

# North by Northwest: Manitoba Modernism, c. 1950

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In 1953, the National Gallery of Canada announced a competition to design a new gallery to be built on a spectacular site on Sussex Street overlooking the Ottawa River. The jury consisted of Alfred Barr, Jr., Eero Saarinen, John Bland, and Eric Arthur. When the results were announced a few months later the outcome was something of surprise, since Winnipeg firms dominated the competition: Green, Blankstein, and Russell (GBR) placed first (figure 1), and Smith, Carter, Munn, Katelnikof and Ian M. Brown finished third. Second place was awarded to Vincent Rother Associates of Montreal. During the next few years it became clear that this result was no one-time fluke. Manitoba architectural firms consistently ranked among the best in the country, while Manitoba graduates made important contributions across Canada and abroad.<sup>1</sup>

One might say that during the early 1950s Winnipeg played a significant role as an early centre of architectural modernism in Canada. On the whole, this contribution has been recognised, at least in passing, in standard accounts describing the rise of architectural modernism in Canada. For instance, illustrations of the University of Manitoba's John A. Russell Architecture Building of 1956-57 by Smith, Carter, Searle with Jim Donahue are often reproduced.<sup>2</sup> However, current efforts to deepen our understanding of the accomplishments and legacy of high-modernism provide an opportunity to take a second look at the architectural climate of Winnipeg during this period. And the historical evidence suggests that certain aspects of that scene have been overlooked. In particular, there is reason to think that by 1950 Winnipeg architects had already begun to produce a regionally based modernism independent of developments in Toronto and Vancouver, one based on a local reading of a formal language and the aesthetic principles of the Chicago School.

There are certain aspects of the National Gallery competition that encourage us to reconsider Winnipeg. Quite apart from the results — who would expect not one but *two* firms from a provincial city in the western flatlands to produce designs among the most advanced in the country in 1953? — the published comments of the jury contain passages that still seem notable, even provocative. For instance, it is surprising

that the jury awarded GBR first prize in the competition in spite of, rather than because of, the Miesian character of their design. There is no doubt they saw this character as a drawback: in their report they noted that, on first seeing the design, they thought so obvious an approach was necessarily facile. And there is reason to think that National Gallery director Allan Jarvis was not convinced about the suitability of a glass pavilion as an art gallery.<sup>3</sup> It may well be that this hesitation was an important factor in the design never being carried out.<sup>4</sup> It is also intriguing to read that, despite the submission's Miesian vocabulary, the design was considered remarkable by the jury for its rigour and skill, and that it demonstrated a "more positive aesthetic confidence that was indicated by any of the others."<sup>5</sup>

This kind of remark suggests that there was more to the 1953-54 National Gallery of Canada competition than first meets the eye — and there are reasons to conclude that this was indeed the case. In light of the generally provincial state of architecture in Canada at the time, the obvious first question about the competition result is, how could a Winnipeg firm emulate the evolving manner of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, arguably the greatest architect of his day, in a way that would impress so knowledgeable a jury? There is, in fact, one very good explanation: the designers of that impressive Miesian gallery, two young Winnipeggers named Morley Blankstein and Isadore (Izzie) Coop, had just returned from postgraduate studies with Mies himself, at the Illinois Institute of Technology.<sup>6</sup> They had studied with the master, and it showed. This does not, however, account for Smith, Carter, Munn, and Katelnikof's third-place gallery submission, or the architectural successes achieved by all the other Manitoba graduates. A more complete explanation of GBR's success in the National Gallery competition can be found in the facts and the background to the competition results. These paint a picture of a remarkably vital, plugged-in, and sophisticated architectural scene in Winnipeg in 1953.

While it is not yet possible to give a comprehensive account of the main trends, projects, and personalities that led to the birth of Manitoba modernism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, one can offer the beginnings of an explanation of



Figure 1. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, unbuilt competition design by Green, Blankstein, and Russell, architects. (*Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* [hereafter *JRAIC*] 31, no. 4 [April 1954]: 108)

why it developed the way it did. Looking at the evidence, there is good reason to think that there were at least three significant factors at work. The first was the intellectual climate of the School of Architecture at the University of Manitoba; the second was the presence of a number of people in Winnipeg within and outside the profession who were genuinely open to new ideas; and third was the existence of a theory, at least in embryonic form, that offered a modernist architectural language replete with terms specific to the Manitoba situation. Of the three, arguably the most important was centred on developments at the University of Manitoba's School of Architecture.

