

space in this section of the book are devoted to the nature, scope and importance of these collections and the business of curatorship. Instead we get a full page of happy people watching an IMAX film!

The CMC-MCC is a huge, complex and multifaceted business, and it is maybe too easy and perhaps unfair to descend to petty criticism. On a number of levels it is a highly successful attraction made possible by the hard work, energy and dedication of numerous people to a vision of increasing public awareness and participation in the process of creating and sharing new knowledge and teaching thousands of Canadians about the human experience in Canada. Contemporary history is notoriously difficult to write, particularly if the goal is, in a few pages, to touch all the bases and serve the public relations requirements of the museum today. This means that it is doubly difficult to explore the positives and negatives that have arisen from some of the decisions. Some critics, for example, have suggested that the decision to create the Canada Hall as a series of constructed environments reduces the story of Canada to the stereotypes of an elementary school textbook—others maintain it provides for visitor engagement and the sort of innovative interpretation provided by the actors of “Dramamuse.” Both are true, but if one covers whole pages with a single picture and devotes a lot of space to thoughts about the future, there is no room for such discussion in this book. It also means that the real challenges of developing a First Nations Hall in full cooperation with Canada’s

native peoples cannot be adequately explored, or indeed whether a national museum—a place for artifacts and their interpretation—is really the right location for an IMAX theatre, or a Great Hall that might provide for a dramatic sense of space, but which apparently best serves their interests as a reception or banquet facility.

These subjects deserve some debate. Some will say that this kind of book is not the place to engage such discussion; the desire is to “feel good” and present an uncomplicated narrative. However, in a couple of page-long sections the authors actually do step away from the narrative to highlight late 19th century “Important Developments Outside the Museum,” and a more recent thorny issue, the “Question of Ownership” surrounding native artifacts. The fact that the latter is not dealt with very effectively is less important than the fact that the museum’s approach to a difficult museological subject was raised. A couple more such issues might have been the “Place and Importance of Research” or the “Role of Entertainment in Education.”

This is certainly not a book without merit and the authors must have felt conflicted as they tried to meet a variety of goals, size and salability among them. But it falls down in the CMC-MCC years—in the very years in which it should succeed—under the weight of trying to “do” history and public relations at the same time. The first three quarters of the book, therefore, are the most interesting, satisfying and successful.

## S. HOLYCK HUNCHUCK

Review of

Rochon, Lisa. 2005 *Up North: Where Canada’s Architecture Meets the Land*. Toronto: Key Porter.

Pp. 304, index, footnotes and bibliography, colourplates and black-and-white illus., cloth \$55, ISBN 1-55263-690-9. Foreword by Lise Anne Couture.

Lisa Rochon is a professor of architecture at the University of Toronto and the architectural critic for *The Globe and Mail* newspaper. She comes to this, her first book, with a *certificat d’études politiques*, a combined bachelors degree in French and journalism and a master’s degree in urban design. Despite such accomplishments, Rochon’s *Up North: Where Canada’s Architecture Meets the Land* is confused and confusing.

Rochon says the book’s “singular exploration” is of Canadian architecture that “aligns with the landscape,” (17), and adds that “the work celebrated in this book depends on its intimacy with the land, and with Canadians themselves” (23). From this, one might expect *Up North* to concern itself with architectural responses to the Canadian experience, climate and geography, through, for example, the use of natural building materials or the sensitive

interplay between form of landscape and the form of buildings. Not so, alas.

*Up North* opens promisingly. It begins with an extended frontispiece of five striking photographs: an extreme close-up of weathered wooden siding and a window frame; an impressionistic seascape; the interior of an igloo dome under construction; a close-up of forest interior covered in wet snow; and a rural landscape framed by a cottage deck. Any one of these images could generate enough ideas to fill a book on its own, and the reader might reasonably assume that the essays that follow pick up the themes suggested here. The beauty of natural materials, maritime influences on Canadian building, aboriginal traditions, the importance of sunlight and the role of cottages in Canada are all subjects that immediately come to mind. Here too, initial expectations are unfulfilled. None of the frontispiece images are explored by the author beyond an incidental mention buried in the next 300 pages. What then, one wonders, is *Up North* really about?

