



**JOHN C. PARKIN, ARCHIVES AND PHOTOGRAPHY:
REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE AND
PRESENTATION OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE** by
Linda Fraser, Michael McMordie and Geoffrey Simmins

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John B. Parkin Associates Archive at the Canadian Architectural Archives

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By Linda Fraser

Archival collections, in their many formats and media, constitute a cultural and heritage resource that enables people to reach into the past and find relevant information concerning what has transpired over the course of time. Architectural records form an important part of that resource and yet few institutions collect them in any significant numbers. The loss of these records can only be measured by the passing of time but what remains will doubtless be invaluable in weaving together Canada's rich historical tapestry. The John B. Parkin Associates fonds at the Canadian Architectural Archives is such a resource. Researchers of all kinds will find it rich in detail critical to understanding and chronicling an important period in Canadian history.

John B. Parkin Associates

Post-World War II Canada was an exciting time to practice architecture. The philosophical foundations of modern architecture were laid by the teachings of architects such as Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe, and in Canada championed by noted architect, educator, critic and scholar, Eric Arthur and others who had, even before the 1940s, embraced modernism. It resulted in a large number of young architects who embraced modernist ideals and began to practice in Canada with the idea that architecture could improve the quality of life. A building boom made it possible to realize those ideals on a large scale and modernism became the dominant architectural style particularly for government and corporate buildings.

- 5.1. Ottawa Union Station,
Ottawa, Panda
Associates
fonds,
Canadian
Architectural
Archives (PAN
67261-22).





5.2. Ottawa Union Station, Ottawa, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 67261-113).

In particular, the leadership of John B. Parkin Associates felt that architecture played an integral role in society and the affairs of government and in merging culture with government and industry. John B. and John C. were both public advocates of design. John B., “a resourceful and aggressive businessman,” served as head of the Board of Trade.¹ John C. was chairman of the Canadian Conference of the Arts and of the National Design Council and the president of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. As partner in charge of design, John C. won five Massey medals by the time he was twenty-eight and his unflinching belief in modernist ideals made him view “the new architecture as an environmental art form” and architects not as “fine artists but social artists.”² He was quoted as saying, “The architect-urbanist must have political instincts, the sense of survival, the will to prevail.”³ By all accounts, John B. Parkin and Associates exemplified those words.

By 1960, John B. Parkin Associates was the largest firm in the country and was designing distinctive modernist buildings for a wide variety of government and corporate clients. Their architecture became influential in the business community and played an important role in the merging of culture with the cityscape – universities,

office buildings, and housing. Buildings for the Ontario Association of Architects, Ortho Pharmaceutical, the Don Mills development, Terminal 1 at the Lester B. Pearson International Airport, Ottawa Union Station (figs. 5.1–2), and the Bata Building (figs. 5.3–5) were among their many designs. They were also chosen as associates by internationally prominent architects such as Mies van der Rohe and Viljo Revell for Toronto Dominion Square and Toronto City Hall. Exemplifying the role architects play in the affairs of the city, their work became monuments to government and business.

The decline of the popularity of modern architecture in subsequent years has led to the demolition of a significant amount of Parkin architecture. What remains as a testament to their importance in Canadian history are their archives preserved at the Canadian Architectural Archives. Today, the archival collection of John B. Parkin remains the largest ever received by the Canadian Architectural Archives. The first accession, acquired in 1975, comprised a multitude of drawings and 550 boxes of textual records. The drawings themselves are a remarkable legacy of a rich and varied practice. Although few perspectives and fewer sketches remain, every drawing, mostly done on large sheets of



5.3. Bata Shoe Stores Ltd. Office Building, Don Mills, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 65018-1).

5.4. Exterior columns at Bata Shoe, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 65973-1).





5.5. Interior columns at Bata Shoe, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 65973-3).

Mylar, shows the completed project work in remarkable detail. The textual records, unfortunately rare in most architectural collections, provide an uncommon glimpse of the actual workings of the Parkin firm and how it contributed to every aspect of the society in which it practised. Rich in detail, these records provide evidence of how architecture and the principles associated with its practice can define the society and culture of a particular generation.

