

Ron Thom: The Shaping of an Architect, by Douglas Shadbolt. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995. viii, 165 pp. Illus. \$40.00 cloth.

A book written by an objective architect-educator assessing the particular achievement of a creative architect makes for stimulating reading, for the maturation of individual designers has been largely replaced in the architectural historical literature by the theoretical or ideological reconstruction of the cultural construct. Yet, however much architects/artists may be directly or insidiously affected by the contemporary socio-political and cultural fabric, their diversity of response requires thoughtful consideration of matters of individual talent, training, predilection, and circumstance. This is not to recommend putting creativity upon a pedestal formed of conventionalized Western humanist aesthetics and self-serving connoisseurship. Rather, it is to acknowledge how superficial our understanding of the creative process, in terms other than merely subjective literary appreciation or quasi-scientific models, remains. Architecture, by simultaneously addressing a wide range of material and technical constraints as well as theoretical and expressive opportunities, affords an excellent means to interrelate and advance beyond those discussions.

Ron Thom articulated with Sharp and Thompson Berwick Pratt, the leading Modernist architectural firm in Western Canada during the postwar Reconstruction era. But, in contradiction to their abstract functionalist values and in company with his friend and colleague, Fred T. Hollingsworth, Thom early articulated the organic and oriental constituents of the work of F.L. Wright and the (San Francisco) Bay Region architects. Even Thom and Hollingsworth, equally adept at architectural rendering and the manipulation of space and form, developed noticeably different design idioms before either of them received the professional imprimatur of membership in the Architectural Institute of British Columbia. Thom, moreover, would strive for a larger and more diverse practice that enabled him to tackle monumental architectural expression. He transmogrified a sensibility for the tailoring of intimate domestic environments into architectonic strategies for managing and celebrating institutional operation. In this process he expanded a command of spaces in form into a command of forms in space. Nurtured in the more liberal, or unformed, Vancouver architectural scene, and intensely conscious of the invigorating setting, Thom actually produced his finest architecture in the geographically blander and socially staid Ontario. Massey College at the University of Toronto is his most subtle and enduring, if synthetically historicized and least Canadian, building. Nonetheless, Thom's interpretation of imposed collegiate specification demonstrates the symbolic and sensual potency of Modernist principles. His major commission was for Trent University near Peterborough, for which he further reconstituted the elitist Oxbridge collegiate typology for a supposedly egalitarian higher education; indeed, the picturesquely disposed planar blocks of the campus evoke a dilettante nostalgia: "Is there honey still for tea/ beside the Otanbee."

Shadbolt's review of those university commissions is convincing, not least because it clarifies recent myths of authorship of the BC Electric Company's head office at Vancouver and continued in the aborted provincial offices and court house scheme. Despite the advent of the architect as "superstar" of populist culture, postwar practice has compounded teamwork both within architectural offices and across the design-related professions. Thom himself assembled an inner group of able *jeunes* at Thompson Berwick Pratt — including leading members of the contemporary Vancouver profession such as Paul Merrick, Barry Downs, and Richard Archambault — to assist in the design and execution of the later batch of what Shadbolt calls "Houses West." The evolution of architectural practice over the last four decades is also discussed by Shadbolt, together with the impact of changes in the economy and patronage.

In fact most readers might have welcomed more extensive analyses of the character of the times and of the architect's tally of work. Shadbolt so adeptly summons up the experience of looking at and being affected by architecture that he could have included more of Thom's houses. For instance, the idiosyncratic nature of the second house Thom designed for the contractor Alvin Narod, jettied out on boldly articulated concrete abutments over the eastern strand of English Bay in Vancouver, would be underscored by a comparison with the low cubic residence he had built for the family nearly two decades earlier. Likewise, a fuller comparison of Thom's university commissions with those of Arthur Erickson and John Andrews would have enlarged upon such recent general histories as Harold Kalman's *A History of Canadian Architecture* (1994). Similarly, Shadbolt might have pursued further the design stimuli behind the last phase of Thom's architecture. An interest in the work of James Stirling seems evident in the Arts and Social Science Building at Queens University, while some awareness of structures at the Regent Park (London) Zoo is manifest in Thom's contribution to the zoo in Toronto. A list of Thom's completed and projected architecture, plans, and fuller information on dates and locations in the captions would also enhance the book.

That said, Shadbolt has fulfilled the brief implied by the title. In accounting for the personal and experiential constituents of Thom's architecture, Shadbolt has justly established the significance of his career. Superbly illustrated and well argued, the text will advance the appreciation of postwar Canadian architecture during this time of apparent lack of national identity — showing that Canadian culture is derived but not derivative, respectful of tradition but not obsequious, unostentatious and even self-effacing yet assured and distinctive, and regionally conscious rather than regionally segregated. Lastly, the book will illuminate the art of architecture for the general reader.