped make people feel good about the architecture on display. Placing the architect's model of the Elveden Centre on the floor made it easy to visualize and understand the overall design, particularly when coupled with a photograph of the finished building and a dramatic construction shot. Throughout the exhibition, aerial photographs of Calgary, such as those visible around the architect's model, covered what would have been a bare concrete floor.

Photo courtesy Linda Cunningham

tactfully explains that the advisory committee “came to share a common vision: that exhibitions on architecture were oriented too much to the architect. Architectural drawings, we felt, are difficult to read for the layperson and not that interesting when displayed on the wall, so we wanted to develop a format for this exhibition that would be more inviting to people who were not design professionals ... an exhibition format that would encourage the *experience* of architecture rather than just its *documentation*.” That was the beginning of wisdom.

With this commitment came the decision to avoid architect-speak. The plain language captions succeed so well that minor lapses, such as the comment that St. Andrew’s Church “represents ecclesiastical architecture of excellence that tends to express the extraordinary,” stick out noticeably. In typical architectural exhibitions, such words would simply blend right into the rest of the nearly incomprehensible verbal wallpaper.

### **Research**

Research complemented the committee’s sound communications goals. To support their goals of public education, they wisely chose to emphasize buildings under construction or in context and used photographs that had been intended for publications aimed at the general public, such as magazines. Many of the images were chosen because they showed context: “Modern people, tradesmen, clothing, fashion, hairstyle, cars, furniture, fittings, artwork, signs...with the modern building.”

Calgary is evidently the home of rich archival resources. The collections at the Glenbow Museum, Library, and Archives and the Canadian Architectural Archives in the University of Calgary Library provided most of the archival images. Archival material from private collections and some commissioned photographs filled in the gaps. In addition, many members of the advisory committee, and other interested individuals, contributed furniture and artifacts.

Informative captions added to the value of carefully selected images. However, I do have one major criticism. Although many exhibition photographs made it into the catalogue, where they are properly identified – for example, “Photo courtesy of Glenbow Archives, NA2864-1578 #9” or “Photo courtesy of Canadian Architectural Archives, Gordon Atkins Architects Collection” – the exhibition captions did not properly identify sources. I am not just being picky because I am a former archivist and museum curator. The issue goes beyond simple institutional courtesy. Exhibition visitors and researchers often want to locate copies of specific images or investigate collections for similar images. Like all public institutions, archives are trying to do more with less

and the decision to omit full source information from the captions adds to the workload of archivists who helped make *Calgary Modern* possible. The omission also puts a barrier in the way of people who want to follow up on interests inspired by a superb exhibition. This is all the more serious in an exhibition aimed at increasing public awareness.

All in all, however, a sound communications philosophy buttressed by excellent research created the potential for an exhibition which “would encourage the *experience* of architecture rather than just its *documentation*.”

### **Design and Fabrication to Experience Architecture**

Superb exhibition design and construction work led by architect Marc Boutin made sure visitors experienced the architecture from the first to the last moment in *Calgary Modern*. For most of the exhibition, visitors walked on slightly elevated walkways or hallways which branched into various room-like enclosures. The walls generally consisted of translucent panels or horizontal wooden slats spaced to allow light to show through. Even though some parts of the exhibition were quite small, the design concept and execution made the whole exhibition feel light and airy. The visitor walked through pleasant, well-defined spaces rather than wandering about looking at walls in a single gallery.

Carefully selected artifacts, such as a 1955 Chevrolet, furniture, artwork, kitchenware, and ceramics, heightened the sense of experiencing architecture rather than looking at pictures of architecture, but they did so without upstaging the photographs. A stunning 1958 Philco television loaned by Retroville, a local modern antiques dealer, let visitors watch and listen to interviews with key figures in the history of architecture and building in Calgary. The VCR was hidden as it should be. There was even a place to sit and read a few relevant books. There were many delightful touches, such as the model of an apartment building that I found tucked in a little nook: the kind of thing one would find in a well-designed house.

Bold graphics on hallway or divider wall panels offered quotations from key figures in the modern movement – Mies Van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier – or provided insights on key beliefs, objectives, and materials. Visitors learned that the “Office Building is a house of work, of organization, of clarity, of economy,” that there should be “[b]right wide workrooms, easy to oversee, undivided except as the organism of the undertaking is divided,” and that one should strive for the “Maximum Effect with the minimum expenditure of means.”

Everything flowed together so seamlessly that one tended to walk through the exhibition without being aware of the underlying intellectual order. However, on subsequent visits after opening night, I began to see more.



The view after stepping back from the section of *Calgary Modern* which deals with houses reveals a number of the finer features of the exhibition. There is a sense of openness as one looks towards the Elveden Centre architect's model and photographs. Large wall text panels are simple and clear of the floor so as not to interfere with the sense of openness. Visitors sat on the chairs shown here and elsewhere in the exhibition. In other locations there were video clips, an 8 mm. film loop as well as books which people could actually sit down with, hold, and read. In the housing portion of the exhibition, well-executed elegant design suggests someone had parked their new 1955 Chevrolet in the unfinished garage. It is a beautiful touch which captures how quickly new houses were occupied and reminds us of the boom times overlap between moving in and finishing construction. Interior shots placed at chair level give one the sense of being there, of participating in the rooms. Perhaps participation is the best word to describe what the exhibition did throughout; it put you inside the buildings and their surroundings.

