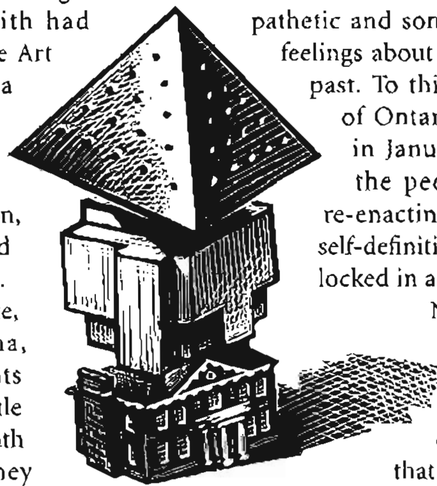
The Oedipus Edifice

Seldom has the ritual of father-killing been so flamboyantly performed as in the architectural history of the Art Gallery of Ontario

by Robert Fulford

A CENTURY AGO, DURING MONTHS when the elms were in leaf, the famous journalist and historian Goldwin Smith could look south from his porch in downtown Toronto and see nothing through the silent trees except the spire of St. George the Martyr, an elegant little Anglican church. Miraculously, Smith had found, on the land where the Art Gallery of Ontario now sits, a haven of gentility and ease. His handsome Georgian house, The Grange, was like a modest English mansion, and the only one of its kind he ever saw in North America. "In such a mansion," he wrote, "lived Miss Austen's Emma, and her father." The servants were housed in four pretty little cottages in the park to the south and, in the English way, they stayed with the family forever. When Smith died, in 1910, his butler had been at The Grange for just under fifty-two years.



Smith wasn't alone in his affection for The Grange. In the nineteenth century it embodied Toronto's self-image, for good or ill. It was a little piece of England, a symbol of the British colonialism that enriched some Torontonians and left others feeling angry and powerless. In the twentieth century, that same piece of land has been a battlefield where Toronto, and sometimes English Canada, have tried to define themselves through their cultural ambitions. The buildings erected there can be read as a history, sometimes pathetic and sometimes grand, of a society's feelings about itself, its possibilities, and its past. To this minute, as the Art Gallery of Ontario prepares for the opening in January of its latest renovation, the people who run the AGO are re-enacting this drama of architectural self-definition. At the same time they are locked in a more public struggle with the NDP government of Ontario over the proper role of a provincial museum. The New Democrats have become deeply committed to the idea that the AGO is elitist, apparently unaware that this charge is aimed eventually at just about every art museum on earth. The New Democrats have accordingly appointed a

commission that (they imagine) will lead the AGO onto the path of populist righteousness. Meanwhile the trustees are praying that early in 1993 their gleaming new building will so win the love of the public that the AGO's position in the community will be radically improved.

The charge of elitism carries an echo of The Grange's first appearance in Canadian history, as a gathering place of the dominant class in Upper Canada. It was built about 1817 on one hundred acres of open country, as the home of D'Arcy Boulton Jr. He was a leader of what its most famous enemy, William Lyon Mackenzie, called the Family Compact, a local oligarchy (as the historian W. Stewart Wallace wrote) "composed of men, some well-born, some ill-born, some brilliant, some stupid, whom the caprices of a small provincial society, with a code all its own, had pitchforked into power." Boulton and his friends made The Grange notorious as the symbol of a despotic colonialism, the first private house in Ontario whose bricks carried a political message: British aristocratic power is good, democracy is not so good. In the 1830s, and for years after, it was possible for people to reveal their politics by the way they spoke about The Grange.

D'Arcy Boulton Jr. and the son to whom he left The Grange, William, saw early Toronto through the eyes of imaginative property developers. They knew that The Grange, and the church to the south that they helped build, would eventually make the district fashionable. Gradually selling off their land, they created most of the streets that now surround the art gallery. William Boulton died in 1874, and the following year his widow, Harriet, married Goldwin Smith, an Oxford historian who was visiting Toronto. Smith moved into The Grange and dwelt there uxoriously for his last thirty-five years, making it even more famous than in Family Compact days. He became the best-known intellectual in Toronto, thanks to his busy pen, his firmly held opinions, and the family money (his and hers) that he put into magazines like *Bystander* and *Week*. He favoured free trade with the U.S. and imagined a day when Canadians would happily unite with Americans to create one English-speaking nation within Anglo-Saxon traditions. His lack of interest in a future for French Canada weakened any permanent national influence he might have had.

