

## Architectural Drawings: Sources for Urban History

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Architectural drawings are among those documents not yet utilized extensively by urban historians. In addition to possessing aesthetic properties, graphic architectural records are valuable sources of information communicated both overtly and covertly. They provide data directly related to the structure, such as its location, dimensions, owner and architect. More subtly, architectural drawings convey an impression about the scale of structures, their style and the philosophy of the architect involved. This article, using examples from collections at the Public Archives of Canada, suggests how architectural drawings might contribute to urban history.

# Research Note/Note de recherche

## Architectural Drawings: Sources for Urban History

Dorothy Ahlgren

### Résumé/Abstract

*Les plans d'architectes figurent parmi les documents qui n'ont pas encore été exploités à fond par les spécialistes de l'histoire urbaine. Outre de posséder des propriétés esthétiques, les documents graphiques d'ordre architectural constituent une précieuse source d'informations. Ils fournissent des informations se rapportant directement à la structure, notamment l'emplacement, les dimensions, le propriétaire et l'architecte. Ces dessins transmettent plus subtilement d'autres renseignements, par exemple des notions sur l'échelle et le style des structures ainsi que sur les théories de l'architecte concerné. Le présent article, à l'aide d'exemples tirés de collections des Archives publiques du Canada, explique de quelle façon les plans d'architectes pourraient servir à l'histoire urbaine.*

*Architectural drawings are among those documents not yet utilized extensively by urban historians. In addition to possessing aesthetic properties, graphic architectural records are valuable sources of information communicated both overtly and covertly. They provide data directly related to the structure, such as its location, dimensions, owner and architect. More subtly, architectural drawings convey an impression about the scale of structures, their style and the philosophy of the architect involved. This article, using examples from collections at the Public Archives of Canada, suggests how architectural drawings might contribute to urban history.*

Of the many research sources available to the urban historian, the architectural drawing is sometimes overlooked. As with photographs, maps and other graphic formats, architectural drawings are often used as illustrations because their aesthetic properties brighten pages of prose. In relegating these documents to a purely pictorial role, however, urban historians risk ignoring large caches of information about the urban environment.

Architectural drawings are not only artistic works but vehicles of communication, characterized by both clarity of information and metaphoric representation of human activities. All graphic records supply evidence that is not transmitted as effectively by other means. The content of architectural drawings includes both the obvious and the subtle. Approached critically, their information corroborated by evidence from other sources, architectural drawings offer a great deal more than a pretty picture.

The Public Archives of Canada (PAC) has custody of over 250,000 architectural drawings, created by ar-

chitects and architectural firms in private practice and by federal government departments and agencies responsible in some way for buildings or other structures. Although most of these architectural drawings were created during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some works are dated earlier than 1800. The wealth of information to be extracted from such drawings is suggested in the examples that follow, all of which have been selected from the PAC collections.

At their most obvious, architectural drawings clearly convey precise information about structures. The plans explain the relationship of one space to another. Dimensions of spaces are indicated in exact measurements. Building materials are specified either through the use of conventions of colour and symbol or, as they are in Figure 1, by lettering. The location and function of the building and the date of its design generally are noted, as are the names of architect and client.

Architectural drawings provide evidence about the history of cities. Many building types which once were commonplace no longer exist and risk being lost from the collective memory of a society. Patterns of land use change over time, reflecting reorganization of the economic base from agricultural to industrial and of the social environ-