The frontispieces are followed by an introduction. In it, Rochon thanks several academics for helping sort out her “disparate ideas about architecture and its connections to culture and society” (17). Unfortunately, disparateness proves to be an unintentional motif of the book. In the same essay she asserts that the inspiration for *Up North* was the twelve winners of the 2002 Governor-General’s (G-Gs) Awards (given annually by the Canada Council for the Arts for architectural excellence). This too is a false lead. Any hope that *Up North* might be an exploration of those twelve architects and projects, within the central theme of their relationship to nature, proves to be unfounded. Rochon neglects even to tell the reader who these winners are or what projects won.

As it turns out, the volume is essentially one woman’s highly personal account of her experiences with the built environment made up of three interwoven but ill-fitting elements. The book is first and foremost a collection of the author’s immediate impressions of, and emotional responses to, the architectural spaces she has encountered during her travels. It is also a record of her conversations with some of the best-known names in Canadian architecture. Third, it is a combination of the first two experiences with selected readings about Canadian identity and architecture. The sources for the visual imagery are oddly limited, but Rochon’s textual sources are diverse and wide-ranging: novelists Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies and

Wallace Stegner; politicians Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Pierre Trudeau and George W. Bush; philosophers Gaston Bachelard and Betty Friedan; and popular musicians The Barenaked Ladies and Alanis Morissette. The results are, at best, mixed. The reader is left with an overall sense that the author’s reach (and that of her editors at Key Porter) have exceeded their grasp.

Indeed, it is a challenge to discern the structure of *Up North* as a whole. It contains six chapters that do not follow any obvious order of geography, chronology, materiality or school of thought. At the same time, it includes many architects who have little or nothing to do with Canada or those whose cited works arguably stand in direct opposition to the book’s apparent *raison d’être*. The opening chapter, “Canadian Architecture: A Manifesto” sketches out some of Rochon’s ideas and influences. It is followed by chapters on “The West Coast Modernists,” featuring Vancouver architects Arthur Erickson, Ned Pratt and BC Binning; “Ecstasy and the Landscape,” focuses on neo-Expressionistic 1960s churches in Manitoba and Quebec; “Defining Modernism for Big City Canada,” a review of changes in public architecture and urban revitalization during the 1960s and 1970s; “Liberating Form from Concrete,” a study of the material with reference to Erickson, Toronto architect Raymond Moriyama and the Montréal firm Saucier et Perrotte; and, finally, “Between the Earth and Sky,” which surveys the last decade from earthworks in Quebec to schools in British Columbia.

Each chapter contains an introductory essay, followed by a discrete text that does not necessarily accord with its stated topic. “West Coast Modernists,” owes much to Rhodri Windsor Liscombe’s *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963* (1997). Yet, Rochon’s exploration of the subject contains little of the clarity and elegant prose that Windsor Liscombe, an architectural historian and professor at the University of British Columbia, seems to produce so effortlessly. Instead, Rochon includes a lengthy interview with the American architect Frank Gehry. While Gehry was born in Timmins, Ontario, and raised partly in Toronto, his inclusion here is at best perplexing. He was educated in the United States, has never practised in the West Coast of Canada, and cannot easily be classified as a Modernist in the sense that Binning or Pratt were. Moreover, since Rochon later discusses Gehry’s work at length in the “Ecstasy and the Landscape” chapter, the

decision to place his interview here confounds the thematic flow and editorial logic. Meanwhile, that same “Ecstasy” chapter contains a lengthy digression on the merits of different computer software systems. It then presents “The Structural Audacity of [Douglas Cardinal’s] St. Mary’s Church” wherein Rochon barely discusses the building’s engineering and instead centres on her umbrage at the priest’s homily: a lecture on courtesy, delivered on the day she arrived late for Mass.

