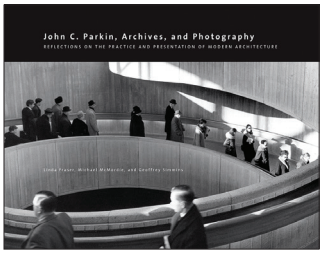

JOHN C. PARKIN, ARCHIVES AND PHOTOGRAPHY: REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE AND PRESENTATION OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE by Linda Fraser, Michael McMordie and Geoffrey Simmins

ISBN 978-1-55238-639-2

John C. Parkin, Archives, and Photography

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ART IN PROFILE

Geoffrey Simmins, General Editor

ISSN 1700-9995 (Print) ISSN 1927-4351 (Online)

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY PRESS

Art in Profile Series
ISSN 1700-9995 (Print) ISSN 1927-4351 (Online)

University of Calgary Press
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, Alberta
Canada T2N 1N4
www.uofcpress.com

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

John C . Parkin, archives, and photography : reflections on the practice and presentation of modern architecture / Linda Fraser, Michael McMordie, and Geoffrey Simmins.

(Art in profile, ISSN 1700-9995 ; no. 12)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Contents: John C. Parkin: The Image of a Modern Architect / by Geoffrey Simmins — The Design of an Architect – Collaborative and Corporatist in Practice, Artistic in Orientation / by Geoffrey Simmins — John B. Parkin Associates and Albert Kahn Inc.: An Industrial View of Architecture / by Michael McMordie — Mid-Century Icons: Architectural Photography from the Panda Collection / by Linda Fraser and Geoffrey Simmins — John B. Parkin Associates Archive at the Canadian Architectural Archives / by Linda Fraser — John C. Parkin in Conversation with Michael McMordie. Transcribed by Julie Sribney and annotated by John C. Parkin with biographical details provided by Geoffrey Simmins.

Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-55238-638-5 (pbk.).—ISBN 978-1-55238-639-2 (pdf).—ISBN 978-1-55238-640-8 (pdf).—ISBN 978-1-55238-641-5 (epub).—ISBN 978-1-55238-758-0 (mobi)

1. Parkin, John Cresswell, 1922-1988—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Architecture—Canada—Archival resources—History—20th century. 3. Architectural photography—Canada—History—20th century. 4. Art and architecture—Canada—History—20th century. 5. Architecture—Canada— History—20th century. 6. Architecture, Modern—20th century. I. Simmins, Geoffrey. John C. Parkin. II. Series: Art in profile ; no. 12

NA749.P37J64 2013 720.92 C2013-906967-4
C2013-906968-2

The University of Calgary Press acknowledges the support of the Government of Alberta through the Alberta Multimedia Development Fund for our publications. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for our publishing activities. We acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program.

Alberta Government Canada Canada Council for the Arts Conseil des Arts du Canada

Cover design, page design, and typesetting by Melina Cusano

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

This book has enjoyed a long gestation and several components of it were produced separately. Accordingly, our thanks are offered to people who provided assistance for quite different aspects of the project.

We acknowledge sincerely the expert assistance provided by Julie Sribney, who transcribed the typescript of the Parkin interview – a typescript that Parkin himself reviewed and on which he placed numerous hand-written editorial comments and corrections. Her contribution came at a critical juncture and provided welcome momentum for the book.

We acknowledge with thanks Professor Larry Richards, who commissioned the exhibition *Mid-Century Icons* at the Eric Arthur Gallery at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto. We also thank Jacek Malek, director of the Triangle Gallery of Visual Arts, who sponsored an exhibition of *Mid-Century Icons* in Calgary and a related publication on the Panda Photography collection, from which one of the chapters in this book is drawn. We are also particularly grateful to Rebecca Lesser and Karly Sawatzky, respectively the assistant curator of *Mid-Century Icons* (an exhibition shown in Toronto and Calgary) and assistant curator of the Canadian Architectural Archives. Rebecca and Karly worked on all aspects of the exhibition – Karly particularly on exhibition preparation, and Rebecca on exhibition research (especially the bibliography). We would also like to thank Branka Baic for additional bibliographic research and David Brown for his expert photography.

At the University of Calgary, Libraries and Cultural Resources and the Faculty of Fine Arts materially supported the project – in particular, Tom Hickerson, Vice-Provost and Director, Libraries and Cultural Resources, and Ann Calvert, then-Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts. The University of Calgary also provided a Special Projects grant, funding reproduction costs, and an Undergraduate Research Award, supporting Rebecca Lesser's research internship.