When the National Gallery competition was announced in 1953, the University of Manitoba's School of Architecture was already forty years old. It had been established in 1913 as a department in the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, and was the first architecture program in Canada west of Toronto. At that time, the surrounding city of Winnipeg was little more than a generation away from its frontier days at the heart of the Red River settlement, but it was already a city of impressive commercial wealth and architecture. Great Montreal and Toronto firms such as the Maxwell brothers and Darling & Pearson had worked in the city, but designs and architects had also come from Chicago, St. Paul, and New

York. The warehouses, mansions, public buildings, and banks built at this time still give large parts of the city their distinctive characters. During this period, Winnipeg had itself begun to function as an architectural centre for its hinterland to the west. Architectural work was abundant, and this encouraged the formation of a school of architecture.

What is striking about the decision-making process at the University of Manitoba in 1913 is that, in contrast to its sister institutions at McGill and Toronto, it was decided not to appoint a Scot, nor an Englishman, nor a Canadian as the first director of the school of architecture, but an American; a New Yorker by the name of Arthur Stoughton. A graduate of Columbia University, Stoughton had studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and brought to Manitoba the academic culture of the American east coast. This decision had long-lasting consequences. Along with the traditions of the *Beaux-Arts*, it ensured a line of succession that lasted for more than fifty years: when Stoughton retired in 1929, he was replaced by Milton Osborne, another Columbia graduate. And when Osborne left Winnipeg in 1946, his successor was John (Jack) Russell, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the economic ups and downs of the prairie economy over the next thirty years, the architecture school

managed to hold its own, attracting a steady stream of students. As one might expect from their Beaux-Arts-based education, neither Stoughton nor Osborne was particularly attracted to the gospel of modernism then emerging in Europe, and so there was no question of Manitoba introducing a modernist curriculum in the 1920s and 1930s. In an interview recorded by Dr. Michael McMordie in 1975, John C. Parkin remarked that when he entered the University of Manitoba in 1939 he found high standards, a competitive environment, and the dying embers of the Beaux-Arts system.<sup>5</sup>

Pressure for change seems to have been coming from various sources as early as 1940, and based on the evidence of student work published in the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, modernist ideas had entered the design studio by 1943-44;<sup>9</sup> thereafter it took firm hold (figure 2). Parkin related that many students were dissatisfied with Milton Osborne's teaching; in particular, Parkin remembered Osborne as someone with little interest in technical matters.<sup>10</sup> What Parkin would not have known, but what surviving correspondence reveals, is that Osborne himself realized the world was changing, and that the architectural curriculum would have to change with it. In 1942, Osborne took a year's leave of absence to examine developments in architectural education in the United States. Several years later, in 1945, Osborne resigned to take a post at Pennsylvania State College, where he is best remembered for designing a neo-Colonial mansion for Dwight D. Eisenhower. It would seem that by the mid-1940s he had concluded it was time to make way for a younger director and a new generation.<sup>11</sup>

Milton Osborne's successor was Jack Russell, another American and the privileged son of a successful industrialist. Russell had been hired by Osborne in 1928 at the age of 21 with a newly-minted degree from MIT. In 1932 Russell attended the School of Fine Arts at Fontainebleau, and from 1943 seems to have been the *de facto* director of the University of Manitoba's School of Architecture.<sup>12</sup> Talented and energetic, he cultivated his links with the local community, and with the east-coast American architectural establishment he had left behind. He also encouraged his students to leave Winnipeg to pursue graduate work. Eric Thrift, Roy Sellors, and Ernest Smith studied at MIT; Andrew Chomick, Izzie Coop, Morley Blankstein, and David Haid left for Chicago; Harry Seidler and John C. Parkin opted for Harvard. Recognizing this tendency of Manitoba graduates to seek post-graduate degrees outside the country is crucial to understanding Winnipeg's ultimate success as a centre of modernism in Canada. It was encouraged by the culture of the school, and in Parkin's view it was not an attitude to be found in Toronto. Greater opportunities there encouraged young graduates to go directly into practice or to work on graduate degrees without leaving the city.<sup>13</sup>

While many of these young graduates, such as Parkin, never



Figure 2. An Apartment House; Harry Seidler, Bachelor of Architecture thesis design, University of Manitoba. (*JRAIC*, 22, no. 4 [April 1945]: 79)

came back to Winnipeg, others, including Blankstein and Coop, soon returned, some to practice, others to teach. Inevitably, this reinvigorated the local architectural scene. Russell also took advantage of a dramatic postwar rise in student numbers to hire the best teachers he could find, including two Harvard graduates, Earl Farnham and James Donahue, and the IIT-trained Herschel Elarth. Among the few exceptions to this American influx were Wolfgang Gerson, who had a degree from the Architectural Association in London, and Vladimir Kostka, a Czech planner who joined the school in 1947.<sup>14</sup>

The results were predictable. At first incrementally, and then by means of a thorough reorganization in 1948, the University of Manitoba curriculum was transformed along modernist lines.<sup>15</sup> To stimulate debate, Russell brought lecturers such as Konrad Wachsmann to the school and inaugurated a series of exhibitions, including shows organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Boston Contemporary Institute of Art, and the National Gallery of Canada. By the early 1950s, Manitoba graduates and professors had begun to design and produce buildings strongly influenced by German-American modernist principles. The winning National Gallery of Canada design of 1953-54 is but one example in a large repertoire that includes the Russell architecture building itself. All this demonstrates that by about 1950 the school of architecture at the University of Manitoba had taken its place in a continent-wide revamping of architecture school curricula along the models established by Mies van der Rohe at IIT, and Walter Gropius at Harvard.