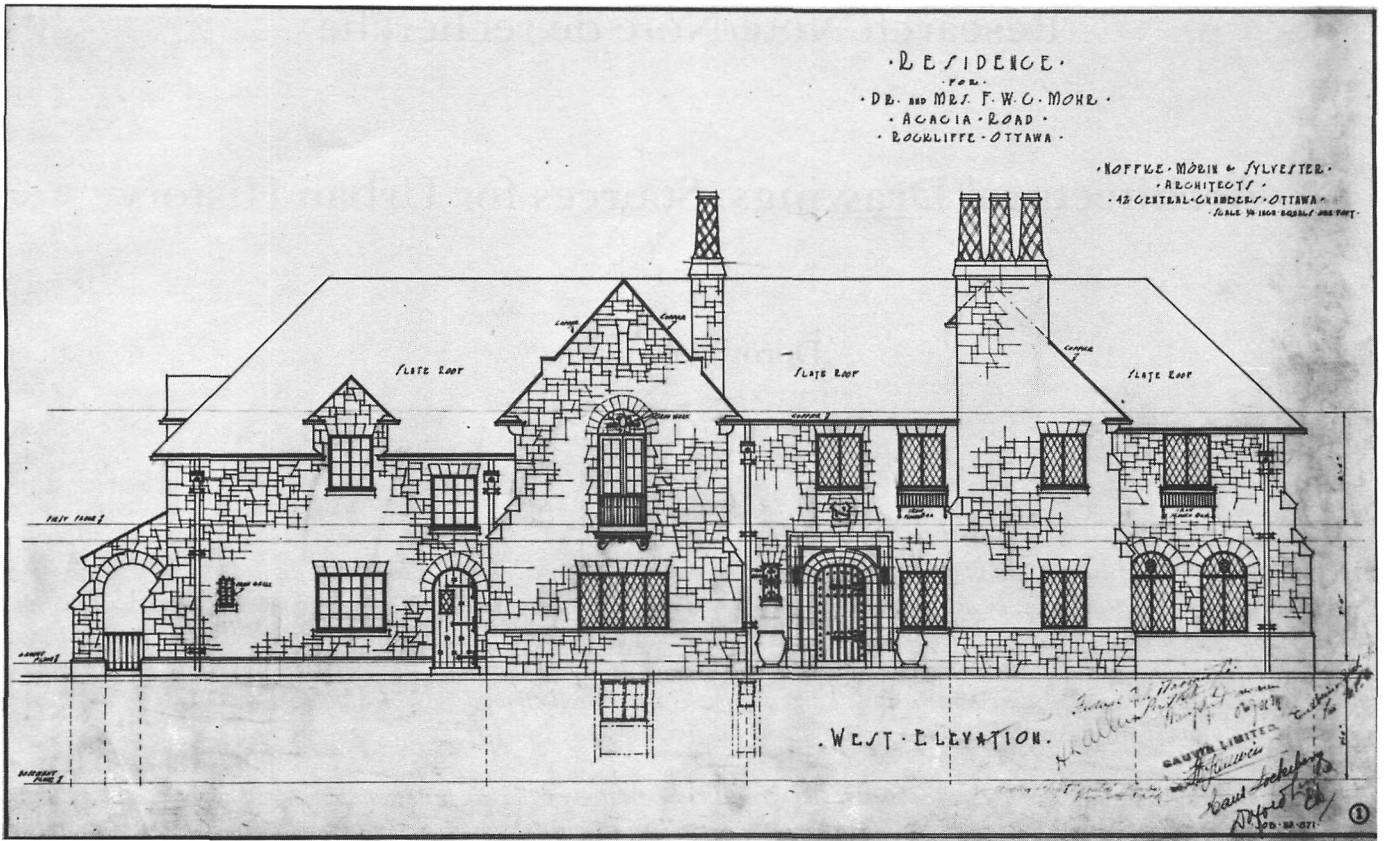
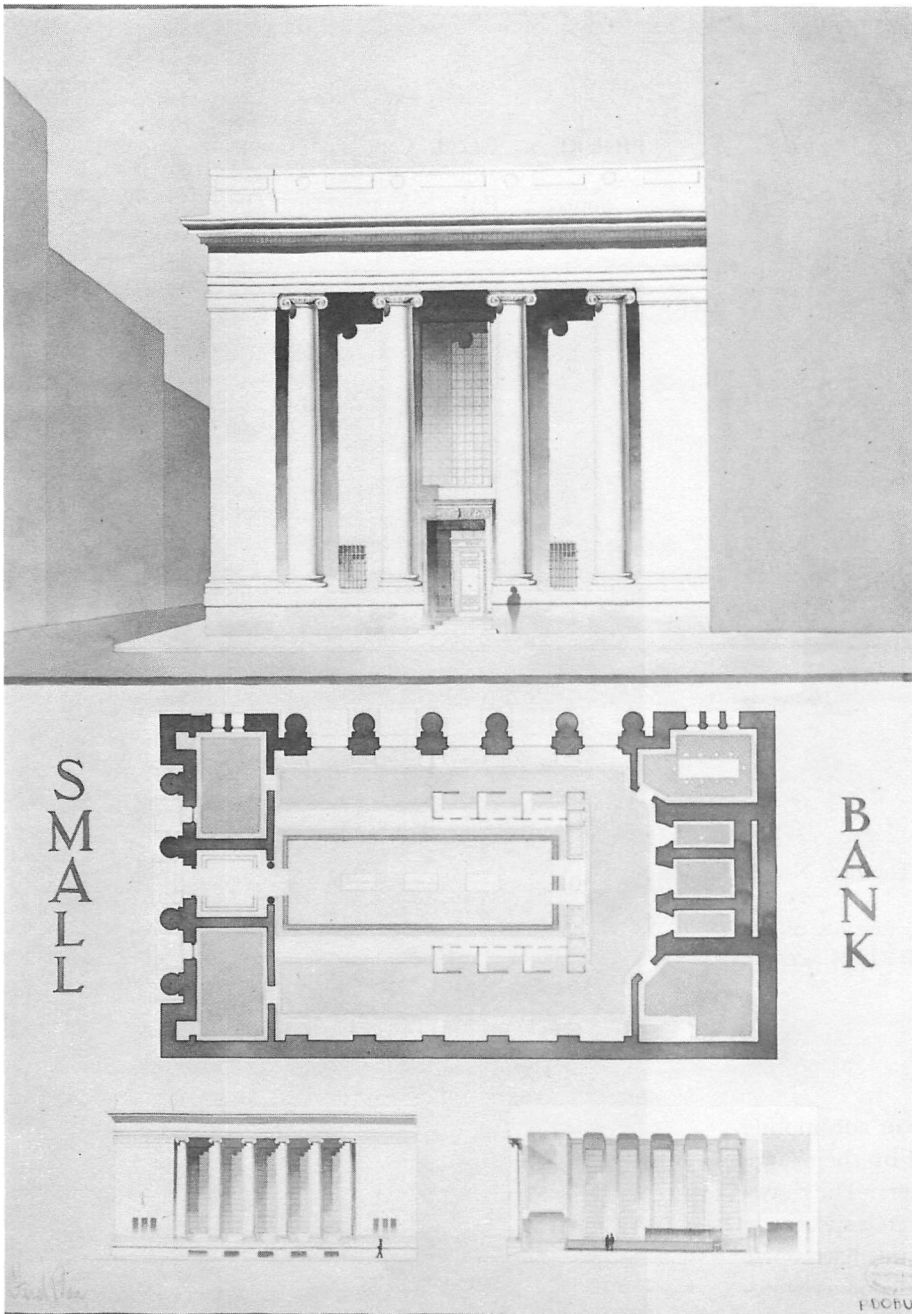