Photo courtesy Linda Cunningham

### Themes and Assumptions

Each of the eight intellectually distinct but related parts had its own area or building module: introduction, office, housing, house, worship, education, leisure, and infrastructure. Each module was exciting, filled with well-chosen examples that offered insight into what the modern movement was trying to achieve, as well as a variety of Calgary examples. Each flowed into the next, leaving the overall impression that, between 1947 and 1967, Calgary was characterized by a combination of boldness, vigour, and quality, characteristics that are lamentably absent in some parts of Canada. I particularly liked the photograph of an airplane being lowered onto the roof of the Highlander Motor Hotel to attract attention to a conference. That photo says a lot about Calgary and the mindset that created the city we know today.

When I visit cities, I like to wander and explore. And even though I have visited Calgary about twice a year since 1989, every category in the exhibition introduced me to buildings I had never before noticed. The houses, churches, and schools were most surprising. Over the past decade I've seen a lot of Calgary homes, everything from tract bungalows to California ranches to Tudor England "wannabes." In his exhibition catalogue essay "Suburban Modern: Searching for an Aesthetic in Post-War Calgary," Robert Stamp writes the following:

By 1958, eight out of ten houses built in Calgary were single-storey bungalows with hip or gabled roofs. While New York boasts the loft as its most pervasive residential unit ... we have bungalows – blocks and blocks and blocks of bungalows.

It's hard to miss the bungalows when you visit Calgary, but the exhibition highlighted certain clean, angular residential styles I like. On my next trip, I know where I'll be driving around looking at houses.

The photographs of St. Luke's Roman Catholic Church reveal a stunning "ribbed concrete roof, supported on 12 slender columns 36 feet high." Although it is spectacular, it is not outlandish and displays the sense of reverence one expects in a place of worship. It is, as the caption reads, the "result of a creative collaboration among a client, an engineer, an artist, and the architect." That sentence captures one of the most important messages of the exhibition: collaboration works.

Other parts of the exhibition raised questions in my mind. For example, photographs of the Maryland Heights Elementary School showed an unusual concrete structure, which appears to have been an intellectual dead end. As described in the caption, "this project represents an educational concept promoting windowless schools, which was thought to encourage students' concentration. It also emphasizes social interaction in the central meeting spaces, gymnasium and library, which are open to the corridors." Did it work? The

photographs remind me of two things. First, I wondered if the massive scale of the building had intimidated the children. The exhibition skirts the issue with a passing reference to appropriately scaled lockers. Maryland Heights Elementary also reminded me of Scott Park Secondary School in Hamilton. It was not completely windowless; there were narrow vertical corner windows which the kids called “gun slits.” My father, the construction superintendent, considered Scott Park Secondary a thermally efficient inhumane design. Teachers I knew hated it, and so did the students.

How did people feel about studying, teaching, or being a janitor or secretary in Maryland Heights Elementary School? These feelings are part of experiencing architecture; they represent the aspect of buildings with which the public is most familiar. I suspect that failure to talk about user experience was more due to lack of resources than lack of interest. Clearly the exhibition committee wanted to help people learn to read or interpret buildings. For example, in the caption to a dramatic shot taken from above and looking down to workmen doing exterior caulking on the twelfth floor windows of the Elveden Centre, the viewer is asked to note that one window is partly open, “signalling that in this project both fresh air and conditioned air were still considered desirable.”

And yet, even though I believe that the organizers had the best of intentions, something was missing, a void I failed to notice on my first visit. Slowly I began to feel that I was supposed to accept that design was everything, not just the focal point of the exhibition. There was little mention of construction or user experience.

I first detected this design-is-everything subtext when I read the following caption: “ca. 1950 Wood Bench. Designers: Charles and Ray Eames. Dr. and Mrs. R. Stamp.” There was no mention of manufacturer Herman Miller Inc., or its contributions in bringing modern design to commercial spaces and upscale residences during the period portrayed by the exhibition. Nor was there any mention that we were looking at a recent reissue that had been designed in the mid-1940s. Moreover, the bench, variously referred to as the slat bench, or slat table, was not the work of Charles and Ray Eames, but of George Nelson, another influential Herman Miller designer.

Design does not exist in a vacuum. The study of design should include fabrication or construction, workability, how others experience the work of designers such as architects, and the importance of continuing modification. The formal design record tends to leave out the often fascinating differences between as-designed, as-built, and as-found. Is it asking too much to have public and user reactions included in an architecture exhibition? Or is it reasonable to expect that an exhibition intended to create greater public interest should include the public, as well as the architect and the building, in its approach to buildings?

