

Canadian Centre for Architecture

AR3AI100 - Research Paper

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Canadian Centre for Architecture



Figure 1: View of the south elevation showing Shaughnessy House and Scholars' Wing (Gabor Szilasi, 1989)

introduction

The Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) is an international research institution and museum dedicated to promoting public engagement with architecture. It was founded in 1979 by architect Phyllis Lambert in Montreal. As the collections and the staff grew, the CCA soon recognized the need for a central location with the ambition of creating a fully functioning contemporary museum (Richards, 1989). Phyllis Lambert saw the potential of the block on which the Shaughnessy House stands, a 19th-century mansion she bought in 1974 to prevent its demolition (Noakes, 2022). Peter Rose, a Montreal native architect, was commissioned to fully restore the mansion and design a pioneering complex of the new programs. The construction of the CCA began in 1985 and opened to the public in 1989 (Richards, 1989). This research studies the CCA as an

example of architectural archives. By reviewing relevant literature and media, the study aims to explore how an archival building is shaped by its urban context and the specific needs of the institution. The paper will examine the building from the urban scale to the building scale and finally zoom into the object scale. The first part studies the building's connection with the local architectural culture and surrounding neighborhood. The second part walks the reader into the building and analyzes the spatial organization of the building, which stresses the interrelation of the programs. The third part unfolds the specific restoration and preservation process of the collections at the CCA, exploring the relation between archival space and archival activity. Finally, the conclusion attempts to critically reflect on the implications and limitations of the design of CCA as an architectural archive nowadays.

urban context and landscape

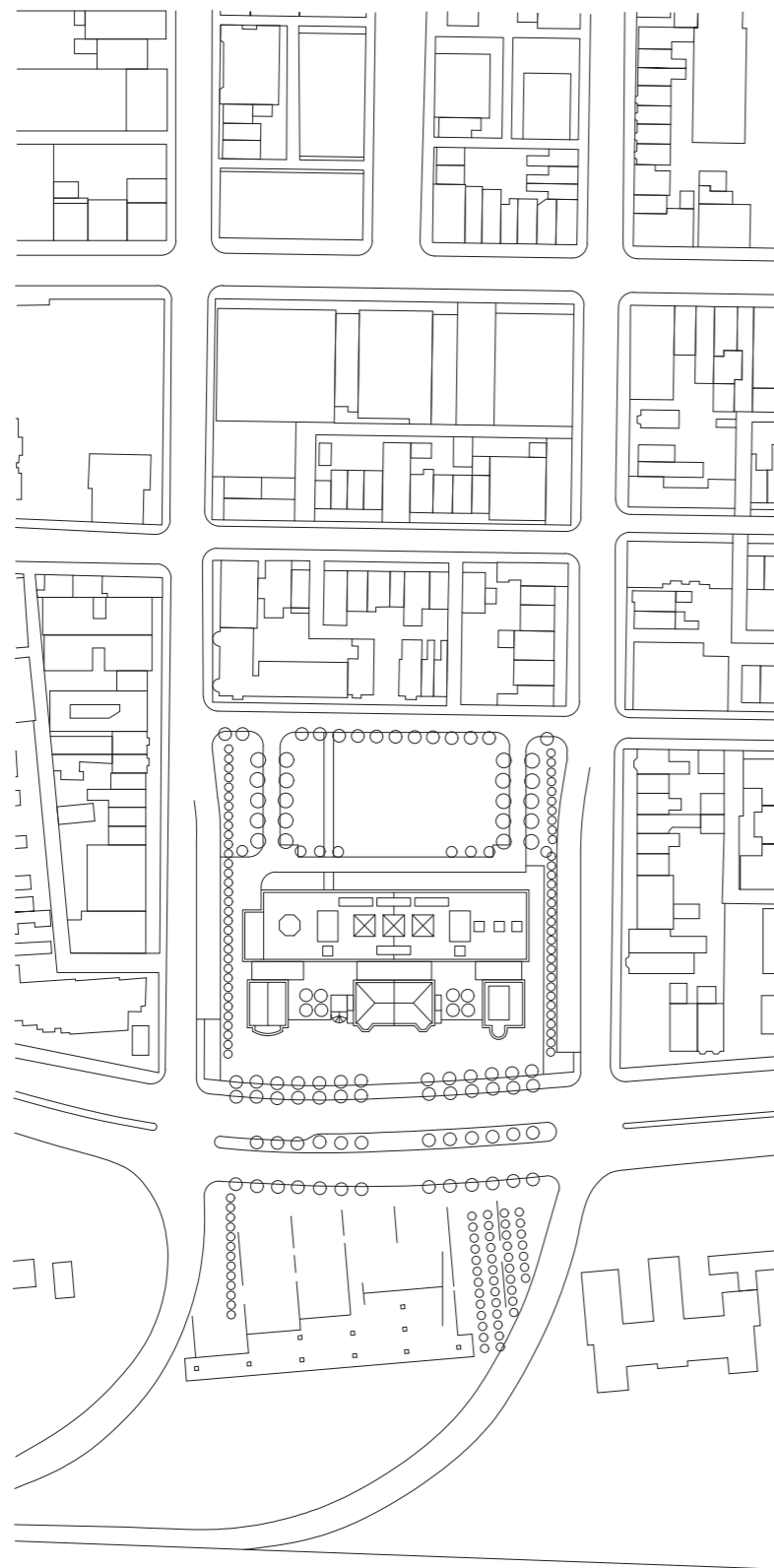
The Canadian Centre for Architecture is located in Montréal on the city's edge, paralleling the historic town, and is enclosed by driveways on all sides (figure 2). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the city was being demolished to create room for urban renewal and the rapid development of infrastructure (Noakes, 2022). The Shaughnessy House was located in the center of this transformation and was purchased by Phyllis Lambert in 1974 to prevent its demolition, thus leaving it the only historic villa in the area remaining to this date. Its image represents the decades-long battle of the city to decay and the loss of Montréal's traditional architecture (Peter Rose + Partners, n.d.). Preservation of heritage became the catalyst of the design of the CCA (Klein, 2013).