FIGURE 1. W.E. Noffke, "Residence for Dr. and Mrs. F.W.C. Mohr, Acacia Road, Rockliffe, Ottawa," [1929].  
 Source : Public Archives of Canada, National Map Collection, W. E. Noffke Collection, acc. no. 77803/7, Job 871, item 1.

FIGURE 3.  
 G.A. McElroy, "S.S. Kresge Store no. 5044, Val d'Or, Que.," [ca. 1950].  
 Source :  
 PAC, National Map Collection,  
 G.A. McElroy Collection, acc. no. 80103/55.





**FIGURE 2.**  
 Peter Dobush, "Small bank," [ca. 1925].  
 Source :  
 PAC, National Map Collection,  
 Peter Dobush Collection, acc. no.  
 81203/17.

ment from rural to urban. The profiles of urban centres change as dynamic forces influence and alter the status quo. Residential areas are taken over by commercial, recreational space is identified and set apart, satellite communities spring up. The architecture of any area in which transition took place illustrates this change, and so do the relevant architectural drawings.

Information communicated in a less obvious manner requires a little more perceptiveness if it is to be understood and utilized by the urban historian. The reader of architectural drawings absorbs insight into the scale of buildings

and their impact on the urban landscape, as well as prevailing taste and prejudice. These messages are not expressed directly, they are sublime and must be detected before they can be interpreted.