Late in their lives Harriet and Goldwin Smith decided that their mansion, like certain great homes in Europe, would become an art museum. In 1900 the painter George A. Reid and the banker Sir Edmund Walker had founded the Art Museum of Toronto, a title that was more hopeful than descriptive. They had no building, and for a decade what exhibitions they put on were installed in borrowed space. Finally, with the Smiths both dead, the museum inherited The Grange and the six remaining acres of the park. It held its first exhibition there in 1913, and soon began the program of expansion that has continued, off and on, ever since.

Frank Darling, a much-honoured architect who was then in his mid-sixties, designed the first three galleries in the new structure. There, in May, 1920, another kind of history was made. Up on Darling's Italianate walls went a remarkable collection of new paintings, among them *The Tangled Garden* by J.E.H. MacDonald and *Terre Sauvage* by A.Y. Jackson. This was the first exhibition of the Group of Seven, the epochal opening shot in the campaign that eventually influenced not only art in Canada but the Canadian imagination itself. Some Group members already had modest individual reputations, but joining forces at this moment, under the banner of nationalism, proved to be a masterstroke of publicity, the most inspired move of its kind in Canadian cultural history. After coming together in the first spring of the decade in which Canada would make its most significant strides toward sovereignty, the Group was able to ride a wave of nationalism, impressing on the public its view of the Canadian landscape.

After Darling's death in 1923, his firm, Darling and Pearson, developed the gallery further, adding, among other spaces, the Walker Sculpture Court (named for Edmund Walker, by now also dead). This extension went up in 1926 and another was added in 1935. These first twentieth-century galleries, erected over two decades, set a pattern for future changes: by the time they were finished it was clear that Darling and Pearson had pretty well ignored the existence of The Grange, just as future architects would ignore (or hide) whatever recent history they inherited. In architecture, as in the other arts, each generation makes its way by destroying the one before, masking its ambition with the rhetoric of progress. Aesthetic upheaval is central to modern culture, but this ritual of father-killing has seldom been so flamboyantly performed as in the architectural history of the AGO. The museum has developed as much through rejection as through growth. Each of the three major architectural transformations has begun with the humiliation of its immediate predecessor.

Frank Darling rejected the (unrecorded) designer of The Grange; John C. Parkin, in the

early 1970s, rejected Frank Darling; and in the late 1980s Barton Myers rejected John C. Parkin. But of course the unfolding history of the building expresses far more than the tastes of a few architects. Each of them, after all, was performing for an audience that was eager to see itself reflected in stone, plaster and glass. From the beginning that audience included the public, the artists and the trustees, not all of whom were mainly interested in looking at pictures. The Toronto elite tended to regard the gallery as more a social than a cultural centre, and in the 1950s winning a place on the Junior Women's Committee was one of the greatest social achievements open to a rich and well-connected young Toronto matron. After 1966, when the Art Gallery of Toronto turned into the Art Gallery of Ontario and became a dependency of the provincial government, the architects' audience grew to include civil servants and Conservative, Liberal and New Democrat politicians. Few of these people have been knowledgeable about museums but some of them have demonstrated an eagerness to manipulate the AGO.

Each architect has also dealt with a different problem, the first difference being size. Darling put what seemed like a huge building behind a pleasant old house. Parkin's AGO was much larger than Darling's and the Myers version is much larger than Parkin's. Each of them has made a bigger and more complex building for a bigger and more complex society.

Darling's chosen style was Renaissance Revival, which he used with a cool elegance; he decorated his nicely proportioned galleries with handsome baseboard mouldings in black marble and delicate plaster cornices. It was possible to imagine, strolling through it, that this public museum, like so many in Italy, was once a private palace. But if the style was intended to attract Renaissance paintings, it was a failure. Rich people in Toronto, unlike those in Cleveland and other enlightened cities, were not much interested in buying the Florentine and Venetian masters. The pictures that went up on Darling's walls tended, far more often, to be Dutch.