The integration of the historical urban context of Montréal was considered to be an important part of the design process. Montréal carries a rich colonial history, which is reflected in the spatial structure and has stayed consistent over time, showcasing a clear timeline of the development of the city (Richards, 1989). The cadastral system influenced the city's development for over four centuries, which is why they wanted to stress the relationship between the cadastral borders and the preservation of heritage. These cadastral lines are also reflected on the exterior of the building by the centerline of the mirrored facade, and on the interior by the placement of columns between the two buildings (figure 4). Furthermore, the relationship between the urban scale and the building scale was reinforced by introducing natural elements into the design. The materialization was heavily influenced by French colonial architecture. A local light gray-brown limestone, Trenton, was used for the facade, and Canadian maple wood was used for interior surfaces (Malkin, 1989). Additionally, the landscape commented on this interrelationship, by designing the gardens

based on the ecology of the area (Richards, 1989). The view looking down from the hilly site reaches over the wide country, with the old town of Montréal visible on the left, and the St. Lawrence River cutting through the center. The new garden landscape was a reaction to the neglected land caused by the infrastructure design and acted as a new engaging gate to the city. The vegetation types were based on three main historical periods: the native plants, the colonial-introduced plants, and the cultivar plants.

When admiring the CCA from the gardens, the differences between the existing and the new are remarkable. A careful combination of new construction, which has a transforming nature, and precise restoration of the existing building was used for the design. A new wing was added to the original mansion, designed by Peter Rose, which features a contrasting appearance (figure 1). The Shaughnessy House's symmetrical and institutional characteristics make the visitor philosophize about the hierarchy of the two semi-detached houses and the two entrances of the mansion (Richards, 1989). A sculpture garden, designed by Melvin Charley, faces the south facade and showcases architectural artworks. Contrastingly, the north facade of the new building presents a monotonous demeanor, where the main entrance is prominent (figure 6). This facade gives the impression of a formal modern museum, emphasizing the horizontal direction with a long pathway through a public park. It is more accessible to the public and engaging due to the use of landscape and greenery (Richards, 1989).