Building style is one kind of subtle information transmitted by architectural drawings and important to the urban historian. Certain categories of buildings have a common design language, making them easily recognizable wherever they are situated. Banks, for instance, evoke continuity and stability through their classical building styles. Commercial buildings encourage consumerism by

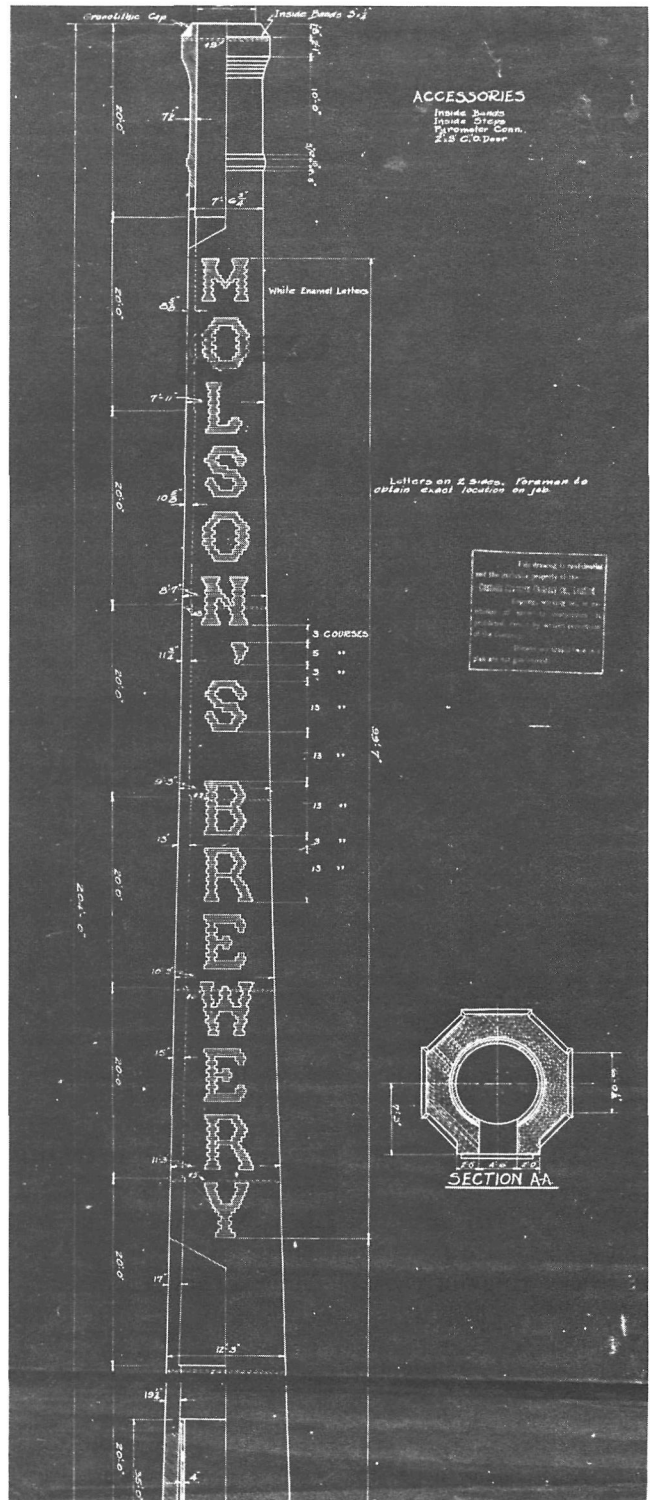


FIGURE 4. Henry Langley, "Post Office, Toronto, No. 9, south elevation."  
 Source : PAC, National Map Collection, Records of the Department of Public Works, RG 11 M, acc. no. 79003/42, item 4794.

their strategic placement along pedestrian or automobile routes, their accessible entrance ways and by their large display windows beckoning potential buyers. The drawings reproduced here as Figures 2 and 3 respectively exhibit these characteristics. Some structures harmonize with the existing landscape, others stand out as statements of individuality. The effect created by architecture is relevant to the historian because inhabitants of urban centres respond individually and collectively to their physical surroundings. Drawings depict those architectural idioms in the urban environment which are unconsciously understood and reacted to. The urban historian can analyse the stylistic properties present in graphic architectural records.

These drawings collectively document the shaping of an urban environment by the forces in control, such as governments and entrepreneurs. The presence of the federal government, for example, is evident in many Canadian urban centres through the public buildings it constructed. Government buildings are designed to per-

FIGURE 5. E.G.M. Cape and Company, [Smokestack for Molson's Brewery Limited], 1921.  
 Source : PAC, National Map Collection, Molson Collection, acc. no. 76703/10, item 264.