Whatever the priorities of the Toronto elite, they did not include The Grange. Darling's design turned its back on The Grange and faced north. By the 1930s, when the Darling and Pearson building reached Dundas Street, The Grange looked like an outbuilding. At the time — roughly from the late 1920s to the mid-1960s — Torontonians saw little reason to preserve the physical embodiment of a past that was only slightly interesting to them. Besides, The Grange represented a political position no one was anxious to recall, much less celebrate. During much of this period the prime minister of Canada was William Lyon Mackenzie King, the proud grandson of the radical politician and journalist who had fought the people of The Grange, and beaten them. Every history book told us that William Lyon Mackenzie, through the Rebellion of 1837, had defeated the bad men from England and brought responsible government to Canada. Who cared, then, about the aristocrats and would-be aristocrats who ended up on the losing side?

The Grange was left to rot. By the 1950s the gallery's offices were housed there, with the telephone switchboard placed under the Boultons' elegant staircase and the bedrooms crammed with desks and filing cabinets. No one with any power showed any interest in even cleaning and painting it, much less restoring it to the style the Boultons and the Smiths knew. This was the state of things in 1961, when William Withrow became director. Within a few years, he and the trustees were planning a much larger and more impressive museum. The Grange reopened in 1973, handsomely restored, with furniture, paintings and even table-settings from the middle of the nineteenth century. By that point John C. Parkin was preparing the expansion of the main gallery.

Parkin had been the young prince of Canadian modernism in the 1950s, having brought back from Harvard the doctrines of Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. He had no interest in historicist architecture, and no time for nostalgia, so it wasn't surprising that his building not only encircled but overwhelmed Frank Darling's. Parkin's two-part extension opened in 1974 and 1977, and revealed itself as a set of connected boxes. In almost every way, it was a clear failure. "Architecture should enliven, ennoble and inspire, and not gratify or glorify the banal," Parkin once wrote. No one would apply any of those words, except the last, to his AGO. It was at best a neutral background for the art; at worst it was confusing (it took some of us years to find our way around) and intimidating. It hid much of the grace of Darling's design with false ceilings and neutral wall-covering but substituted no noticeable grace of its own. One of modernism's chief glories, the use of precisely proportioned rooms as a kind of silent aesthetic statement, was altogether absent. And there was one gigantic gaffe: a grand staircase that led straight to the coat-check room.

One major flaw was not Parkin's fault but the result of the shoestring budget set by the provincial government of the day, a Tory government almost as intrusive and parsimonious as the New Democrats of the 1990s. That's the reason, as Withrow said recently, that much of the building was clad in what looked like congealed porridge. Everything, right down to doorknobs and signs, was cheap — "post-office or air-terminal minimal," as Withrow says.

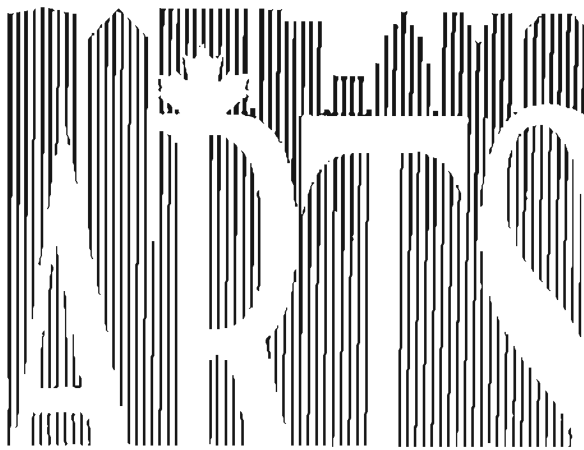
There was something else that was wrong with the Parkin building: it was dated before it opened. It said "modernist," clearly and bluntly, at a moment when cultural buildings all over the world were moving beyond modernism. In 1976, a year before Parkin's second stage opened, the new Citadel Theatre went up in Edmonton, a graceful and airy work of high-tech postmodernism. The architect was Barton Myers, and it was Myers who in the 1980s won the competition to enlarge the AGO. Enlarge it — and change it radically.