The new structure forms two L-shaped buildings that are combined to create a configuration similar to the traditional 'E' shape often found in Montreal Institutional buildings (Richards, 1989).



scale 1:2000

Figure 2: Redrawing of the site plan of the CCA, based on Peter Rose Architect drawings (Fang, 2024)

configuration of the building

Approaching the building, its exterior immediately reveals a distinct separation between the public and private spaces within. The public levels are situated above the ground, whereas the private, such as the curatorial level is located half a level above ground and extends into the underground vaults. This tripartite organization is especially evident when viewing the building section, revealing the distinct layering of the programs (figure 3) (Richards, 1989). The Shaughnessy House is used for the café, services, and administrative offices. The contemporary addition houses the exhibition galleries, library and research center, bookstore, offices, and laboratories, on top of a two-level underground collection storage, flanked by the theater and scholars' wings (Noakes, 2022).

The main public entrance of the CCA is located on the north side facade, therefore it is part of the new building. The entrance, contrary to the initial design phases, is located on the right side of the building. This decision allowed for the development of a cohesive design that avoids splitting the building into two distinct areas, instead, unifying it as a single institution.

To enter the building and reach the elevated ground floor, an outside staircase leads to the main entrance. Once inside, an internal staircase continues to guide people from the raised ground floor to the first floor. The first consists of the publicly accessible areas of the building, the main corridor, exhibition rooms, library, and bookshop.

Careful attention has been given to the circulation system on the public level, which is organized around a sequence of top-lit spaces. As a result, the routing is defined by transitions from areas of intense light, highlighting the entrance and corridors, to areas of subdued light, marking the exhibition rooms; serving as key guidelines

for navigating the building. (figure 16) This system follows the U-shaped routing that connects the different public spaces at the public level (Richards, 1989).

After examining the public level, we shift to the curatorial level. This half above ground level is the building's first non-public space. Therefore the space has specific work-related needs that define the configuration of the plan. In contrast to the open public areas, this level features a long series of offices, all lined up along narrow corridors, enhancing its functionality (figure 7). The lighting system on this floor is designed according to its function; there is no need for external lighting to enhance the routing system. Given that it is half above the ground floor, the primary lighting is artificial, except in the rooms facing the exterior, which feature small horizontal windows for natural light. This is where the artifacts for the archive first entered the CCA, marking the initial phase of their arrival in the institution's collection.

Another significant part of the CCA is located underground, at the vault level, where long corridors extend from one side of the building to the other, organizing the space. These corridors are featureless and contain only a few doors giving access to storage rooms, laboratories, and service spaces (figure 17). The entire lighting system in this area is artificial and allows for precise control of light levels, which is essential for the proper conservation of the artifacts.

Therefore, the hierarchy of the building is particularly evident not only in its section but also in the floor configurations. The division and organization of spaces and the different ways of handling light, both natural and artificial, define the boundary between the public and the private. See figure 9 to 15 for the interior views.



Figure 3: Redrawing of the longitudinal section of the CCA, based on Peter Rose Architect drawings (Danesin, 2024)