Globe and Mail author Dave LeBlanc generously shared his research notes with respect to a published interview he conducted with Hugh Robertson; we drew heavily on this interview as well as on Mr. LeBlanc's unpublished notes. We also thank Calgary architect Fred Valentine and cultural historian Rebecca Sisler, both of whom met with us to discuss John C. Parkin's life and work. Their insights helped us develop a surer portrait of the man and his work.

List of Illustrations

2.9. Don Mills Convenience Centre, Don Mills, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 55943-10).

2.10. Don Mills Collegiate Institute and Junior High School, Don Mills, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 64812c).

CHAPTER 3

3.1. John C. Parkin: "A crisp, military efficiency to serve the clients", *The Globe Magazine*, July 5, 1969, p.7; Parkin/NORR fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives). Reprinted with permission of *The Globe and Mail*.

3.2. Albert Kahn (photo: Hedrich-Blessing, from Nelson [1939, p. 15]. Reprinted with permission of the Chicago History Museum.

3.3. Lady Esther, exterior (photo: Hedrich-Blessing, from *The Architectural Forum*, August 1938, p. 100; Parkin/NORR fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives). Reprinted with permission of the Chicago History Museum.

3.4. Kahn organization chart (from *The Architectural Forum*, August 1938, v. 69, n. 2, p. 92; Parkin/NORR fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives).

3.5. "The Parkin Organization" (from *Canadian Builder*, April 1961, p. 32).

3.6. Diagram from advertisement for "Univac Total Management Information System," Univac Division of Sperry Rand Corporation, page from *Fortune*, March 1966, reverse of p. 92 (Parkin/NORR fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives: PAR 88A/80.23). Credit: Unisys Corporation.

3.7. John B. Parkin Associates, 1500 Don Mills Road. Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 55149).

3.8. "Parkin in the Don Mills Brain Factory" (from *The Globe Magazine*, July 5, 1969, p. 6; Parkin/NORR fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives). Reprinted with permission of *The Globe and Mail*).

3.9. Hebb building, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Thompson Berwick Pratt & Partners (photo: McMordie fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives).

3.10. Salvation Army Headquarters, Toronto. John B. Parkin Associates (photo: McMordie fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives).

3.11. Ortho Pharmaceutical, Don Mills, Ontario. Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 56360).

3.12. Residence of Mr. and Mrs. John C. Parkin, Toronto, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 581100-1)

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

6.1. Toronto Transit Commission Bus Terminal, Bay and Adelaide, Toronto. Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 47645-7k).

6.2. Toronto Transit Commission, Bus Terminal, Toronto, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 4611-1).

6.3. Ottawa City Hall, Ottawa, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 58888-34)

6.4. Hirshhorn Residence, Bootlegger's Bay, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, (PAN 58936-33).

6.5. Salvation Army Building, Toronto, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 561456-6).

6.6. George Harvey School aerial photograph, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, (PAN 54465-5).

6.7. George Harvey School, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 53753-2).

6.8. George Harvey School, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 53753-19).

6.9. George Harvey School, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 53753-21).

6.10. George Harvey School, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 53753-1).

6.11. George Harvey School, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 53753-5).

6.12. Toronto International Airport, Malton, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 58312-3).

6.13. Toronto International Airport Aeroquay, Malton, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 64040-12).

6.14. Toronto International Airport Aeroquay, Malton, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 64040-96).

6.15. Toronto International Airport Power Plant, Malton, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 64812)

6.16. John B. Parkin Associates Office Building, Don Mills, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 551149-7).

6.17. John B. Parkin Associates Drafting Room, Don Mills, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 66414-6).

6.18. Toronto-Dominion Centre, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 68854-23).

6.19. Toronto-Dominion Centre progress photographs, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 67203-10).

6.20. Toronto-Dominion Centre, Toronto, Panda Associates fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives (PAN 74236-4C).

ADDITIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS

Introduction

The 1950s to 1970s were exciting years for Canadian architecture. This book seeks to convey some of that excitement by examining aspects of the work of a leading architectural practice of the time and the ideas of its partner in charge of design. At its heart is a transcribed interview with that designer, John Cresswell Parkin, supported by essays discussing the firm, the production of the work, and the photography that was the characteristic expression of that work in print. As well, in this introduction and elsewhere, we consider the wider national context that created the conditions for the production of the work and its supportive reception.

A brief comment about what the book is *not* might also seem in order here. We are not presenting a comprehensive overview and monograph of John C. Parkin's work; rather, we concentrate on a particular moment in that architect's career, when the architect had already achieved considerable critical and professional success. Around this moment, we construct a contextual study that focuses more broadly on the way that architectural meaning is conveyed, through photography that contributed to the self-construction of Parkin's identity. We also take some time to discuss the ways in which Parkin's work has been documented and is now preserved, through an archival collection.

