

The Architect J. C. Merrett's Influences for Montreal's Central Station

Key dates:

- 1909 born in Montreal
- 1926-1931 McGill School of Architecture
- 1931-1934 Grand European tour, including a year at the
Architecture Association
- 1935 registered with the provincial architecture association (P.Q.A.A.)
- 1936-1944 Canadian National Railways
- 1938-1943 Central Station
- 1944-1945 Saint John, N.B. town planner
- 1946 Joined Ernest Barott, Lorne Marshall & Robert Montgomery to form Barott,
Marshall, Montgomery and Merrett
- 1977 retired
- 1998 died at home in Montreal

In 1936 John Campbell Merrett, my grandfather, was hired as a staff architect for Canadian National Railways. As the C.N.R. architect he was responsible for a range of projects of which Montreal's Central Station is arguably the most important. Although the 1911 master-plan for the site was for the station to be eventually enclosed by other building, initially it was free-standing. Today the station is now mostly experienced as an interior space, and an important part of Montreal's underground city. I've been looking at my grandfather's influences for the station. This was his first major building project and he was clearly influenced both by his previous training and experience working for the Montreal architect Ernest Barott, and by the Modern Architecture he studied in Europe during his grand tour of 1931 to 1934.

To understand the impact that Modernism had on my grandfather, it is important to know something of how he was educated. He entered McGill's School of Architecture in 1926. At the time the school was a Beaux-Arts school, training students in the classical orders and traditional architecture. The Modern Movement, which had made its mark in Europe by 1923, was not on the curriculum.

Beaux-Arts Architecture emphasized harmony in composition and monumentality. Plans were based on simple geometric forms, carefully ordered. Facades were symmetrical and ornately detailed with elements drawn from the study of Ancient Greek and Roman architecture. Architectural history was an important part of the Beaux-Arts education and McGill covered the history of Western Architecture up until the 19th century. Twentieth century architecture was not covered.

The Beaux-Arts education required advanced drawing abilities, with a particular emphasis on the large scale presentation drawings rendered in water-color. My grandfather learned draughting, freehand drawing, shadow drawing, "*how to plot geometrically the entasis on classical columns and the volutes of an Ionic capital*", and presentation drawings in monochrome washes. As part of his education, he would have had to produce drawings of the classical orders, i.e. the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian columns that were used in Ancient Architecture.

Sound construction was also emphasized in Beaux-Arts Architecture and education. McGill offered some structural engineering, and courses in construction methods, materials, and specification writing. There was less on the more technical aspects in the curriculum at McGill, but my grandfather would have been taught some plumbing and sanitation and a little on heating and electrical services.

My grandfather would have been familiar with the works of the big American offices who mostly did neo-classical or neo-gothic, and with some of the Arts and Craft architects. His exposure to Art-Deco would have come through the contemporary practices in Montreal, and his summer job at Barott & Blackader, whom he worked for every summer during his studies.

Modernism, in Canadian architecture circles at that time, was little more than a rumor. The RAIC Journal had published maybe a couple of articles on the "new style", and Le Corbusier and Mies van de Rohe were names just being introduced.

After graduating from the School of Architecture in 1931, he was awarded a Province of Quebec scholarship which paid for three years of travel in Europe. The time spent in Europe, and particularly his "grand-tour", had a huge impact on his career. This was my grandfather's first exposure to the 'new style', Modern Architecture, which would distinguish most of his work.

From the notes and sketches he took during his trip, it is evident that he paid careful attention to details, materials, and proportions. He was very attentive to ornamental elements and approved of sculptural elements on modern as well as traditional buildings. He wasn't entirely uncritical of what he saw. His Beaux-Art training would have given him a sense of proportion and careful consideration to construction. His understanding of architecture was of something that expressed humanity to its fullest, and he wasn't keen on the idea of buildings as machines for living.

Some quotes from his sketchbook:

describing the Citoën Garage in Lyon:

"This is the finest building in the 'new style' that I have seen to date. It is definitely modern in design, materials, construction and purpose, and yet it is very decidedly architecture – that is to say, it is more than a clever bit of engineering, or than an original and ingenious adaptation of modern structure and materials: It has good composition and proportion and scale, and the joie-de-vivre which is necessary to a work of man if it is to be a work of art. [...]"

"[T]his garage, was without any doubt in my mind, quite the most pleasing, restful and dignified building in the whole town. The simple, unbroken lines of wall and window and the general horizontality made it full of repose"...

on modern housing in Munich:

"The most notable thing about the Munich housing is the valiant and commendable attempt to make it something more than machinery to live in – an attempt which has been very successful! [...]"