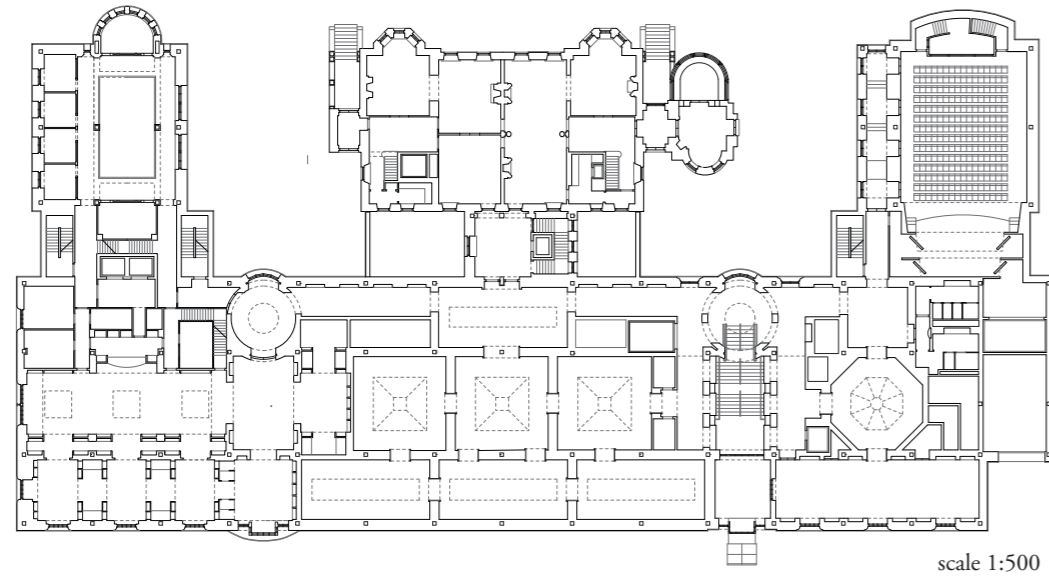


Figure 4: Redrawing of the public level of the CCA, based on Peter Rose Architect drawings (Danesin, 2024)

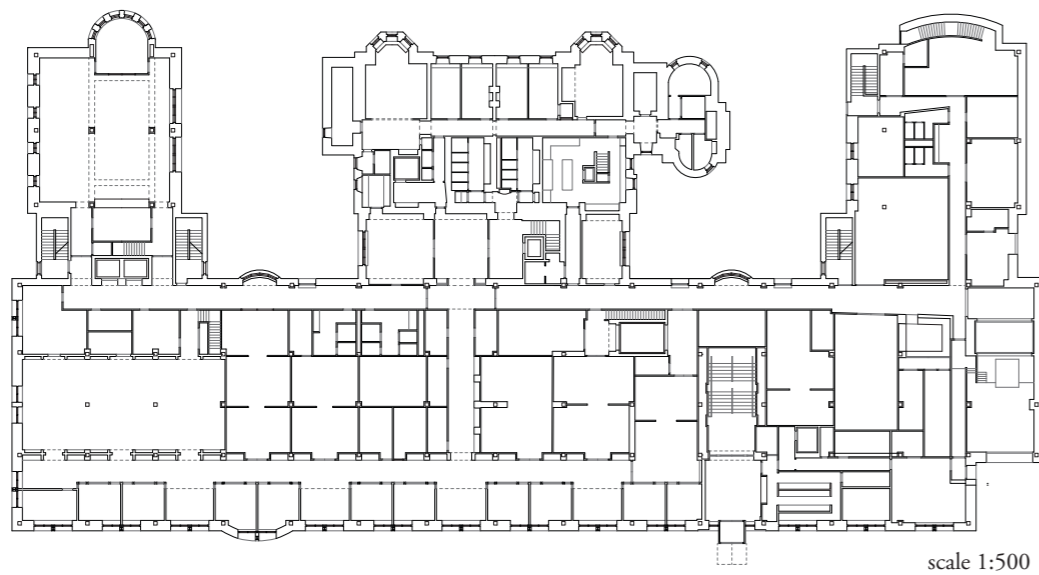


Figure 5: Redrawing of the curatorial level of the CCA, based on Peter Rose Architect drawings (Danesin, 2024)

archiving

When new archival objects enter the collection of the CCA, they enter the shipping space on the curatorial level of the CCA. However, before the CCA decides to incorporate a new collection, countless correspondence happens with the architect or previous archive, to make out the details and ensure that the new collection is preserved correctly (Yaneva, 2020). Once the crates arrive at the shipping space in the CCA, they are inspected first on their completeness and determined what next steps are to be taken before they can be stored in the vaults. Each object is photographed, numbered, coded, and cataloged.

Based on what each archival piece needs, they are then taken to the conservation lab. Moving through long, artificially lit corridors and heavy black doors, they arrive in the highly restricted, serene labs. Here, the archival pieces undergo a series of surgical procedures to prolong their lifespan. One of the principles of the CCA is to conserve its archival objects to such a degree that they may outlive their architect. The way the CCA building is designed is a testament to this (Lambert, 1989). As soon as a drawing enters the CCA archive, its status changes to its archival standard.

