

DICKINSON, Peter A.R. (1923 – 1961)

Although Peter Dickinson died tragically of cancer at the young age of 35, his architectural designs had a profound influence on the shape of modern Canadian architecture. Through his writings and designs he was an early practitioner of the international and expressionist-modern style which influenced others in their later designs. Many of Canada's pre-eminent designers began their career under his tutelage including Richard Williams, Colin Vaughan, Fred Ashworth, Peter Webb, Boris Zerafa, Rene Menkes, Rick Housden, Peter Trilon, and Jack Korbee to name only a few.

Peter Dickinson was born in London, England in 1923 and was an honors student at the Architectural Association School in London. He won international recognition through a prize-winning entry in the Festival of Britain national competition in 1943. He came to Canada in 1950 because of the lack of work in Britain in the post-war years. He settled in Toronto and began work at the firm of Page and Steele where he was their chief designer for over 7 years. In 1958 he set out on his own and formed Peter Dickinson Associates. Dickinson made his mark by staying within a buildings budget and for his controversial sharp criticism of other designs and architects. By the end of his career he was head of a firm where 70 architects drew plans for \$150,000,000. worth of buildings with offices in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and London, England.

While he was with Page and Steele the firm won the Massey medal on two occasions; for the Toronto Teachers College and the Workmen's Compensation Board. His first project was his designs for an apartment complex known as the Benvenuto at the crown of the hill on Avenue Road, Toronto (1951-55). It was the model for dozens of later large modern apartment complexes. The Benvenuto exhibited many of Dickinson's design signatures such as the demarcation or expression of the edges of the floor slabs, his use of balconies to create form and use of a lot of masonry with glazed brick. He was adept at siting a building so it had presence but respected the street. He liked to put canopies over the entrances and include large suavely detailed lobbies. He pioneered working with

new materials to clad his buildings and explored mixed uses within a single structure.

In 1959 he designed Regis College Seminary for the Jesuit Fathers of Upper Canada, Ballyconnor Crescent, North York, the design for all 3 buildings was based on a drawing of hands. One of his earliest office building commissions was the City of Ottawa Police Building which he won by competition in 1954. He was the first Canadian architect to win the design of a major Canadian bank tower with his preliminary design for the 43-storey Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce Building on Windsor Plaza in Montreal (1958-62). At the time it was the tallest skyscraper in the Commonwealth and has a distinct and columnar appearance, executed in the international style with a curtain wall of distinctive cut-stone, glass and steel. Other office commissions came at a dizzying rate including: Continental Can Company, S.W. corner of Bay Street at College, Toronto (1959); 801 Bay Street, Toronto (1959); Prudential Insurance Company of America, King Street West at Yonge, Toronto (1960); 1420 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec (1960) and the Wananese Mutual Insurance Company, Yonge Street south of Davisville, Toronto (1955) as well as many others. He was one of the first to use the podium format for his high-rise commercial buildings and facing the exterior in precast panel and casement windows.

Other major designs include the O'Keefe Centre, Front Street at Yonge, Toronto (1955-60) which he designed with Page and Steele and Earle C. Morgan. It was a neo-expressionist 3,200-seat performing arts centre with a huge cantilevered entrance canopy and generous circulation areas. He designed several distinctive hotels including: The Westbury Hotel, Yonge Street at Alexander (1953-57); Park Plaza addition Avenue Road at Bloor Street, Toronto (1956) and Four Season Motor Hotel with matching gas station (demolished), Jarvis Street at Carlton, Toronto (1961). His designs for the Westbury and Park Plaza use concrete and glazed-brick cladding with balconies for form and shaped into courtyards for the main entrance-way. The Four Seasons Motor Hotel was a pioneer in the motor hotel format. He later

(continued next page)

designed the Inn-on-the-Park, Bayview Ave. at Eglinton, Toronto (1961) which he modelled on the works of Frank Lloyd Wright.

He also designed apartments at 500 Avenue Road, Toronto (1958), and the high-rise apartment towers in Regent Park, Toronto (1957) which were the first innovative assisted housing projects built after the war and contained the first two-storey

apartments for families. His designs for Beth Tzedec synagogue, Toronto (1954) attracted much attention as they were based on Coventry Cathedral, England. Dickinson also designed the Elm Ridge Golf and Country Club, Ile Bizard, Quebec, (1961) and the Queen Elizabeth Building, Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto (1961).