A second factor that encouraged new architectural ideas in postwar Winnipeg was a social and economic climate that was conducive to innovation. One of the best examples of this — years before competition drawings for buildings such as the National Gallery were to find their way onto Manitoba drawing boards — was the planning and development in 1945 of an experimental suburb on the banks of the Red River not far from the University of Manitoba. The model, once again, was American-modern, and only indirectly European; specifically,

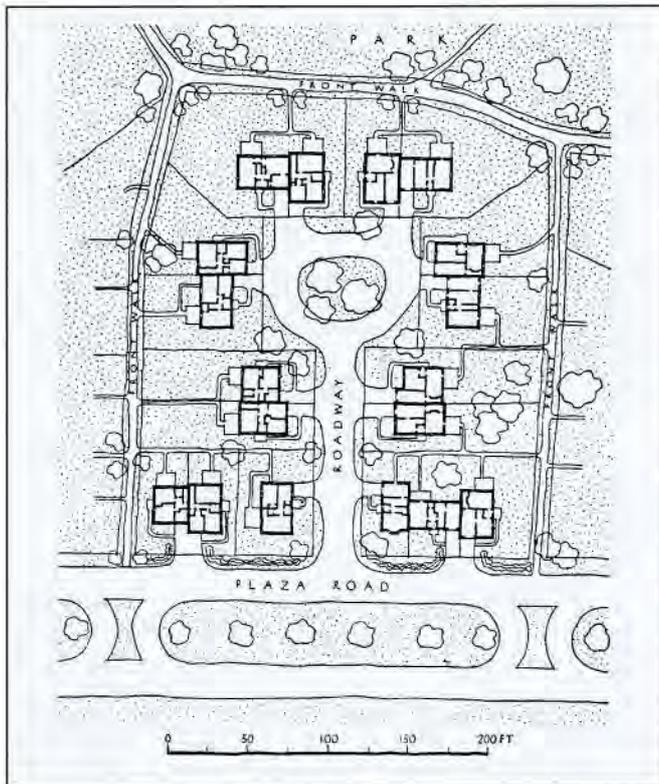


Figure 3. Plan of Radburn, New Jersey. (*JRAIC* 29, no. 9 [September 1952]: 5)

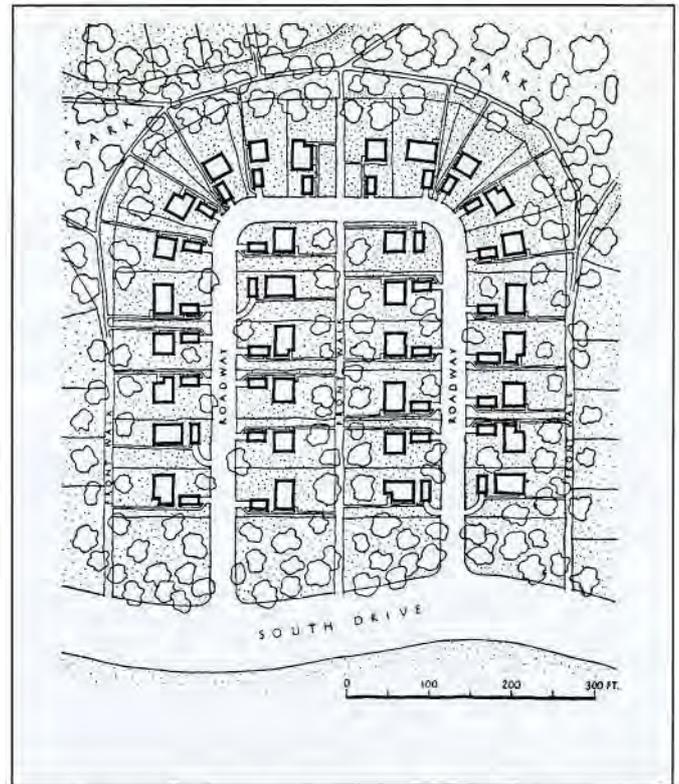


Figure 4. Plan of Wildwood Park, Winnipeg. (*JRAIC* 29, no. 9 [September 1952]: 5)

the planning ideas were based on those that New York reformer Clarence Stein had explored in the 1920s and 1930s. Superblocks, specialized roads, and separation of pedestrians and automobiles all had a profound influence on Canadian planning generally in the postwar era, but few if any Canadian suburbs were as radical in design or as successful in execution as Winnipeg's Wildwood Park.