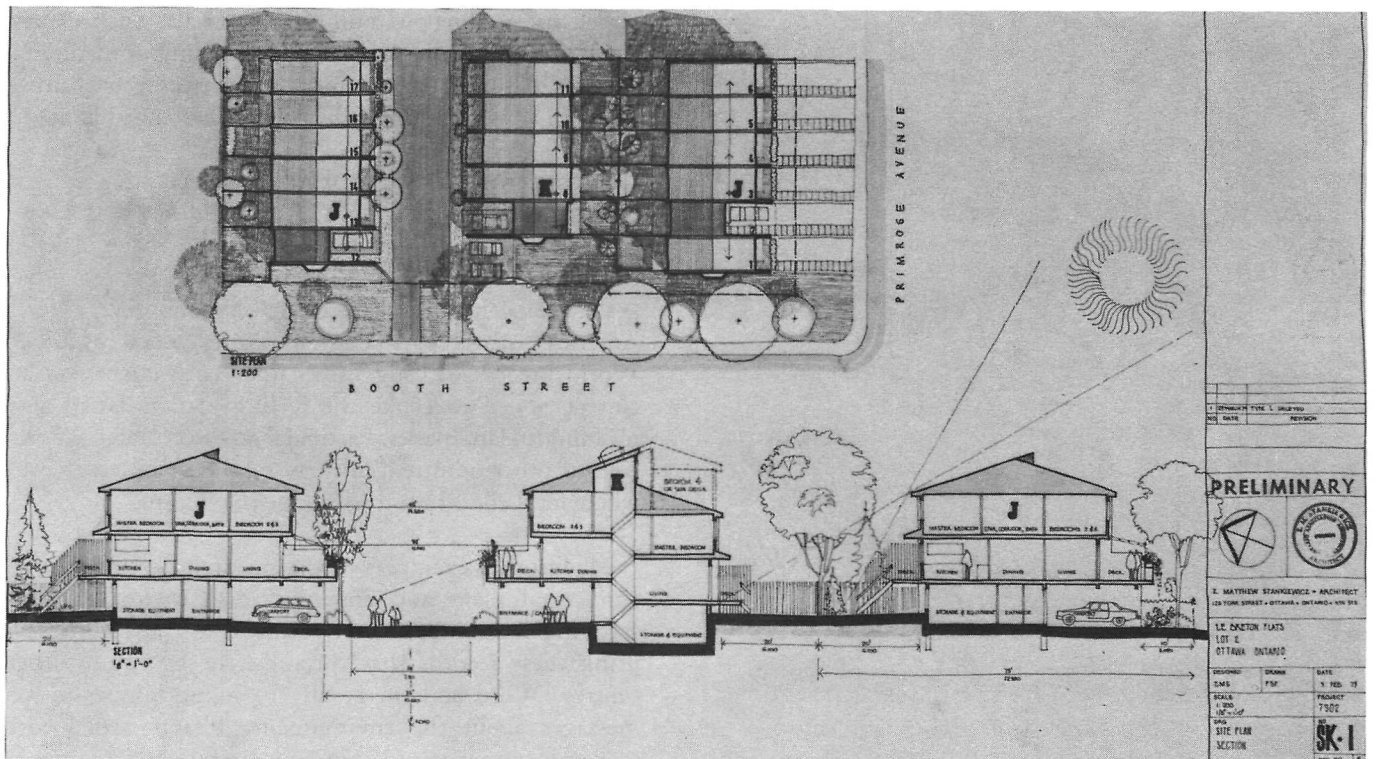


FIGURE 6. Z.M. Stankiewicz, "Le Breton Flats, lot 2, Ottawa, Ontario ... site plan, section," 9 Feb. 1979.  
 Source : PAC, National Map Collection, Z.M. Stankiewicz Collection, acc. no. 80103/47, Project 7902.

form specific functions, but as well they may possess inherent design features evoking qualities such as strength and durability. Typically the post office of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canadian urban centres, such as the one shown as Figure 4, was an imposing structure. It dominated the streetscape and provided a focal point through a clock tower or a spire embellished with a flag pole. One might speculate about the image the Post Office wishes to project today by erecting buildings of much less ostentatious presence. Other government buildings similarly provoke a particular consciousness. The rigid geometry of military barracks and prisons, for example, discourages deviation and reinforces conformity.

An entrepreneurial spirit which directed a city's development may be in evidence through architectural drawings. The business elite, through tract land ownership, has shaped many Canadian cities by controlling and directing large-scale development. The same deliberate approach may be apparent in individual buildings that form a part of the large scheme. Structures built by entrepreneurs may embody a spirit of energy and achievement through building forms which stimulate certain responses. For example, the essentially functional smokestack of Molson's Breweries in Montreal (Figure 5) is itself a symbol of domination in an industrial setting. It was

designed to include the company name in a contrasting colour of brick, advertising to some distance the identity of the force behind the industry.