Numerous other points of confusion mark the book. For example, Rochon seems to undermine its very premise with the prominent inclusion of the New York firm Asymptote. The company, with two ex-patriate Canadian partners, describes itself as “famous for our virtual environments” (116). It has produced no work in Canada, but Rochon provides three lavish photographs of one of its few built projects, a small, pierside pavilion near Amsterdam. Here it should be noted that the firm’s Lise Anne Couture also figures prominently in the book: she contributes the Foreword with an essay that is, at best, out of place and at worst approaches overt self-promotion. Couture refers only once to the Canadian landscape (and not at all to Rochon or to *Up North*), but manages to work in some twenty-seven references to herself and her design business. We learn little about architecture that is “intimate” with nature in this Foreword, but much about Asymptote. The reader may be further confused as Couture boasts of her design process in which “virtual environments” [videogames?] are typed out on “twin laptops” while sealed in airplane cabins, jetting from one anonymous site in the world to another—all this while in “business class,” no less. This causes one to question Rochon’s powers of discernment: could there be any human activity with less “intimacy” with the land—and more alienated from it—than the way this firm apparently produces architecture?

Throughout the book, the author’s critical perspective remains unclear. The inside front cover of the book describes Rochon as “harness[ing] the passion and anger that bad architecture provokes.” However, her tone varies between bitterness and flattery, sometimes over the same architect and the same building. Among the work that is anger-provoking to Rochon are two major projects underway in Toronto: the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) by American architects Daniel Libeskind and Frank Gehry respectively. Both designs have generated controversy and merit an impassioned critique.

They each involve massive changes to pre-existing community institutions and both designs have been accused of ravaging the extant buildings, of displaying insensitivity to the scale and fabric of the surrounding streetscapes, and of needlessly destroying rare garden spaces that are crucial to their public natures. In what seems like a condemnation of Libeskind and Gehry, Rochon writes:

The fight to be noticed among downtown cultural institutions has triggered extravaganzas by international superstars that are less about enduring architecture and more about the inflation of a museum’s significance. In their stunning aggression, they force air into our lungs, causing us to hyperventilate. (23)

Rochon underlines her critique by asserting that the “exploded crystalline” form of the ROM expansion “resembles ... a collapsed mind” that “bumps and grinds” its way over Toronto’s Bloor Street West (25). One might expect her to explain these highly provocative remarks, or perhaps to make the easily demonstrated argument that Libeskind’s ROM amounts to little more than a self-plagiarism of his previous work in other cities. However, Rochon abandons her overt critique of Libeskind to issue instead an equivocal explanation of his intentions:

Some architects explain their forms by way of rich metaphor—the crystal collection of the [ROM] ... inspired ... Libeskind to create a massive addition of aluminum shards and steeply angled façades. Curiously, Libeskind also used an exploded crystalline structure for his redevelopment of the Denver Art Museum, even though it doesn’t own a crystal collection. (26)

Even more disappointing is the star-struck pose Rochon adopts in the conversation she records with Gehry (the only transcribed interview in the book). Where one hopes she might engage him with hard questions, particularly as they relate to the AGO, and his “intimacy with the land and with Canadians themselves,” the interview turns away from *Up North*’s apparent purpose. The AGO is Gehry’s only work in Canada after a fifty-year career in the United States. In it, a much-loved promenade of ginkgo trees was eliminated from Dundas Street West in Toronto’s Chinatown in 2005 and will be replaced with a massive glass-and-metal shed, due in 2008. In fact, Rochon fails to mention the AGO to Gehry, perhaps because every aspect of his intervention there stands in direct opposition to the intent of *Up North*. Instead, her tone with him is trivia-obsessed and borders on the syncopantic.

Gehry's claim, "[It's] part of my DNA—not making things too precious" (91) is arguably refuted by his words as well as by his most famous work, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Rather than discuss these claims with Gehry, Rochon replies: "Your [Bilbao] museum practically makes love to the river ... your architecture finds a peace between insanity and humanity" (93).