Wildwood Park was the brainchild of a developer by the name of Hubert Bird. Like many western Canadians, Bird had come to the prairies in the early years of the 20th century with little money in his pocket, but with ambition and high hopes. At first, the 16-year-old Bird worked as a farm labourer, bank clerk, and time keeper for a construction company, but by the 1930s he had prospered and moved to Winnipeg. During the Second World War he built air training units and housing for servicemen throughout the Canadian West.

Before the war, Bird had bought a house on a heavily wooded flood plane near the banks of the Red River. His intention was to develop a nearby piece of land for housing, but the war intervened and it was not until early 1945 that he was able to begin the project in earnest. Looking for an architect, Bird approached GBR, a firm that had itself only just reorganized following a wartime hiatus. Bird did not have in mind a conventional suburb; what he wanted was a design modelled on Clarence Stein and Henry Wright's experimental development at Radburn, New Jersey. There, Stein had grouped houses around collective green spaces with connecting sidewalks

and paths distinct from service and arterial roads. In the end, Bird got what he wanted to a remarkable degree. Wildwood Park proved to be extremely close in design to Radburn, with the important distinction that service roads were designed as circular throughways rather than the "hammer-head" cul-de-sacs used by Stein<sup>16</sup> (figures 3, 4).

Cecil Blankstein, the GBR partner-in-charge at Wildwood, was responsible for overall site planning. He was also asked to design a number of standard house plans that could be built at prices accessible to middle-class buyers. The result was a series of conventional but serviceable storey-and-a-half and two-storey houses ranging in price from \$6,870 for a one-level house without basement to \$9,370 for a two-storey house with three bedrooms and a den<sup>17</sup> (figure 5). The system of construction was more innovative than the designs: very much in tune with the time, Bird employed prefabrication methods he had developed during the war. Formwork panels were reused, concrete was mixed on site, and wall panels were constructed nearby (including studs and framing), delivered to the building site by truck, and erected by mobile crane. In a filmed demonstration for the *Minneapolis Tribune*, a bungalow and a one-and-one-half storey house were both erected in 58 minutes.<sup>18</sup>

The experiment was a success by virtually every yardstick. Today, many of the original houses have been expanded and altered as owners adapted them to changing circumstances, but Bird's vision of a middle-class Arcadia, and the reformist intentions of Clarence Stein, remain intact. With its mature



Figure 5. Two-storey house, Wildwood Park, Winnipeg. (K. Crossman, 1998)



Figure 6. Wildwood Park, Winnipeg; view of common space with walkway. (K. Crossman, 1998)

trees, rolling lawns, and, in the winter, snowy vistas, Wildwood stands today an alternative to the conventional Canadian suburb no less than its “new urbanist” descendants (figure 6).

The willingness of a Hubert Bird to deviate from the tried-and-true and to risk money and resources in search of a better way of life for ordinary people will always be a rare occurrence, but there is good reason to believe that western Canada and Winnipeg in the early 1950s was a place of genuine opportunity for architects, many of whom were able to practice in a climate of remarkable openness to innovative ideas. There is also evidence to suggest, as the construction of Wildwood Park demonstrates, that it was a place with a highly developed and sophisticated architectural culture.

In search of evidence for these assertions, it is useful to turn once again to the background behind the winning National Gallery of Canada design. Of particular interest is how two architects in their twenties, fresh out of graduate school and with no real experience, ended up as lead designers for an established architectural firm in an important national competition. The short answer is that Morley Blankstein was the brother of

GBR partner Cecil Blankstein. The long answer is that by 1953 design at GBR was already very much in the hands of a generation still in their twenties.

Exactly how this came about was the consequence of an unlikely conjunction of three factors: the history of GBR itself, the developing reputation of the University of Manitoba's School of Architecture, and the willingness of the GBR partners to accept the ideas of a younger generation. These three factors seem to have come together very quickly. As mentioned earlier, GBR in 1945 had just reopened after the post-war reorganization of a long-established firm. As reorganized, Laurie Green ran the office while Leslie Russell, a veteran of the Manitoba architectural scene, and Cecil Blankstein, the younger partner, handled the design function.<sup>19</sup> Soon after the war the firm won a number of commissions, including Wildwood Park and the design of Shaarey Zedek synagogue (figure 7).