Additional acquisitions from its successor firm NORR, enriched by a series of interviews conducted by Michael McMordie with John C. Parkin and the addition of the Panda Associates collection of architectural photography, one of the premier architectural photography firms in its day, makes the Parkin collection an immensely rich resource for study.

The Importance of Archival Collections, including Architectural Records

Some stories deserve to be told. The telling of such stories relies on the word and image and in archives the foundations for those stories are found. What are archives?

Archives are: “1. Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control; permanent records.”⁴ Archives contain a vast amount of documentary evidence in a variety of forms including diaries, manuscripts, letters, official documents, music scores, maps, plans, photographs, sound recordings, moving images, transcripts, e-mails, and other digital content. Records are produced by individuals, organizations, and businesses in the course of their daily activities and they contain evidence of those activities. As Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz remark, “They emerge from organizational cultures and personal psychologies of great complexity, multiple relationships, and many identities.”⁵

Archival records become fundamental to our understanding of the past. Providing essential information about society, they are intimately connected with the processes of life that produce them, making them “alive with human nature in all its diversity.”⁶ They become part of the collective memory. They give society the

chance to examine and re-examine what has gone before with the knowledge that memory is “made and continually re-made.”⁷

Archives in memory institutions are collected for a wide variety of purposes with the knowledge that their preservation is critical to our public identity. Many archival collections are theme-based and are derived from particular institutional mandates. Literary papers, political papers, art, music, theatre, and architectural records may contain personal papers, diaries, business records, letters, oral histories, manuscripts, scores, and plans that are representative of the records that reflect human endeavours and are dispersed across collections in every nation. “Recorded information, therefore, derives from a variety of sources and is collected and saved for a complex of reasons.”⁸ The preservation and public availability of these records ensure the continuing research into past events and accomplishments or failures. Though the initial use of these records often serves an immediate purpose, “as time passes, however, new uses for recorded information emerge.”⁹ The use of archives is not limited to academics and scholars. A broad number of people use archives in search of archival records for relevant information from the past. Students of all ages,

local historians, biographers, genealogists, film makers and the general public use archives because they provide a door to the past of all elements that constitute society. In the words of archivist Verne Harris, “the archives ... is a crucible of human experience. A battleground for meaning and significance. A babel of stories.”¹⁰

Architectural records constitute an important branch of archival collections, documenting a variety of complex interactions: the building, the architect, the architectural firm, organizational context, and other factors and communities that may influence how and why certain decisions are made and the context in which the work takes place. “The function of architecture is, in short, complex and wide-ranging; the records creators are numerous and varied, and the records of this function are deeply interrelated and are generated by many recording media.”¹¹

Architectural records are retained in architectural offices and archives as evidence of how buildings were designed, how they were constructed, what materials were used, who designed them, and who commissioned them. They can be used to examine the careers of architects and trace the uses of particular buildings over time. They can be used for restoration and preservation,

for additions and renovations to existing structures, to study precedents for future design, and to determine fault in litigation. In short, they can be used by a wide variety of people for the purpose for which they were created. "Much of this contextual information is available in the most complete and reliable form through the preservation of the records of architects and architectural firms."¹²

It may appear that architecture is adequately documented by sources other than archival records. "The building itself carries a wealth of information for as long as it stands or can be reconstructed, and visual representations in the form of photographs, films, paintings and drawings of completed buildings and streetscapes are often available as well; published sources include professional and trade periodicals, product information, stock plans and pattern books."¹³ While these sources add to a rich documentary heritage, they can in no way replace the information often found in architectural archives and "where architectural records are concerned, one generally can accept no substitutions."¹⁴

