

Jennifer McKendry

The Provincial Asylum in Toronto: Reflections on Social and Architectural History

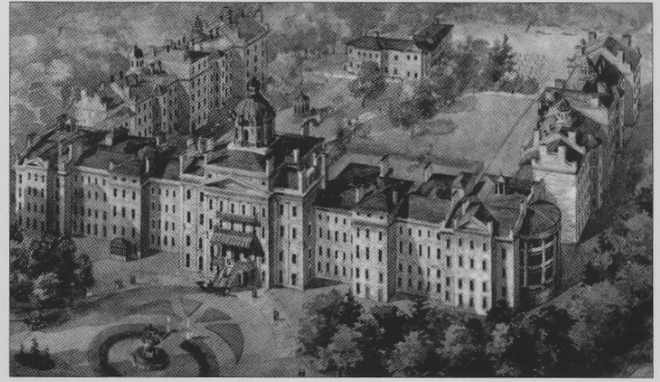
EDNA HUDSON (ed.) (2000)

(Toronto: Toronto Region Architectural Conservancy), ISBN 0-9699054-3-2, \$ 30 (order from Toronto Region Architectural Conservancy, P.O. Box 7162, Station A, Toronto ON M5W 1X8).

The inability to preserve the fine 1846 structure at 999 Queen Street West stemmed from the difficulty of convincing public decision-makers that the bad image of a building was not the result of the building's structure. (John Sewell, 217)

The Toronto Region Architectural Conservancy is to be congratulated on the publication of a book of 246 pages analyzing a single institution, particularly on one that bears the stigma of a psychiatric hospital or lunatic asylum, as it was deemed in the 1840s. Too little attention has been paid in Canadian architectural histories to such institutions, and studies dedicated to individual buildings are rare.

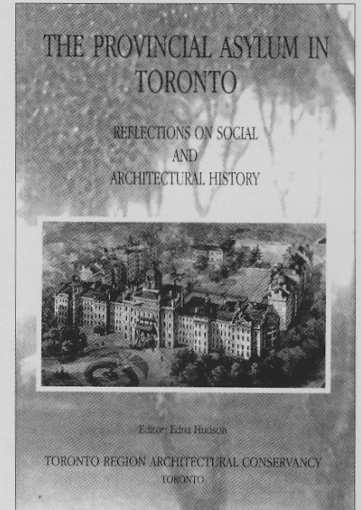
While one salutes the twelve writers who have contributed insight into various aspects of its history and evolving (and dissolving) physical aspects from the mid 19th century to today, one has reservations about the organization of the book. Some of the confusion created for the reader by the chapters jumping backwards and forwards in time and subject might have been easily alleviated with a chronology and an index. Edna Hudson's contribution on asylum layouts does not appear until chapter eleven, and yet might have set the stage for the reader's understanding of 19th-century mental hospitals, particularly as studied by architect John Howard. Presumably the stage was being set in chapter two by Douglas Richardson, "The Asylum in Context," yet it mainly looks at *The Hand-Book of Toronto*, published in 1858, well after the asylum (which was given short shift in this particular



guide book) was built. The author seems more interested in assessing architect William Hay's role in the *Hand-Book* than adding to the reader's understanding of John Howard as asylum architect. On the chapter's last page the asylum and Howard are finally addressed - as they were described in another guide-book of 1860 - but not quoted directly, even though the reader might have difficulty accessing this rare book.

Given the disparate nature of the chapters, numbering the many illustrations consecutively throughout the book with cross-references in the texts would have helped. More attention might have been paid to the asylum's place within the British tradition - including the British Isles, Canada and the United States - of public classical buildings composed of a dome over a central pavilion connected by wings to end pavilions (although this was somewhat considered by Alec Keefer and Edna Hudson). Did the Toronto building influence later asylums, such as Kingston's Rockwood Lunatic Asylum designed in 1857 by William Coverdale? Did Rockwood influence the East and West Wings added in the late 1860s to the Toronto building by Kivas Tully? The introduction at Kingston of bay windows to illuminate gathering areas and break up the tedium of long interior corridors was significant, and may have been the result of Coverdale consulting with Thomas Kirkbride in Philadelphia, where the latter had published an influential book on the construction of hospitals for the insane in 1854 (see *SSAC Bulletin*, vol. 18, March 1993). Kirkbride's "linear plan" is of particular interest in the study of asylums.

The Provincial Asylum in Toronto is a valuable addition to the scant collection of monographs on Canadian architectural history. Despite the inevitable problems of co-ordinating the work of so many authors, it is a book one must acquire for a better understanding of institutional architecture.



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