During the last 15 years, there has been a renaissance in Canadian architectural publishing, supported by the efforts of the Canada Council and other funding agencies, private sponsors, and numerous dedicated journalists, scholars, curators and architects. In particular, the intrepid publishers must be commended. This includes stalwarts such as Douglas & McIntyre, newcomers like Figure 1 Publishing, and international houses such as Princeton Architectural Press.

One of the key players in this vital landscape is Dalhousie Architectural Press, established over 35 years ago in Halifax, originally as TUNS Press. Landmark books by the press include Patkau Architects: Selected Projects 1983-1993 (1994), which did much to put Canadian architecture on the map. In 2013, the press began a series called Canadian Modern, overseen by Michelangelo Sabatino. Numbering six books to date, the series is effectively a set of exhibition catalogues that concentrate on archival material.

George Thomas Kapelos’s Competing Modernisms: Toronto’s New City Hall and Square (2015) and Steven Mannell’s Living Lightly on the Earth: Building an Ark for Prince Edward Island, 1974-76 (2018) provide detailed documentation of two crucial, and yet opposite, buildings in Canadian history. Kapelos’s book, which complements an exhibition held at Ryerson University in 2015, comprehensively presents the Toronto City Hall competition of 1958. He includes a fine essay on the history of design competitions in Canada (especially city hall competitions), along with spreads on the finalists and 50 other entries. What is missing is a more lengthy description and analysis of the winning entry, a building that has since achieved iconic status. Nevertheless, the book is a significant contribution to the study of Canadian architecture.
The same can be said of Mannell’s evocative book on the Ark for Prince Edward Island, produced along with an exhibition at the Confederation Centre of the Arts (2016–17). Opened in 1976, the Ark represented a remarkable experiment in environmentally responsive design and living—it was a true product of its time. Mannell provides much information on the genesis and life of the project, accompanied by many intriguing images. Sadly, the project met its demise in 1998.

The most unfamiliar story in the series is told in Cammie McAtee’s Montreal’s Geodesic Dreams: Jeffrey Lindsay and the Fuller Research Foundation Canadian Division (2017). Lindsay was a Montreal-born engineer who became enamoured with the work of U.S. inventor Buckminster Fuller. He established a Canadian arm of Fuller’s research outfit in 1949, and experimented with geodesic structures in the following years. Notably, he also provided structural design services for Erickson and Massey’s mall at Simon Fraser University, and the firm’s projects for Expo 67.

Lindsay’s daughter donated her father’s notebooks, drawings, and photos to the Canadian Architectural Archives at the University of Calgary in 2014. The book was produced in conjunction with an exhibition held at the Centre de Design at UQAM in 2017, and provides a window on a little-known aspect of Canadian design.

Michael Windover and Anne F. MacLennan’s Seeing, Selling, and Situating Radio in Canada, 1922–1956 (2017) explores the early social and spatial territories of radio. The authors, an architectural historian and a communications historian, cover topics such as the modern architecture of radio broadcast stations, and the prominence of radio consoles in the sitting rooms of Canadian homes. The book accompanied an exhibition held at Carleton University in 2017.

The book that launched the series, Linda Fraser and Michelangelo Sabatino’s Arthur Erickson: Layered Landscapes—Drawings from the Canadian Architectural Archives (2013), presents drawings from the Arthur
ITSELF
ARCHITECTURE
and Other Postmodernist Myths

A Few Minutes of Design

By Emily Campbell (Princeton Architectural Press, 2018)

This new set of cards offers 52 activities intended to “Spark Your Creativity.” The cards run the gamut of design, from typeface to architecture, divided into colour-coded suites on different themes. Their appearance is engaging—colourful, with attractive, vivid photographs. Unfortunately, the activities are less so. This reviewer field-tested the cards with two groups: a gathering of architects, and a family of kids who aren’t especially focused on design. The response was lukewarm, which is not what you want from a set of cards meant to excite people about design.

The set is by Emily Campbell, who has a background in design and the design education of children. Perhaps for this reason the cards serve more as a meditation on what makes design tick, rather than engaging users in the design process. Many of the tasks seem condensed from what might be a week-long project—for example, look for forms in a picture of an engine, and then create a new form based on them. Distilling this to an ostensibly five-minute task robs it of its potential richness.

The bigger problem is that the assignments (because this is what they often feel like) use examples of design—a set of icons, a typeface—as the basis for instructions like “What rules would govern the shape of nos. 2 and 3? Draw them.” There may be such a thing as “design principles”—this set seems to assert that design should be logical and pleasing. But that’s not where design generally starts.

A few of the problems are open-ended in the right way—for example, jumbles of lines that the reader is encouraged to join together. But most seem quite prescriptive, even when not trying to be. While as a writer I like words, the accompanying texts hem in the reader. They could be edited down by half, which would help make the tasks more open. Other activities are too abstract. If you want to explore how two objects might be joined together, the way to do it is by playing with the objects themselves, not by drawing them from photographs.

Considering that the set is clearly conceived as a pack of cards, it is a lost opportunity that there doesn’t seem to be any way to turn them into a game. Or to use the cards themselves as tools—stencils perhaps, or building blocks to be stacked or slotted together. That was the approach taken by Charles and Ray Eames’s House of Cards, an altogether more playful (and oblique) introduction to design.

However, this card set did generate in each test group a discussion of “what is design?” These cards, while trying hard, don’t have the answer. Perhaps raising the question is enough.

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