

A Review from the Margins

Book title:

Landscape Architecture in Canada

Author:

Ron Williams

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REVIEW BY NINA-MARIE LISTER

Ron Williams spent 14 years filling a gap—a chasm really—in the story of landscape architecture in Canada. Much of our national identity is tied to our collective interpretation (and memory) of the majesty and power of the landscape, from mountains to prairie to boreal forest, and from west to east to north coasts. But these associations are inevitably with the landscapes of nature and the wild, and rarely are they associated with the human hand and the imagination of design—and thus, the territory of landscape architecture. With no guide to the designed landscapes that shaped the founding of Canada as a nation, and which continue today to shape

our emergent culture and our evolving identity, we would have little collective sense of who we are, let alone who we are becoming. Indeed, with more than 80 percent of Canadians living in urban areas within two hours of the U.S. border, we are now an urban nation, and there is no question that the landscapes that shaped us are also the landscapes that must sustain us. In this context, Ron Williams' wide-reaching text is the first critical history of landscape architecture in Canada, and a guide to the past that offers insights for today and questions for tomorrow.

Professor Williams' journey to identify and chronicle the history, typologies, and significance of landscape architecture in Canada was no small task. He began in 2000, with a brainstorming meeting with his wife, Sachi Williams, and their friend, renowned Canadian landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander. Rather than attempting to be encyclopedic, Williams chose to tell "a huge story in a coherent way" and to be thematic, oscillating between the temporal and the spatial to focus on pivotal periods in Canadian history and significant sites, illustrating the intimate relationship between landscape as cultural artifact and the fabric of nature. The result is 664 pages, divided into 24 thematic chapters and four parts that range from the heritage landscapes of the colonists and First Nations, to the growth of the urban and industrial era, to the challenges of war and Depression through the rise of modernism and the contemporary urban landscapes that define much of Canada today.

Williams' careful curation and documentation of historic through contemporary sites is complemented with archival and modern photographs, hand and digital drawings, historic plans, and a wide variety of maps.

He notably includes some projects that were speculative and unbuilt but remain nonetheless significant in relation to the contemporary urban landscape. His perspective on the rise of modernism and the urban renaissance is of particular interest, as it offers insights into the rise of landscape architecture as a profession in Canada and a sea change in the public perception of the designed landscape as integral to the modern city. Trained as both architect and landscape architect, Williams worked with John Schreiber (a student of Hideo Sasaki), in Montreal in the 1960s. Highlighted by the global influence of Expo '67, this was among the most significant periods for Canadian landscape design and the emergence of new professional schools.