Shaarey Zedek synagogue came off the drawing board in 1948, and it remains today a very good example of the firm's style at that moment. It was just about this time that the firm began to develop what was to be a close and long-lasting relationship with both the School of Architecture and the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Manitoba. One aspect of this relationship that was to prove critically important was GBR's decision to hire Manitoba students to work in their office. What was unusual about this decision is that these students and young graduates were very quickly given a chance to design at an advanced level. This probably explains why GBR's office shifted virtually overnight from the tepid, uncertain manner common to mainstream Canadian architecture at that time to a confident and well-understood modernism. The alternative explanation, that Leslie Russell or Cecil Blankstein, in a moment of vision, retrained and rethought years of practice, is unlikely. The only convincing explanation for what happened to design at GBR beginning about 1948-49 is that the office provided a welcoming place for young architects with talent, and through them ideas began to move quickly from design studio to drawing board to developed project.



Figure 7. Shaarey Zedek synagogue, Wellington Crescent, Winnipeg; Green, Blankstein, and Russell, architects, 1948. (K. Crossman, 1998)

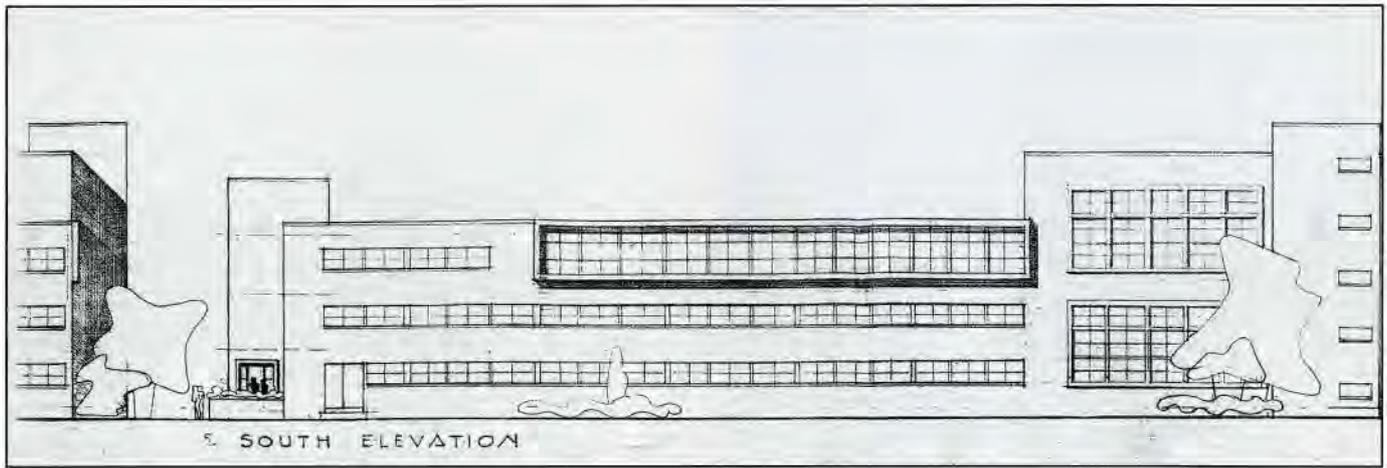


Figure 8. Proposal for the Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg; unsigned, undated drawing. (GBR file, Public Archives of Manitoba)

What happened at GBR suggests that historians to date have perhaps underestimated the importance of generational change in accounts of the assimilation and diffusion of modernist ideas throughout Canadian society. Because of the fortunate preservation of drawings from this period we can still see the galvanizing effect the young students and graduates had on design at GBR. The project that may have been the catalyst for the move from a residual historicism to a full-blown modernist practice at GBR, and perhaps Winnipeg as a whole, was the commission for a new library (to be named after Elizabeth Dafoe) at the University of Manitoba. Early drawings for this project dating from the winter of 1947-48 show a blocky composition clad in stone with little surface decoration (figure 8). The overall impression is not unlike the Shaarey Zedek synagogue, and is reminiscent of much Canadian design of that period (see, for instance, Allward and Gouinlock's 1947-48 addition to the Mechanical Engineering Building at the University of Toronto).

The dossier contains a number of revisions to this basic concept executed during the next year or so; it also contains a burst of drawings of a radically different concept, many on similar tracing paper and all of which relating to the building as it was eventually built in 1950-51<sup>20</sup> (figures 9, 10). With its balanced asymmetry, sliding planes, sense of implied structure, and expansive glazing, it is certainly one of the earliest modernist public buildings on the prairies and one of the first east of the Rockies. It is also a design that is quite remarkably well-resolved, at least in the sense that we can see in it many of the principles and strategies found in later GBR projects such as the Winnipeg Post Office (1953-60) and the Winnipeg International Airport (1959-64). It is all the more extraordinary because it is generally accepted that it was produced by a very young architect named David Thordarson.<sup>21</sup>