### **A Lasting Legacy: Oral Archives and an Exhibition Catalogue**

The *Calgary Modern* exhibition has been dismantled, but its ideas and approach are still accessible to those who missed it. The forty-eight-page catalogue *Calgary Modern 1947–1967* (Calgary: Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary, 2000), edited by Geoffrey Simmins and Linda Cunningham, and reasonably priced at fifteen dollars, is a valuable adjunct to the exhibition, particularly in light of the exhibition goal of increasing awareness and appreciation of modern architecture in Calgary. The introduction and curator statement provide a clear idea of how the exhibition originated and what it hoped to achieve. Robert M. Stamp's "Suburban Modern: Searching for an Aesthetic in Post-War Calgary" discusses everything from bungalows, decorating, and city planning to cars, bridges, and shopping, and sets the stage for other essays on workplace, education, worship, home, and institution, which roughly parallel the exhibition.

I have always enjoyed the way Stamp manages to combine the interesting and the insightful in his writings on technology and material culture. In "Suburban Modern" he shows how understanding the changing meanings of modern and modernism unite many of the seemingly diverse strands of an emerging modern Calgary.

[Calgarians] redefined terms such as "Modern" and "Modernism." They shifted the emphasis from the avant-garde and from high Modernism to mass-market Modernism. They went beyond modern art, modern architecture, and modern design, and redefined Modernism to include modern homes in modern suburbs, with modern furniture and modern appliances and modern cars. For post-war Calgarians, Modernism meant personal betterment, achieving all those material gains that had been delayed or denied by fifteen years of depression and war. Calgarians democratized Modernism.

Individual essays are well documented with footnotes for the text and full attributions for the illustrations. The bibliography is divided into archival collections, printed sources, and electronic sources. The latter is another example of how carefully someone thought about the reader's needs. It is still all too rare to find electronic sources listed.

To mark the opening of the exhibition, the organizers staged a one-day symposium featuring a panel discussion with four people from the 1947–67 period: Kevin Peterson, journalist and former publisher of the *Calgary Herald*; Rod Sykes, a former Canadian Pacific and Marathon Realty accountant who eventually became mayor of Calgary; Ted Raines, a retired private architect; and Fred Valentine, an architect and Calgarian by birth who completed a master's degree in architecture under Walter Gropius. I regret that I missed this lively combination of academic erudition – in suitably limited quantities –

and insider knowledge. Raines jokingly said it was the first time he had ever gone to a meeting with Sykes where there were no lawyers.

In pursuit of maximum long-term benefit from the symposium, the organizers audiotaped the panel discussion for the Canadian Architectural Archives in the University of Calgary Library. They also videotaped interviews with the main practising Calgary architects of the period 1947–67, Jack Long, Ted Raines, and Gordon Atkins, as well as John Rule, son and nephew of two of the founders of Rule, Wynn & Rule.

All in all, *Calgary Modern 1947–1967* was an impressive effort. Not only did I enjoy it, but I also consider it a model of how to plan exhibitions that use and contribute to archival sources. We need more of this two-way traffic.

### **The Way of the Future?**

The *Calgary Modern* organizers may be reminding the archival community that collaboration is the best way to stretch limited resources. The exhibition started with archival collections at both the Glenbow Museum, Library, and Archives and the Canadian Architectural Archives at the University of Calgary. Now the exhibition team has given something back to the latter institution: audiotaped and videotaped interviews prepared as part of the exhibition research and symposium.

Imaginative taped interviews could add much to architectural scholarship and archival records. The challenge is to get beyond the way architects view architecture to include more diverse views. Just as good writers think about the needs of their readers, good interviewers must think about the people who use buildings. Such interviews would focus on architectures as seen and experienced by non-architects and would include the views of present and past office workers, teachers, students, shoppers, sales staff, and janitors about the spaces they see every day. For example, the people who were students, teachers, and janitors in Maryland Heights Elementary School could be tracked down and interviewed. I am sure they would raise issues that architects would not think of themselves. As I listened to the interviews transmitted through the 1958 Philco TV from Retroville, I was struck by the multiple viewpoints and perspectives. This is a promising beginning.

I look forward to visiting more exhibitions like *Calgary Modern 1947–1967*. For example, I'd like to see the sequel, *Engineering and Building Modern Calgary 1947–1997*. By stretching both subject and time, the exhibition could include the LRT (Light Rapid Transit), the Olympic Speed Skating Oval, and a few of my other favourite Calgary sites, such as the Eric Harvie Bridge.

If there is a follow-up exhibition, may I contribute a little reminder about labels? List sources, use larger type, and don't put labels six feet off the ground. There may be lots of tall cowboys in Calgary, but I'm a short Ontarian and I'm not alone. Moreover, I've got bifocals, so reading those high-up labels

nearly dislocated my neck. As for the typeface, I would like to echo the sentiments of Charles Brackbill of Mountainside, New Jersey, who wrote a letter that was published in the Sunday *New York Times* (5 March 2000) asking the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art for “Bigger Type, Please.” It’s not just me.

### **Final Words**

*Calgary Modern* was not a big-budget exhibition, just a big achiever. Perhaps the greatest legacy of *Calgary Modern* is that inadvertently it gave us all deeper insight into doing more with less; we do it by cooperating. I think that would sit well with the pioneers of modern architecture.