First, the objects are copied and conditioned. The condition report shows a detailed overview of all the wear and tear (figure 18). Later, when the objects have for instance been displayed at the public level of the CCA, the condition report is consulted to determine whether the object is in the same state (Yaneva, 2020). Then, with surgical precision, the objects are treated - or stabilized - to get them ready for either exhibition or storage. Again, before any treatment is done, the original owner is inquired whether an intervention is necessary and if so, to what extent. Furthermore, every treatment is laid out by a certain set of procedures, much like in a hospi-

tal. Once all treatments are completed and the archival pieces are conserved, they are brought down to the vault levels (figure 8). On the two underground levels, several separate rooms barred with heavy black doors, have different climatological qualities. Each one to cater to the different needs of the vast collection of the CCA archive. The vaults are all filled with shelves on rails, occasionally, a trolley is used to move fragile cases or boxes to the tables, on the ends of a row of shelves. Here, boxes can be opened and their contents examined. Researchers can, for a more thorough inspection, book an appointment with the CCA for which the requested materials are taken up to the study room (Canadian Centre for Architecture, n.d.). Carefully coded according to the CCA's organizational method, each object is cataloged and assigned to its correct box and subsequently correct vault. Not only the original pieces but also the preparatory work, the copies, surrogates, condition reports, etc. are cataloged and archived.

The way that the interior of the vaults and conservation labs are designed reflects the CCA's approach to archiving, where the utmost careful restoration and preservation are given to the collections.



Figure 6: Exterior of the CCA, north facade (Peter Rose + Partners, n.d.)

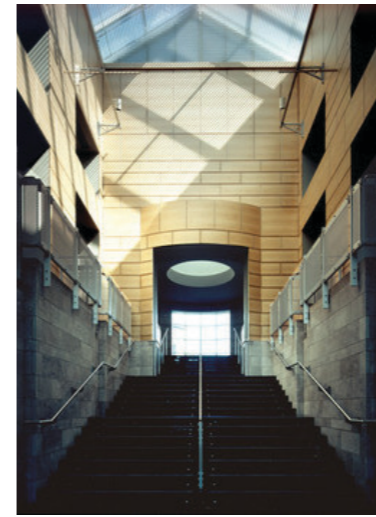


Figure 9: View of entrance Court and West Rotunda (Richard Pare, 1989)



Figure 10: The long galleries (Gabor Szilasi, 1989)



Figure 11: View of Study Room and scholar's offices (Richard Pare, 1989)



Figure 7: Partial view of offices on curatorial level (Gabor Szilasi, 1988)



Figure 12: CCA installation (CCA, 1989)



Figure 13: View of the library Court and Reading rooms (Gabor Szilasi, 1989)



Figure 8: Archival vaults of the CCA (Gabor Szilasi, 1988)



Figure 14: View of the Auditorium room (Peter Rose + Partners, n.d.)

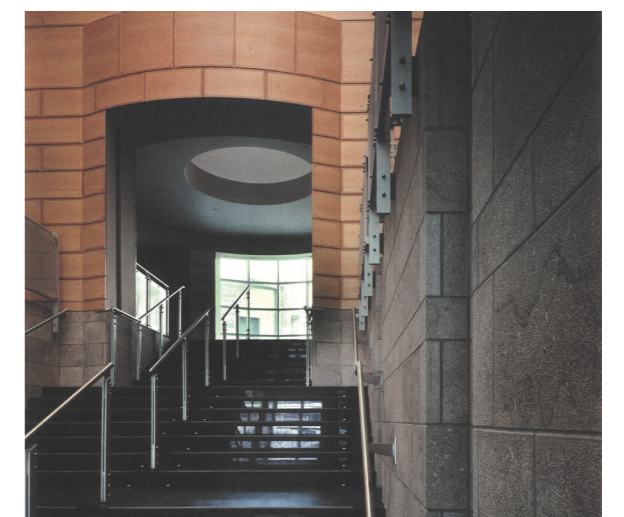


Figure 15: View of entrance Court and West Rotunda (Richard Pare, 1989)