The arrival of David Thordarson on the Winnipeg architectural scene gives credence to the idea that the success of Winnipeg firms in Ottawa in 1954 was part of a larger modernist

scene, and it supports the contention that this success was not based on the happenstance of the brother of a partner being given a chance to design at an early age, but on the existence of many young architects of talent. In comparing Thordarson's Elizabeth Dafoe Library design with the work of Blankstein and Coop, it is apparent that the library design has more in common with the conservative Shaarey Zedek synagogue than with the impressive, perhaps brilliant, Miesian National Gallery solution. While there is a fairly close relationship between the two projects in terms of their materials, certain details, and even cubic massing, Thordarson took those elements, analysed them, separated them, and then reassembled them in a manner that is modern though not particularly Miesian. This analysis and design were to have a lasting impact for several reasons: first, Thordarson was soon to emerge as GBR's leading designer; and second, while the National Gallery design expressed a generic modernism that was strikingly up-to-date in 1953, the Dafoe Library seemed to offer many young architects at that time something more: the possibility of a modern yet locally grounded architecture.

The reason it is possible to make such a claim is that just about the time of the National Gallery competition, an article was published in the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* that more-or-less explained the Dafoe Library as described above: the beginning of a modernist approach to design that nonetheless contained elements specific or at least demonstrably related to the Manitoba context. The title of the article was "Red River Skyline," and it appeared as part of a special issue celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the University of Manitoba's School of Architecture.<sup>22</sup> The article offered a historical review of the architectural development of the Red River valley. It was a collaborative effort written by a group of University of Manitoba students assisted by professor Herschel Elarth. While the article was a history, it was a history written with a view to explaining how the historical past could help provide an understanding of the modernist present.



Figure 9. The Elizabeth Dafoe Library; Green, Blankstein, and Russell, architects, 1950-51. (*JRAIC* 30, no. 10 [October 1953]: 291)



Figure 10. Aerial view of the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, showing the Elizabeth Dafoe Library, bottom left. (*JRAIC* 31, no. 3 [March 1954]: 88)

In the view of these students, there were two ideas that seemed particularly significant. The first was that they believed Winnipeg to have been strongly influenced by the architecture of Chicago and the American Midwest just before and just after the turn of the century. They could see evidence of this in the city's Richardsonian Romanesque warehouses and Sullivanesque office buildings. For them, writing in the early 1950s, this was extremely important, even exciting, since it demonstrated that, far from being remote to many of the principles of architectural modernism, Winnipeg already had a proto-modern structural rationalist tradition based on the innovations of the Chicago School. This interpretation is clearly based on the modernist historiographical view outlined by writers such as Nicholas Pevsner and Siegfried Giedion, a debt to which they make quite clear. Echoing the words of Louis Sullivan, they described the forty years of Winnipeg's development after 1914 as "the grand detour ... a circuitous route through phases of imitation, of shallow speculation and experimentation."<sup>23</sup>

The second idea these students took from their study of Red River architecture was that history showed the existence

of a strong and identifiable tradition of building in the local Tyndall limestone, a tradition that ran unbroken from the earliest days of European settlement to the present. In their view, this was a representative historical element that should be exploited. "Can we expect to find an expression of the prairies, of the dignity and progressive spirit of its people, through the use of local building materials?" they asked. "Materials such as tyndal [sic] stone...possess the character and dignity of the early buildings of the pioneer period."<sup>24</sup>

Taken together, these two ideas — the idea of a modernist methodology formulated on an understanding and exploitation of the structural "cage" or grid, and the use of the local stone — were, on the evidence of this article, the foundations upon which these young architects thought a modern architecture could be built in Winnipeg. And it is quite evident that what they had in mind was not a generic Miesian modernism, but an architecture that could connect with the culture and context of their own place. Fifty years later, it is increasingly clear that this was the goal of many young architects across Canada, and probably North America, in the early 1950s. In Winnipeg can be seen evidence of ideas that defy today's conventional wisdom about the era.<sup>25</sup> The first is that these young architects did not see modern architecture as it was then understood: as foreign and unfamiliar, however distant the source of its immediate formal language might be — a combination of *idées reçues*, as Melvin Charney has described it.<sup>26</sup> Rather, they understood it instinctively as something directly related to their own culture. The second rather unusual idea — and this is how "Red River Skyline" ends — is that when they looked at the Winnipeg scene they were able to point rather convincingly to David Thordarson's Elizabeth Dafoe Library as an example of what they were after, as an example of an emerging point of view, even perhaps of a theory. It is worth repeating their description in full:

First we note the open plan and inter-flowing free space — through the elimination of strict separating walls and the stressing of passage or connecting areas. This we see in the exhibition space which flows through the entrance lobby and up or down into the reading spaces of the library, thereby creating a continuing space-volume. We can enjoy, if we will, a pleasant feeling of expansive openness, even on the coldest day outside. We are tempted to move about, to see new vistas from one space to another. Scarcely interrupted by great glass areas, the inner gallery space seems to flow on outdoors to fuse with the terraces and the Manitoba campus landscape.