The period was that of the "postwar consensus" in the U.K., the U.S., and Canada.[1] The label has been contested, and perhaps agreement was not as deep or as uniform as it suggests, but there certainly appeared to be in Canada broad acceptance of social-democratic views and policies. These were supported by sustained economic growth and a young, expanding and, with a flood of immigrants from previously less-represented parts of the globe, increasingly diverse population. A representative figure referred to in one interview by John C. was the prime minister to be, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, who succeeded Lester B. Pearson in 1968.

The mood was strongly internationalist. Canada had participated actively in the founding in 1945 of the United Nations and its agencies and expected to play a

significant role in international affairs. The arts and artists, painters, writers, musicians, and architects drew on and aligned themselves with international movements in the arts, looking particularly to New York, but also to European centres as places to study and work, and to exhibit their products. This was particularly so for ambitious architects, with the Harvard Graduate School of Design, under the direction of Walter Gropius, a magnet for further study. Other figures and other varieties of architectural modernism also drew Canadians: Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin Fellowship (Roger D'Astous, Harold Hanen), Louis Kahn at Philadelphia, the Architectural Association School in London, England, and Alvar Aalto in Helsinki were among the attractions.

While some of these drew on local traditions and referred to local settings (notably Wright's "organic" buildings), Gropius at the GSD represented 'international' modernism, buildings whose form and appearance made few concessions to place and tradition. Instead, the model was the design and production of such emblematic modern products as automobiles and airplanes, understood to be based on scientific and engineering principles with universal application. This approach inspired the work of the Parkin firm.

The photographic presentation of that work by Hugh Robertson embodied similar principles. Black-and-white images, taken with large-format view cameras, have a formality, precision of detail, and austere character that seem to embody abstract principles, independent of place and time. However illusory and constrained this approach to design and its presentation now seems, it had a powerful directness and simplicity. It gave us the ideas, buildings, and images presented here.

This book came about as the result of collaboration between three scholars with different training and orientation. Different methodologies ranging from archival studies to architectural history to architectural practice resulted in a book that addresses the work and times of John C. Parkin in a multi-sided study.

As suggested above, the book's structure is deliberately diverse, drawing on insights provided from archival science, architectural history, and popular culture. In Chapter 1, Simmins argues that Parkin created for himself an image of the architect as an avatar of modernism and progressive attitudes. The firm was very conscious of the importance of presenting a consistent image of the firm and sought to do this both personally and professionally. The image was of a particular variety of modern

designer – suave, cosmopolitan, self-assured, sophisticated, yet with a machine-like efficiency. The firm went to the extent of discouraging beards in the office, as a means of reinforcing the image of the architect as a creation as polished as their brogues, and crisp and clean as their immaculate white shirts and ties.

In Chapter 2, Simmins argues that Parkin developed a problem-solving approach to architecture, one in which architecture was demystified and presented as essentially functionalist, collaborative, and team-based. Drawing on detailed analysis of architectural periodicals from the 1950s and '60s, as well as promotional brochures produced by the firm itself, Simmins shows in this chapter that Parkin developed a strong interest in collaborating with artists and sculptors and frequently called on them as collaborators – provided that the architect was the impresario in this process.

In Chapter 3, McMordie examines the structure of the firm in more detail, looking particularly at the ways in which the Parkin firm may be compared with the American firm of Albert Kahn. Pursuing a remark of John C. Parkin's in the interview included in this volume, McMordie seeks to understand the style of practice created by the Parkins. The organization and conduct of a comprehensive practice in a deliberately industrially flavoured environment (i.e., the firm's offices at 1500 Don Mills Road) provides more evidence of the presentation of the firm in a way that is inseparable from the actual day-to-day management of the practice.

In Chapter 4, Simmins and Fraser look at how photography contributed to the ways that the firm constructed its self-image, particularly through the work of Panda Associates. Demonstrating how centrally important a tool architectural photography was to creating an image of the Parkin firm, Simmins and Fraser argue that photography assumed a new role: to promote architecture as a lifestyle and to sell it to a generation enjoying unprecedented prosperity. Architectural photographer Hugh Robertson, the Parkin firm's favoured photographer, emerges as a major contributor to the success of the Parkin firm.

Fraser demonstrates in Chapter 5 the importance of archival collections and shows that architecture, as a significant human endeavour, produces records that are essential documentary evidence, not only of the building and design process, but of the activities of society as a whole. As more and more modern architecture disappears from the Canadian landscape, it will be archives

that hold materials that are critical to future study, and, as in the case of John C. Parkin, it may be only through the archives that his life and work can be fully recovered.

