

Multicultural Context and Architectural Expression

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Throughout history, architecture has provided the material link between past, present and future, organizing the built environment not only in space but also in time.

In today's world of global interdependence where diverse social groups engage in cultural interchanges facilitated by cross-border mobility, a qualitatively new societal environment is being developed. We are witnessing various approaches in dealing with this global phenomenon. In contrast to traditional nation-state notions of homogeneous society based on one culture dominating all others, Canada endeavours to create an integrated society in the most diverse context. The dialectics of the processes of social integration and the recognition of cultural diversity of its citizens and communities is the path which Canada has opted for in developing its social sustainability.

As a sensitive receptor of the dynamic processes in the society, Canadian architecture is looking for relevant responses to these social changes. Moreover, architecture plays a catalytic role in these processes, as "the environment that man creates becomes his medium for defining his role in it."¹ By transmitting messages that express common values in a democratic multicultural society, architecture can influence the process of social integration. The architectural expression of social characteristics such as transparency, tolerance and openness is particularly important for institutional buildings, cultural complexes and public spaces, which have a special role in promoting social unity.

An example of cultural transparency is the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto. The entire façade of its "City Room" – a large four-storey space, which includes an informal amphitheatre – is fully glazed to one of the busiest boulevards in the city. This visual connection to the urban context, as well as the free admission to some of the performances in the amphitheatre, expresses the openness and democracy of this cultural space. On nights when the space is illuminated, it transforms into an urban stage

where the audience inside becomes actors in a spectacle viewed from the outside.

The renovated and transformed Art Gallery of Ontario uses a similar approach of transparency and interplay between art and urban activity. The fully glazed "Galleria Italia," located immediately above the street level, in an artistic way connects this cultural centre with the city. The exposed wood structure – a traditional Canadian material – contributes to the warm and poetic character of this dynamic space, which is a work of art itself.

Along with its role in promoting social unity, the signals that architecture spreads are directed to a large spectrum of culturally different recipients. In order to communicate

in such an environment, architecture should examine the cultural characteristics of different social groups and become attuned to their need for civic expression. What is more, these groups are not homogenous and thus are often in a search for cultural identity in their new country, a process in which architecture can play a role.

Throughout history, architecture has provided the material link between past, present and future, organizing the built environment not only in space but also in time. This has been achieved by "abstracting from the past what is still relevant today, and, at the same time...projecting the vision of the future out of the present."² Reproducing



Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, Toronto
Diamond and Schmitt Architects
PHOTO: TOM ARBAN



Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, Toronto
Diamond and Schmitt Architects
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traditions in a society in which people have different roots, and hence different cultural pasts, is a complex and challenging task. This process should consider the existence of various, sometimes even opposing, traditions represented, for example, within the native indigenous and the first settlers'

colonial buildings. Architecture should also integrate new immigrants' traditions that they bring to their new country – an ongoing process that is constantly reshaping the socio-cultural environment.

In a search for expression of Toronto's multicultural context by the symbolic language of architecture, the competition entry for the Nathan Phillips Square Revitalization by Kris Vassilev includes the World's Alley: a new transparent structure proposed to substitute the elevated walkway on the west. It is designed to be a dynamic place for interaction among cultures as it contains exhibition pavilions, spaces for performances and celebrations. To the south, the World's Alley is connected to the city's path system, and to the north with the City Hall podium, expressing the influence that the people of Toronto bring to the City Council.

Integration of Indigenous cultural traditions presents a unique opportunity for adding spirituality and symbolism to the architectural language. A successful step in this direction is the NK'Mip Desert Cultural Centre in Osoyoos, British Columbia. Located within the unique context of the desert, this complex contains indoor and outdoor spaces that honour the cultural traditions of the Osoyoos People. The rammed-earth wall, constructed from local soils mixed with concrete, is the strongest element

of the composition, as well as an element of a complex sustainable design approach. This project convincingly illustrates that a creative application of traditional construction methods and materials in combination with the most advanced and innovative practices can result in a contemporary, poetic and memorable architecture.

Although the contemporary interpretations of the International Style are the prevailing means of expression in Canadian architecture today (its principles seem largely understandable and universal), buildings such as the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre offer a new expression based on a creative approach to the local methods and cultural traditions. Indeed, the multicultural context requires much more diverse vocabulary, which is "accommodating rather than excluding"³ any means of expression. Moreover, new tools and instruments must be developed and employed in this new context as architecture cannot "do a job demanded by the new environment with the tools of the old."⁴

An illustration of the uniqueness of the tasks in such a context is University of Toronto's Multi-faith Centre for Spiritual Study and Practice (Moriyama & Teshima Architects). The idea to renovate existing rooms into places of worship, meditation and



Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (expansion and renovation)
Architectural Design: Gehry International Architects Inc.
 PHOTOS: KRIS VASSILEV



Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (expansion and renovation)
Heritage Architect: E.R.A. Architects Inc.
 PHOTOS: KRIS VASSILEV



NK'MIP Desert Cultural Centre, Osoyoos, British Columbia
Hotson Bakker Boniface Haden Architects + Urbanistes
 PHOTO: NIC LEHOUX

informal gatherings for students of different faith groups presents a real challenge for the architects. In search for a common basis of dissimilar religions, they analyzed their symbols and discovered similarity in some of the compositional approaches, forms and spaces. The square and the light – two unifying themes for many religions, are the central elements of the prayer hall composition. This is a neutral and tolerant space with almost ascetic simplicity, where everyone finds something from his or her own religion and beliefs.

This project summarizes a key question about the architectural language in a multicultural society: should this language be culturally neutral, universal, and thereby largely understandable or should architecture aim to express a more complex cross-culture dialogue and symbiotic relationships and thus become more emotionally engaging for all these culture groups? The cultural and social forces influencing Canadian architecture are rather unique and they require new means of expression. Moreover, the architectural

language should extend beyond the expression of “cultural plurality and symbiosis”⁵ providing that vital binding substance which ties together individual ethnic groups in a coherent civic society.

Although the link between the social context and the architectural language has long been recognized, socio-economic changes do not lead automatically to the creation of new forms, movements and styles in architecture. It is encouraging, however, that in the “cultural fog”⁶ there can be seen some signs of emergence of new architectural expression in Canadian architecture. Whether these initial signs will evolve into a new architectural language or style hinges upon architects themselves, their sensitivity to the social context and their ability to read it, and their creativity in expressing it by the means of architecture.

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The University of Toronto Multi-faith Centre for Spiritual Study and Practice.
Moriyama & Teshima Architects
 PHOTO: TOM ARBAN



Nathan Phillips Square Revitalization, Toronto - Competition Entry
Kris Vassilev, Architect
 PHOTO: RENDERING: KRISTY WUNG