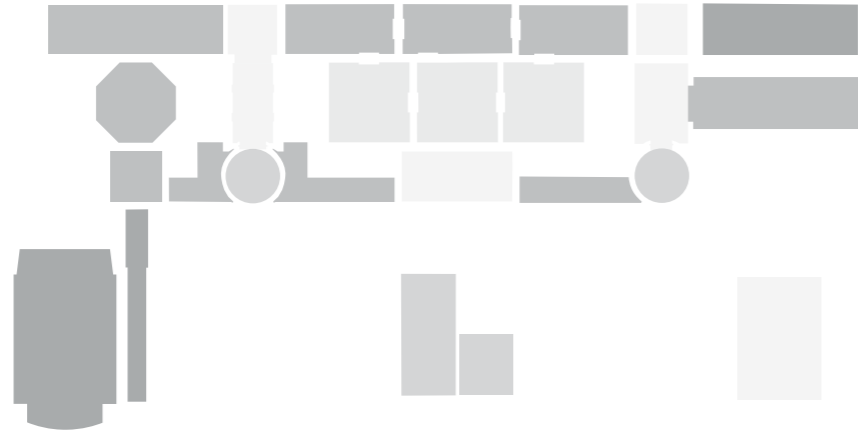


Figure 16: Natural light scheme of the public floor, based on “Canadian Centre for Architecture: Building and Gardens” (Danesin, 2024)



Figure 17: Interior view of the corridor on the second vault level (Gabor Szilasi, 1988)

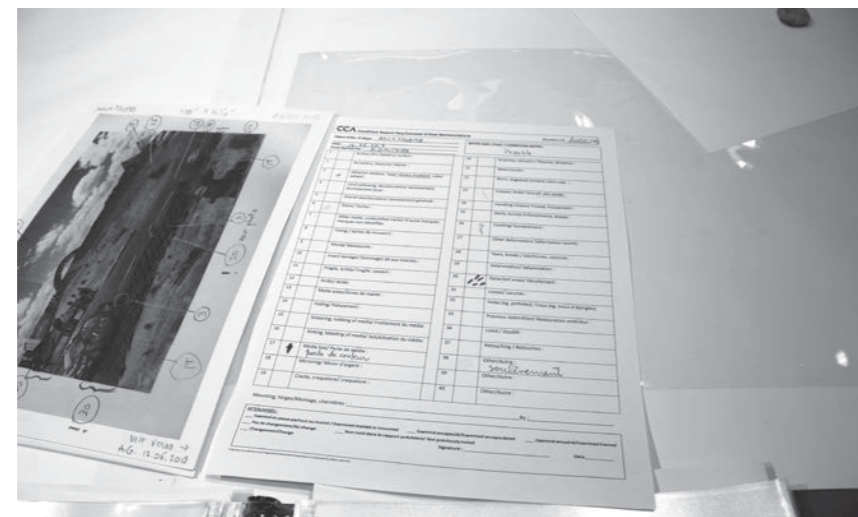


Figure 18: Condition report of a photograph in the curatorial levels of the CCA (Yaneva, 2020)

conclusion

The CCA could be seen as an ultimate manifestation of the idea of archiving being a scientific process. The never-ending clinical vaults, extensive curation and restoration facilities, and elaborate treatment procedures for materials gave a vision of archiving in the 1980s. The curatorial and storage spaces, although well-connected and well-functioning internally, remained hidden from the publicly accessible floor. The public functions were interconnected and gave a profound spatial experience, pioneering its time. The situated design of the CCA demonstrated an architectural museum’s responsibility and power to state its position toward urban development.

For many visitors, however, the building gives the impression of a national institution and the experience of a typical museum. The CCA building reflects its stance towards archiving and museology — formal, professional, and scholarly- both publicly and behind the scenes.

This seriousness is also consistent with its online presence. Through its website, Instagram, and YouTube channel, the CCA actively publishes content on exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and other events, addressing contemporary themes such as Indigenous architecture and women in architecture, which broadens its international audience. As CCA’s director Giovanna (Borasi, 2020) noted in a lecture, while the physical museum may one-day reach capacity, there are no plans for expansion; instead, they have found their second home online.

However, questions remain about the inclusivity of the public the CCA seeks to engage. From a contemporary lens, there is an expectation architectural institutions might bridge the gap beyond academic or professional circles, fostering broader accessibility and public engagement.

Sources

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