Chapter 6 is devoted to John C. Parkin himself, in conversation with Michael McMordie. For readers not familiar in detail with the period, the authors have provided additional biographical details concerning the many architects that Parkin mentions. Documentary adjuncts complete the volume in the form of a selected bibliography that combines bibliographies on Parkin and architectural photography. A contextual study such as this accords with recent trends in architectural history that stress the value of interdisciplinarity.

Scholarship on Parkin is limited and spotty. This book does not attempt to address that lack in all aspects, but it does intend to introduce the subject in a manner that includes elements that are critical to any future study of his work and the milieu in which his work took place. It does this by exploring the practice of a very modern architectural firm that employed modern techniques and philosophies as integral components of their practice. The principals in the firm also engaged in the very modern adoption of a new form of architectural photography and used that as a tool that became a significant factor in their success. But in some ways, it is the introduction of the Canadian Architectural Archives as an important resource that makes this book unique. As much of Parkin's work has disappeared from the landscape and in many cases the buildings are no longer left to study, it is the surviving architectural records that will provide the basis for future research.

The John B. Parkin Associates fonds is the Canadian Architectural Archives' largest collection. As exemplar of its practice, the modern firm stripped away all but the essential ingredients and only the working drawings remain. All preliminary drawings were destroyed by the firm. Fortunately, the textual records, which include correspondence with clients, contractors, and associate trades, design notes, meeting minutes, office files, memos, and much more evidence of the firm's activities and the building process still exist. In addition, the Panda Associates fonds provides rich evidence of the post-World War II period, as well as the work of Parkin. Beyond that, the archives holds the record of conversations of people involved in the events of the time, largely untapped. One major example is the interview with Parkin. These materials provide layers of meaning,

content, and context so that history can be written and interpreted and re-written and re-interpreted.

We are also mindful that these events played out in the context of significant changes in the larger pattern of world architecture. Even before the close of the period documented here, the world of design appeared to move in a radically different direction. Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) specifically rejected the single-mindedness of much modernist architecture. He argued for design that recognized the diversity of functions that most buildings serve and that acknowledged the different ways in which it might be approached and occupied. While Venturi saw his work as a contribution to an enriched modernism, it was quickly recruited into the broader movement called "postmodernism." Other deviations appeared: Thomas Gordon Smith in California employed themes from ancient Greek buildings and vase painting; Peter Eisenman in New York developed complex systems of interacting grids in order to "deconstruct" a building's program; Michael Graves and others on both sides of the Atlantic sought to reintroduce themes and details from historic buildings and traditions that modernism had eliminated. Ricardo Bofil in Spain and France pursued somewhat grotesque renderings of traditional forms in contemporary materials, while Rob and Léon Krier in Germany and England used earlier traditions for both new buildings and town planning and urban design. A notable Canadian example is Jones and Kirkland's Mississauga City Hall (1987). The designers drew on forms and images from rural Ontario for different elements of the building, while its disposition and orientation to Lake Ontario recalls the siting of many early farmhouses in the area.

A new emphasis on the specifics of time and place appeared in architectural photography as well with the immediacy of colour 35-mm images, often hand-held, preferred for a less abstract presentation: buildings as they really are. Both approaches co-existed, depending on the designer, the client and the subject until the onset of digital photography, with a nearly infinite capacity for manipulation and even synthesis of images. A parallel in design, seen for instance in the work of Frank Gehry, was a new complexity of forms and structures made possible by computer-aided design techniques.

Some of the postmodern confusion was resolved when it became apparent that twentieth century needs and building technologies could not be summarily

abandoned. These were at the heart of modernist thinking; their continued requirements and the opportunities they presented demanded expression in building forms and materials. At the same time, modernism proved sufficiently open and flexible to absorb and benefit from much of the new thinking (and rediscovered older traditions) about building form and its relation to use and context. This persistence of the modern suggests that it is more firmly grounded than the postmodern reaction would suggest. For this reason alone, the accomplishments of the Parkin firm and its design leader, John C. Parkin, deserve this re-examination. They stand near the beginning of a design movement that continues to evolve, as it continues to inform most current architecture.

NOTE

1 See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2006) [first published 2005]. Chapter XI, "The Social Democratic Moment," discusses the complexity of the "general post-war European consensus," p. 363. For discussion of the idea, see Anthony Butler, "The end of post-war consensus: Reflections on the scholarly use of political rhetoric," *Political Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (October 1993): pp. 435, 446 [first published online: 24 Aug. 2005].