In other passages, Rochon philosophizes at length. Unfortunately, in some places the text is so overwritten it becomes ambiguous and difficult to follow. "Up north," she says, without italics, in the opening "Manifesto,"

presents a lush and varied sketch of the world. Complexity is its first language. Place is what it communicates. In its subtlety and rejection of sameness, this picture of nature is what architecture in this country has struggled to become. (22)

The reader's struggle here is to derive a clear sense of Rochon's meaning. Is the Up north a reference to "up north," as in a geographic reality, or *Up North*, as in the book? If the former, does the author mean to say merely that a northern landscape can be "complex," "lush" and "varied?" Or is it Rochon as the author of *Up North* whose "first language" is "complexity"? If her book describes the central importance of a physical "place" to the buildings "communicated," what is one to make of the architecture she deems important? Asymptote's oeuvre, for example, exists as far removed from nature as possible—on a computer screen, while Libeskind's ROM and Gehry's AGO are, arguably, unconcerned with, or at least ambivalent to, the very "pictures of nature" that surround them.

In fact, Rochon at times displays a disconcerting nonchalance towards ideas. The absence of discernment recurs whether she describes socio-political history or architectural theories. In discussing the sociopolitics of the Prairies, she asserts that Manitoba is "a place of entrenched conservative values" (101). Perhaps, but for many scholars, the record is more complex. For social historians, Manitoba is the land of the Winnipeg General Strike, while for architectural historians it is a place where the provincial government gave official heritage status to the Ukrainian Labour Temple (a 1,000 seat Bolshevik hall still going strong almost 90 years after it was founded in Winnipeg's North End). In another example, the chapter "Defining Modernism" contains a description of the accelerated social and cultural changes of the 1960s with a definition that reads like random list-making and self-questioning:

John F. Kennedy reigned as President of the United States.... The films of Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, and Federico Fellini and the theories of philosophers Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes became highly influential. The Soviet Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space. The photocopier was invented. The contraceptive pill was placed on the market. What else? The Beatles had released "Love Me Do," and Andy Warhol was exhibiting his artwork and films in New York. (138)

The reader who hopes that Rochon might link these cultural figures and events to Canadian architecture will be stymied by the superficial references and stream-of-consciousness prose. Similarly, her musings on the built environment are also written in a fragmented fashion, as when she argues for Canada's place in world architecture by declaring:

The phenomenon of a global culture cannot be displaced. And yet. With every building that vibrates with the psyche, a crack appears in its omnipresence. In this way, the manifesto for meaning in Canadian architecture builds: for the ordinary pleasure of architecture—when a building reaches for the ground. And the ground is here. (37)

Likewise, her thoughts about a particular building can run from one end of the spectrum to the other, without explanation. "I used to consider [Ron Thom's University of Toronto] Massey College to be architecture that eludes time," she announces. "But I've changed my mind. Massey is simply about time." This statement is considered to be so weighty the editors have chosen to make it twice (page 165 in the text, and highlighted as a 36-point caption over a photograph on page 164).

Ideas drawn from others appear equally patchy and decontextualized. Quotes from philosophers and novelists arise almost arbitrarily, with little or no introductory context, direct application or further exploration. In the Introduction, Rochon gives pride of place to Paul Ricoeur, whom she describes as "the formidable French philosopher" (17). His thoughts merit a paragraph on page 25 and are never mentioned again. A few pages later, she cites Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980). According to Rochon's reading of Norberg-Schulz, the proper task of the architect is to make meaningful spaces (28). One expects this idea—which, by its very nature invites further discussion—to be illustrated with examples from the Canadian built environment

(or, perhaps, to be applied with shattering results to the conceit expressed in the Foreword by Lise Anne Couture). Rochon cites *Genius Loci* once and then drops Norberg-Schulz entirely from the narrative. In the process, she overlooks his central argument: the vital importance to architecture of *genius loci* [spirit of the place]. Since *this* is the exact point that readers expect Rochon to explore at length, one is mystified by its omission from her book. Similarly perplexing is the quote she includes on page 34 from Atwood's male protagonist in the novel *Bodily Harm*. He is a pornographer who states that art manifests a form of societal catharsis. The reader pauses to wonder how Rochon will explore this concept. Is she suggesting that *architectural* pornography exists? If so, what buildings does she have in mind? Is this what she means by the "bumping and grinding" of Libeskind's ROM? These are all questions that arise. Whatever her actual intentions, the subject is abandoned immediately after being raised. Meanwhile Rochon moves the reader onto other thoughts and quotes, and other artists and public figures. The effect can be dizzying and difficult to follow, with conclusions that are often baffling. On page 36, for example, the flow of ideas and personalities goes from Queen Elizabeth II to Shania Twain and Diana Krall via Northrop Frye and Alice Munro, all of which leads to the statement that these individuals plus multiculturalism have brought about a Canada of "public cities" with parks, libraries and community centres.