And if the building no longer exists as an object for study? Large numbers of buildings do not survive in their original form or, in fact, in any form. As Terry

Cook says: "In studying the history and traditions of architecture, it may not be possible to look around and see the architect's physical monument: very often it no longer exists, or has been restored, refaced, reconstructed several times, reused for radically different purposes; or may be located far away in another city or country. Therefore, the monument of the architect's work may not be the actual building, but archival documents that give evidence of the building's plan, design, construction, use, and subsequent alterations and possible demolition."¹⁵

But architectural records, in fact, contain more than evidence of the design and construction process "because the construction process is linked to the social, political, and financial systems of the society in which the building activity takes place, the records also inevitably give evidence of these systems."¹⁶ Like other archival records, they can, therefore, be used by a wide variety of people for a wide variety of purposes and these uses may change over time.

Architectural archives contain a vast amount of information that relates to the fabric of social and cultural history. A comprehensive collection may contain the entire output of a particular architectural firm, their drawings, and office files, models, and the like for

projects, built and unbuilt, iconic or little known. These documents – design notes, letters and memoranda to clients and contractors, minutes of meetings, site studies, design and construction drawings – all provide evidence of motivations, actual events, and the people involved in most aspects of the process, and this evidence provides an unprecedented view of society as a whole. “The study of architecture therefore reveals much more than the history of design, and the records associated with the design and construction of buildings can be put to a variety of uses.”¹⁷

In her 1998 thesis, Laura Elizabeth Cheadle examined the existence of architectural records in Canadian public institutions and concluded that, considering the importance of architectural endeavour, they are vastly under-represented in archival repositories. This gap in the documentary evidence remains today. The importance of architectural records as critical to any study

of society and culture cannot be under-estimated, and it has been shown that “the primary users of architectural archives are not architects looking for design ideas, but those conducting historical research.”¹⁸ The loss of those records “poses a considerable obstacle to the architectural-historical enterprise.”¹⁹ Although, as previously stated, other sources may still exist to perform research – published material in many forms, photographs, paintings, etc. – they cannot, in fact, substitute for the rich content held in architectural collections. The loss of architectural documents “would hence not reduce a redundancy in the historical record but rather scar it irreparably.”²⁰ Architectural records are indispensable to the historical record, crossing multiple disciplines, and their collection and preservation is necessary to the provision of a complete and accurate picture of society as a whole.

NOTES

- 1 Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture*, II (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994), 797.
- 2 Rebecca Sisler, *Passionate Spirits: A History of the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts, 1860–1980* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin 1980), 224.
- 3 Sisler, *Passionate Spirits*, 223–24.
- 4 Definition of archives from Association of American Archivists' "A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology" by Richard Pearce-Mose, at: <http://www.archivists.org/glossary/> (retrieved 6 January 2012).
- 5 Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, "Archives, Records, and Power: From Postmodern Theory to (Archival) Performance," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 171–85, citation on p. 178.
- 6 James M. O'Toole and Richard Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), xvii.
- 7 Cook and Schwartz, "Archives, Records, and Power," 172.
- 8 O'Toole and Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*, 43.
- 9 *Ibid.*, xiv
- 10 Quoted in Cook and Schwartz, "Archives, Records, and Power," 183.
- 11 Terry Cook, "Building and Archives: Appraisal Theory for Architectural Records," *American Archivist* 59 (Spring 1996): 136–43, citation on p. 139.
- 12 Cheadle, Laura Elizabeth, "The Archival Appraisal of Architectural Records," University of British Columbia, 1998. Unpublished master of Archival Studies thesis, 13.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Alfred Willis, "The Place of Archives in the Universe of Architectural Documentation," *American Archivist* 59 (Spring 1996): 193.
- 15 Cook, "Building and Archives," 137.
- 16 Cheadle, "The Archival Appraisal of Architectural Records," ii.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 1–2.
- 18 Willis, "The Place of Archives," 192.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 196.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 198.