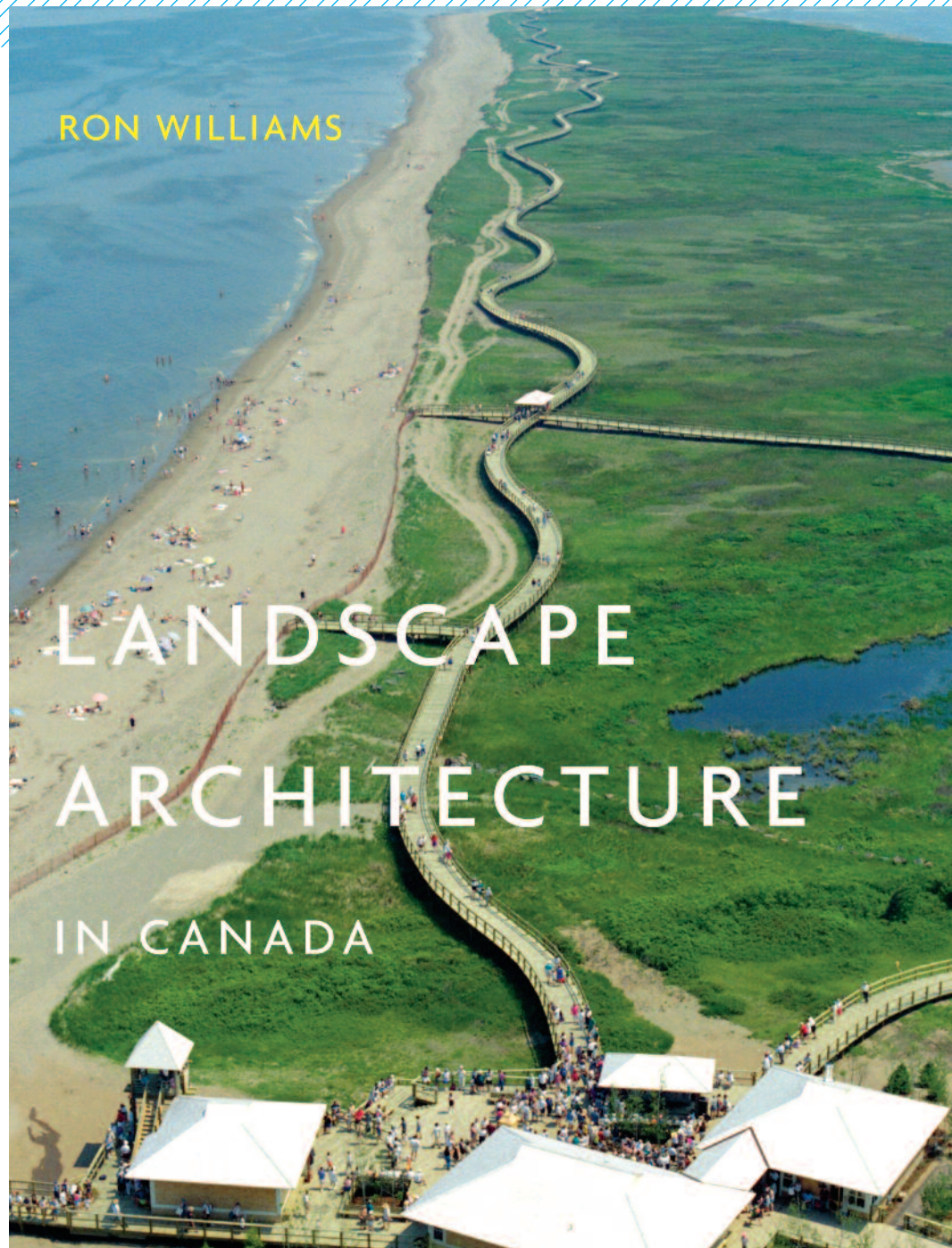
Williams' focus throughout the book emphasizes landscape design as a social-cultural art, yet he includes a variety of landscapes that were not designed by trained professionals. He observes that many of Canada's significant landscapes are the vernacular, cultural landscapes that range in scale from national parks to cemeteries. At the heart of the work is a critical exploration of the history of the landscape idea, highlighting sites and projects that are at once beautiful and long-lasting. As such, the work is an important contribution to the scholarship of historical and modern landscape traditions of Canada.

In the final four chapters, Williams opens the space for a new landscape conversation. He ends the book by identifying contemporary challenges that range from the banality and homogeneity of the suburbanizing landscape, to industrial agriculture, climate change, large-scale resource

extraction, and the densification of cities. Yet in this final section there is a missed opportunity to highlight contemporary projects that do in fact suggest an assertive and critical turn in landscape design on a bold scale. This is significant, for example, in terms of the growing role and voice of Canadian designers who are increasingly working in international multi-disciplinary practices on large-scale waterfront redevelopments and post-industrial conversion projects, for example. Similarly, one cannot underestimate the influence of the Downsview Park project that, while yet unrealized, has nevertheless ignited a potent paradigm shift in landscape architectural theory and practice, in which landscape is now understood as process as much as object, and which has affected a new prominence for the profession in the realm of regional planning and in post-industrial contexts globally.

As Williams concludes the book, he observes the growing relevance of environmental science and the large-scale landscape impacts of resource extraction in Alberta's tar sands and the boreal forest, and he questions the future of the Canadian wilderness. In doing so, Williams lays the groundwork for a renewed and more assertive voice of the landscape architect and the profession, suggesting that the scale of design effort and intention must be commensurate with the project. The implied question is an open one, and is paramount to our future: can we design with intention, with a collective and assertive voice and caring hands for the landscape that sustains us?

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01/ Ron Williams' book *Landscape Architecture in Canada* is available in bookstores and online.

IMAGE/ Courtesy of McGill-Queens University Press