All the buildings are decorated either with small bits of sculpture, or with mural painting. Around the entrances is a favorite place for this indication of 'joie-de-vivre', and the doorways themselves are always carefully and well designed."

on modern architects:

"Some of these lads that call themselves modern architects seem to think that they can throw together shiny metal, shiny glass, neon lights and white plaster, and without taking any pains about composition or detail, produce a result worthy to be called architecture. They cannot."

C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas l'architecture."

on modern architecture:

"I am definitely in favor of some of these sober, well-adopted, modern expressions of classical form. At the same time I think it not necessary to carry modern simplicity so far as to leave cornices, string courses, window and door trims, and so on, (when these elements are used at all), as square, entirely unmolded projections from the façade. There is proportion and refinement of detail to be considered, even as proportion and refinement of the general composition".

.. and ..

"All architecture, to be good, must have some degree of individuality. One of the chief faults of some modern work is that it lacks it entirely."

He arrived in England in June of 1931 and toured England and Scotland that summer with his friend Bob Montgomery. In October of that year he traveled to Scandinavia, specifically Stockholm. He returned to spend the winter in London before departing on his 6 month "grand tour" of Europe at the end of February 1932. In France he spent time in Paris and Lyon before heading to Italy where he visited Milan, Florence, Venice and Verona. By April he was in Germany visiting Munich, Stuttgart, Heidelberg, Frankfurt, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Magdeburg, Berlin and Hamburg. In June he arrived in Amsterdam.

While in Holland he spend two weeks bicycling around the country with stops in Hilversum, Utrecht, Gouda, Rotterdam, Delft, and the Hague. Before returning to London in August he spent time in Belgium and France. The following two years he spent studying at the Architectural Association School in London including a course in town planning at The University of London. He also worked briefly for the London architectural firm, Sir Aston Webb & Son. He continued to travel during the holidays, including a cruise over Easter 1934 to Lisbon, Gibraltar, Casablanca, and Madeira. In August 1934 he sailed home to Canada.

The architects who seem to be most influential for my grandfather while in Europe were Ragnar Östberg and W.M. Dudok. He met Östberg in Stockholm, and was graciously hosted by him. Östberg's most important building is the Stockholm Town Hall. The project was somewhat of an obsession for Östberg who began sketches of a law court building for the site in 1901. Eventually he was chosen to design the Town Hall, with construction beginning on 1911 and continuing until 1923.

My grandfather's sketches from the Town Hall are almost entirely of interior details, including furniture. In fact, there does not appear to be a single exterior view in any of the sketches or photographs. While this could be explained by the weather (it was late October) clearly my grandfather was fascinated by the rich details of the interior, spending 4 or 5 days in the building sketching. He also spent time making detailed sketches of some exterior ironwork.

The Town Hall is one of the two buildings he spent the most time sketching, the second being Englebrekts Church also in Stockholm. While I don't see a direct connection between his studies of the Town Hall on his design for Central Station, the sketches demonstrate my grandfather's attention to details and materials. These were the first sketches on his "grand tour" where he took careful measurements and made notes on materials and construction. Östberg's work was closer to the most contemporary architecture that my grandfather would have been exposed to during his education.

One of the architects who was clearly an influence on my grandfather's design for Central Station was the Dutch Architect Willem Dudok. In particular the Town Hall for Hilversum, completed in 1930, just two year before my grandfather visited it. Dudok's work is characterized by its horizontality, emphasized by the narrow cornice which projected out from the top of the brick facades providing a shadow which reinforces the sense of a capping. We can see this influence on the exterior of Central Station, in the articulation of the horizontal. Dudok also used a strong vertical element to balance the horizontal, usually a tower, into which the horizontal massing of the rest of the building locked in. In the case of Central Station my grandfather used two towers, at either end of the station, making the building symmetrical in keeping with the Art-Deco style.

There is an important tradition of using Art Deco for train stations in North America in the 1930s, which was meant to reflect the modernity of this new form of travel. So it is not surprising that my grandfather designed the station in the spirit of Art-Deco, despite the clear influence of Modernism, especially on the exterior. This kind of fusion of styles was quite typical of Canadian architects at the time, but it is important to note that the design for Montreal's Central Station is the only one which is so heavily influenced by Modernism during this period.

I have not been able to identify a specific influence for the interior of Central Station. Clearly the influences are classicism – in the large regularly spaced columns, reminiscent of a Greek temple – Modernism – in the paired down simplicity of the space – and Art-Deco. From my grandfather's sketches and notes made in Europe, we see his interest in ornament and decoration from both the pre-20th century buildings and the contemporary architecture that he was exploring at the time. To me the interior expresses the understated attention to detail that reflects my grandfather's work and personality.

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