Myers has since moved to Los Angeles and shares credit for the new AGO with his old partners and protégés in Toronto, now the city's leading firm. The official line reads, "Architects: Barton Myers Architect Inc., Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects — Joint Venture Architects." The partner now in charge is Tom Payne. He, Myers, their partners and consultants and clients (including Withrow, the director emeritus, and Glenn Lowry, who replaced Withrow as director in 1990) have transformed the tone of the museum in every conceivable way.

They tore out Parkin's false ceilings, ripped down Parkin's oatmeal-coloured fabric wall-covering, softened Parkin's lighting. They restored Darling's baseboards and cornices. They abandoned Parkin's near-white walls and began experimenting with crimson, mustard, and other background colours that Parkin's generation regarded as outlandishly loud and intrusive. Outside, they put up a forty-six-metre-high decorative tower (with Myers you get tower) to make the gallery more prominent on Dundas Street and placed a glass pyramid over the new entrance hall. They eliminated the pretentious ceremonial entrance Parkin had installed, along with the moat-like space he put between the street and the museum. Wherever they could, they hid Parkin's design. Completed, the work of Myers and his colleagues will represent the deParkinization of the AGO.

"Most great institutions are built incrementally over time," Payne remarked recently. Recognising this truth is central to his generation's world view, just as denying it was central to Parkin's. Payne and his colleagues play with a central paradox of postmodernism: in order to advance, architecture must frequently retreat, and must never hesitate to acknowledge the past (except, of course, the immediate past known as modernism). They illustrate it in the two-storey-high Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Sculpture Atrium. The exterior of the 1817 Georgian mansion forms the south wall of this remarkable room and Frank Darling's 1918 design provides the north wall. The arching roof looks, as it should, like several earlier Myers buildings. And, at the east end of the room, we can still see a little Parkin.

Here, and in several other places, the AGO is now both a more beautiful and more inviting building than at any time since Goldwin and Harriet Smith lived in The Grange. Perhaps it will also turn out to be an example of what Payne has said his firm hopes to create: "buildings that will look just as good fifty years from now (we hope) as they do today." Given the aesthetic history of the site, that seems a good deal less than certain. What matters more at this point is that the latest version of the AGO expresses Toronto's current idea of itself, just as earlier versions did. At the moment Toronto, in its dreams, is open, pluralistic, stylish, and up-to-date. Just like its splendid new gallery. ■



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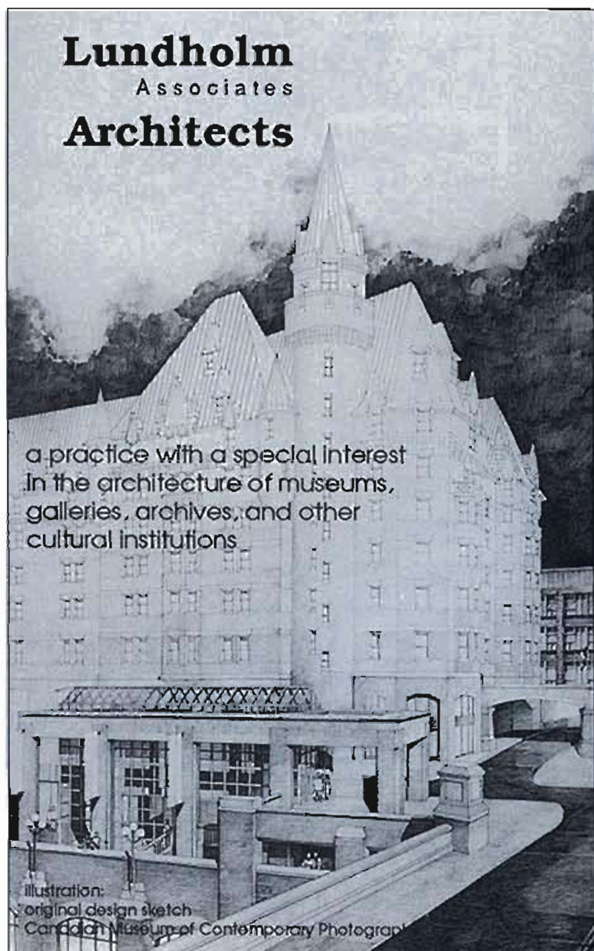

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