Second, we note the library is designed as a grouping of light-enclosing volumes rather than of heavy masonry masses, the result of a clear distinction between primary and secondary structures, between the supporting skeleton and the filling or thin skin-like enclosing envelope of glass.

Third, we note the use of materials in new ways, as well as in old ways, the latter to preserve a sense of continuity with the older traditions, as evidenced in the library's masonry stone enclosure.

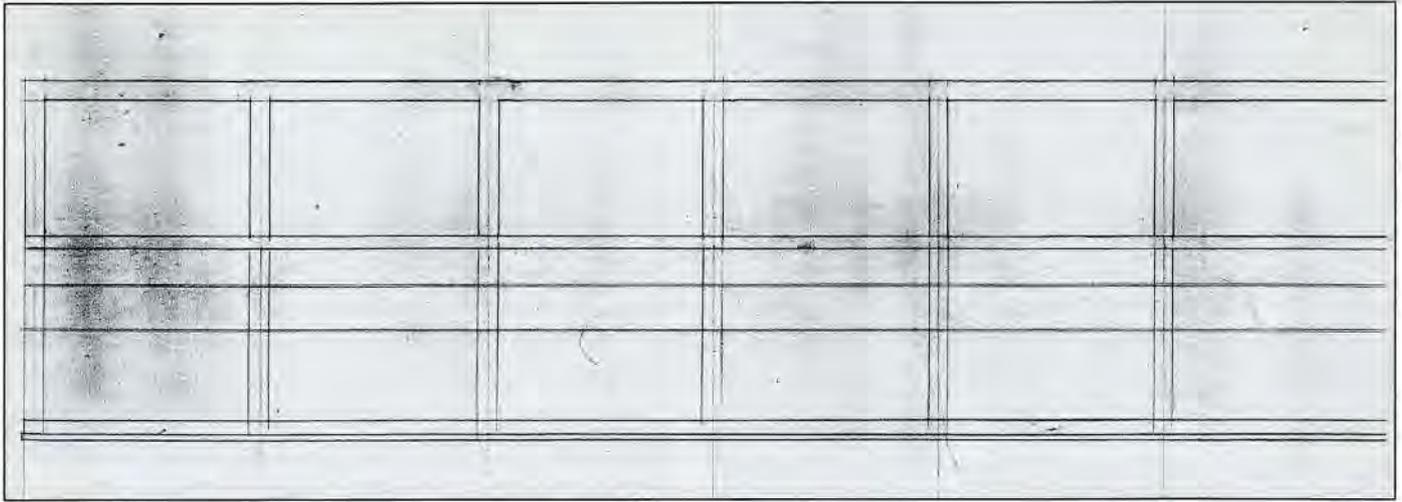


Figure 11. Unsigned drawing [University of Manitoba Library]. (GBR file, Public Archives of Manitoba)

Finally, we note the related content, forms, colours and textures of the other visual arts of mural painting, sculpture and industrial design as they have been integrated into the whole design.<sup>27</sup>

In light of these comments, it is fair to say that Thordarson's library takes on a greater significance than is generally thought. Obviously, it is the first sign of a talent still virtually unknown today, who was to be the progenitor of a series of distinguished modernist buildings, including many (such as St. George's Church [1957] and the Winnipeg City Hall [1959-65]) that are expressly the fulfilment of that program articulated in "Red River Skyline." But, in a larger way, it is the first sign and symbol of an emerging modernist architectural culture on the prairies, and even now it helps us understand the origins of that culture and how we might see it in the context of the broader picture of developments elsewhere in Canada.

What it tells us first is that by 1950 modernism already had deep and significant roots in Winnipeg. Not just Morley Blankstein, not just David Thordarson, not just the authors of "Red River Skyline," but an entire generation of students and teachers were already in place who understood what modernism was and what it implied, and who were able to handle its forms and ideas in a mature, sophisticated way. It is exactly this quality that the jury had observed in Blankstein and Coop's National Gallery design, and it is this quality that can be seen in the Elizabeth Dafoe Library. The degree to which this is the case is clearly revealed by a pencil study also found in the Dafoe Library dossier. The drawing, which probably dates from about 1949-50, is simplicity itself, a few bays of a grid/wall plane based on the idea of the structural grid (figure 11). And that is its significance. For one only has to compare this drawing to the Dafoe Library to see immediately that this idea was the point of departure for the entire design. Echoes of this same idea can be seen in many of Thordarson's later

buildings; it is almost as if, for him, the grid/frame/structure relationship was a kind of Rosetta stone of platonic purity, upon which the visible and possible world could be built.