Architectural drawings may offer insight into the philosophy of the architect who created them. Individuals' values should not be considered too insignificant to interest the urban historian. Many of our urban centres bear the imprint of a few architects who received a large number of commissions or who were influential in the profession. Figure 6 shows a site plan and section for an urban redevelopment scheme in a Canadian city. The architect who created this design approached the challenge of redevelopment in a manner which expresses his own conviction that the quality of life in an urban neighbourhood need not be sacrificed to house a large number of people in a relatively small space. His proposal made provision for privacy within each single-family unit through the placement of trees and windowboxes. Parking spaces and entrances are sheltered from view and weather. The design reveals an appreciation of modern urban conditions.

Expressions of a national or regional identity may be deciphered in such records. A society's feelings of uniqueness may be articulated as architectural ornamentation using motifs inspired by local flora and fauna such as the maple leaves adorning the pediment of a post office

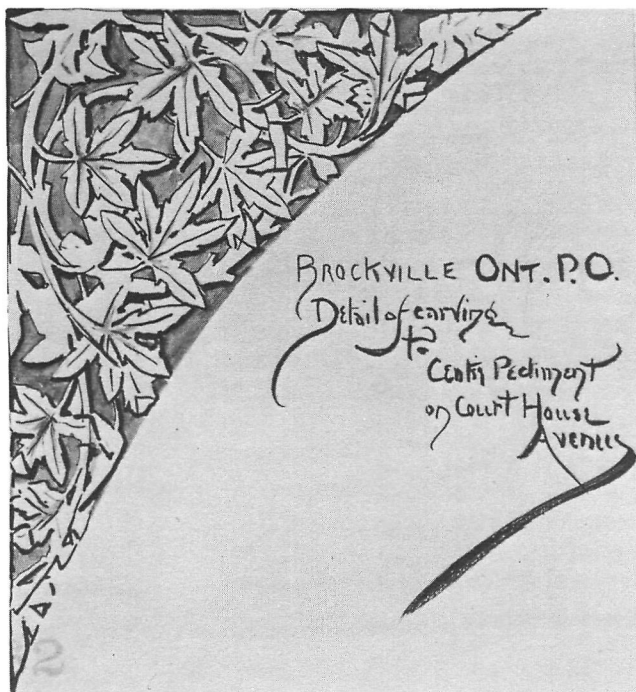


FIGURE 7. Department of Public Works, "Brockville, Ont., P.O. Detail of carving to centre pediment on Court House Avenue," [1882].

Source : PAC, National Map Collection, Records of the Department of Public Works, RG 11 M, acc. no. 79003/42, plan 3562.

(Figure 7). Local historical events and national events and heroes rather than classical elements of decoration may be depicted. National pride may be demonstrated in building forms which convey experiences or objects common to Canadians, which respond to local climatic conditions and

which use indigenous building materials. Such expressions in architecture may substantiate similar manifestations of nationalistic sentiment in other aspects of urban life with which the urban historian is better acquainted.

Architectural drawings reveal preferences for styles of other cultures and geographical areas, be they well-known parent societies or the exotic and far flung. Societies define the constituents of a city and attempt to pattern urban spaces along the lines of the model. In almost every North American urban centre exist structures which recall Old World precedents, suggesting that both client and architect hoped to evoke the feeling of familiarity with meaningful landmarks. Particular architectural modes native to other admired cultures may be emulated, even where local conditions discourage these forms.

Many other examples of the research potential of architectural plans and drawings come to mind. Those studying urban life should be aware of the possibilities for using these records that chronicle the history of urban centres. Word and image ally to communicate myriad messages about the environment. If approached with academic vigour and imagination, architectural drawings will yield a wealth of information for the urban historian.

The PAC collections of architectural drawings may be consulted by any bona fide researcher. Itemized lists, descriptive inventories, an index by building use and another by architect are among the many finding aids. In only a few cases must the researcher obtain permission from the original owner of the documents before copies can be provided. Inquiries about the architectural holdings in general or with reference to specific research projects may be directed to the National Architectural Archives, Public Archives of Canada, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa K1A 0N3.