The difficulty in understanding the author's critical stance is often compounded by her particular style. Rochon too often resorts to exaggerated, romantic and, frankly, self-referential prose. On page 23 for example she declares:

In this country, architecture grows out of the land. And the Canadian landscape is mythic, Herculean in its scale and power. It is omnipresent and noble, given to moments of tenderness and terrible rages. Up north, architecture digs into the side of a hill or a mountain. Or it rises up to match the temper of the land, attaining heights of ecstasy.

Against a land that is mythic, Herculean, omnipresent, noble, tender and terrible, and an architecture that is ecstatic, the narrator's cause cannot help but seem itself heroic. Furthermore, Rochon's self-references can become wearying to the reader. For example, she states:

I travelled across the country ... I did road trips alone in the car ... I covered a thousand miles between ... Lethbridge and Red Deer [Alberta] ...

I flew in a six-seater float plane ... took the train back and forth between Toronto and Montreal ... flew in a snowstorm into Quebec City ... then snowshoed for 10 kilometres ...

and:

I have snowshoed past trees whose branches hold perfect balls of powder snow. I have seen snow wrapped in astonishing spirals around birch trunks ... I see disturbing evidence of the force of nature: an aspen has been tortured by the wind. (22)

Granted, this is her book and her journey. The reader's indulgence, however, is further tested by what does seem, in style at least, like name-dropping:

I spent an afternoon with a Coast Salish elder ... travelled with architect Pierre Thibault ... I flew to Los Angeles to interview world-renowned architect Frank Gehry. During the 2003 heat wave in France, I made a pilgrimage to ... Bilbao ... before criss-crossing back and forth across France to experience [le Corbusier's] Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut ... Raymond Moriyama ... drew a sketch for my book.... (16-17)

Rochon's stated intention to describe the connections between the built environment and the natural environment in Canada remains largely unfulfilled in *Up North*. The book reads less as a thoughtful, systematic grappling with concepts and events that have influenced architectural practice and our relationship to the land, and more as a staccato recital of personal impressions, fragments of theories, puzzling assertions and impressive names. In sum, *Up North* as a whole would benefit from more academic rigour. The bibliography naturally lists Rochon's own newspaper articles, but academic theses on architecture and landscape design in Canada are absent; a curious omission given the author's university affiliation. The inconsistencies and inaccuracies to be found in the endnotes reinforce this concern, although the fault here may rest largely with the editors. Numerous articles are cited from the peer-reviewed Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada (SSAC) *Bulletin*, but all SSAC titles lack dates. James Vioria's article, "Place Bonaventure: Architecture and the Anxiety of Influence" from *Architecture in Canada* (the successor to the *Bulletin*) is cited (288) but is omitted from the bibliography and Vioria is absent from the index. Dates and places for interviews vary in precision ("Barton Myers, Toronto, May 26, 2005" versus "Douglas Cardinal, 2002 and 2005"), or are put in the wrong place (Frank Gehry's interview is dated within the footnotes to chapter 3, rather than chapter 2 where it appears). Dutch architect

Willem Dudok is referenced twice (167, 205) but becomes William (298) while Windsor Liscombe is named correctly three times (twice on page 291 and once on page 293), but is misnamed as Wilson Liscombe on page 286. One could go on. One reference listed but, unfortunately, not discussed is Margaret Atwood's non-fiction work, *Survival*:

*A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. In the end, one might wish that Rochon had explored this last title in detail and perhaps drawn further inspiration from it. An architectural equivalent to *Survival* would make for a fascinating study, but *Up North* is not that book.

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