"Red River Skyline" and the Dafoe Library indicate that by 1950 Winnipeg was not only an emerging centre of architectural modernism with considerable depth, it was also a place that was strongly influenced by a sense of its own place and its own history (the evidence of the National Gallery of Canada design aside). It also seems that the desire to express these values in architecture had already begun to take concrete form. What is particularly striking about this development is that, unlike the Vancouver situation, for example, where similar ideas tended to focus on domestic design (the B.C. Electric Building aside), in Winnipeg these ideas addressed the issue of public architecture. Admittedly, the extent to which David Thordarson and his contemporaries were able or even wanted to carry out this program of local expression over the long term is difficult to say without a closer look at what was built and what was accomplished. But one can say with certainty that, in 1950, Winnipeg must be ranked alongside Vancouver as a place where the "regionalist" impulse had been added to the modernist cocktail, and had begun to produce concepts and buildings that pointed the way to a modern architecture grounded in its own place. But there the similarities end: Vancouver's regionalism was largely domestic, with links to the Arts-and-Crafts traditions of the West Coast; Winnipeg's was largely public, and rooted in an expression of the cage and the legacy of the Chicago School. For young Manitobans in 1953, the prairie was the grid, the grid was modern and the grid was now.

## Endnotes

- 1 Eric R. Arthur, "The National Gallery of Canada Competition," *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* [hereafter JRAIC] 31, no. 4 (April 1954): 104-12. Among the best-known alumni are Harry Seidler and John C. Parkin, but the list of luminaries also includes David Haid, Doug Simpson, Harold Semmens, Ernest Smith, Morley Blankstein, Gordon Arnott, Kiyoshi Izumi, Andrew Chomick, Charles Greenberg, and C.B.K. Van Norman.
- 2 See, for instance, Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver 1938-1963* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), 14, and Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2:812.
- 3 Arthur, 109.
- 4 This was suggested by Morley Blankstein, telephone interview with the author, February 1999.
- 5 Arthur, 109.
- 6 Biographical details based on Morley Blankstein, telephone interview with the author, February 1999.
- 7 "Professor Arthur Alexander Stoughton," JRAIC 27, no. 4 (April 1950): 146; John A. Russell, "Architectural Education at the University of Manitoba, 1913-1953," JRAIC 31, no. 3 (March 1954): 63.
- 8 Interview, Michael McMordie and John C. Parkin, unpublished transcript, p. 3. A copy of the unpublished transcript was kindly provided to me by the Canadian Centre of Architecture with the approval of Dr. McMordie.
- 9 Milton Osborne, "The Course in Architecture at the University of Manitoba," JRAIC 22, no. 4 (April 1945): 79-80. This includes examples of fifth-year work by Harry Seidler, Ernest Smith, and John C. Parkin.
- 10 Interview, Michael McMordie and John C. Parkin, p. 4.
- 11 *Ibid.*; John A. Russell, "An Appreciation: Milton S. Osborne," JRAIC 23, no. 4 (April 1946): 193; John A. Russell, "Department of Architecture and Fine Arts," (President's Report), *University of Manitoba Calendar*, 1943, p. 55.
- 12 "J.H.G. Russell," JRAIC, 23, no. 3 (March 1946): 72.
- 13 Interview, Michael McMordie and John C. Parkin, p. 12.
- 14 "Annual Report of the School of Architecture and Fine Arts 1946-7," *University of Manitoba Calendar*, 1947, p. 53; "Annual Report of the School of Architecture and Fine Arts 1947-48," *University of Manitoba Calendar*, 1948, p. 48.
- 15 Russell, "Architectural Education," 63.
- 16 Carl Nelson, "Wildwood Park Study," unpublished research report for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1985, pp. 32-38, 39.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-26; 32-38.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 19 Easton Lexier, telephone interview with the author, February 1999.
- 20 These are found in Box 18, GBR file, Provincial Archives of Manitoba.
- 21 This has been confirmed by Easton Lexier, John Petersmeyer, Morley Blankstein, and David Thordarson himself. John Petersmeyer, telephone interview with the author, December 1998; David Thordarson, telephone interview with the author, December 1998. David Thordarson was born in Winnipeg in 1926 and graduated from the School of Architecture at the University of Manitoba in 1949.
- 22 A.F. Ackerman, B.H. Green, M.R. Johnston, D.A. McQuaig, K.R. Webber, with H.A. Elarth, "Red River Skyline," JRAIC 31, no. 3 (March 1954): 81-85.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 25 Kelly Crossman, "Vancouver Architecture in 1960: The Case of Ron Thom," *SSAC Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (March 1997): 19-25.
- 26 Melvin Charney, "Modern Movements in French-Canadian Architecture," *Process Architecture No. 5* (Tokyo, 1978), reprinted as "Melvin Charney: Quebec's Modern Architecture," in Geoffrey Simmins, ed., *Documents in Canadian Architecture* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1992), 274.
- 27 Ackerman et al., 85.