

café

Toward an Architecture Policy for Canada

CANADIAN ARCHITECTURE FORUMS ON EDUCATION FORUMS CANADIENS D'ARCHITECTURE SUR L'ÉDUCATION

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NEWS



“ Make architecture
a public policy.”

- Anne Cormier
/ Atelier Big City

CAFÉ Québec: Continuing the Conversation on Architectural Education, Research and Advocacy

On a cold Remembrance Day (Jour du Souvenir), architecture students, educators, practitioners, activists, and researchers gathered at the Université de Montréal at the foot of Mount-Royal for the second forum in the series of Canadian Architecture Forums on Education, or CAFÉs. The event was hosted in the north-east wing of a former convent built in 1936, occupied by the Faculty of Architecture since the seventies and renovated by the Montreal firms Saucier + Perrotte and Menkès Shooner Dagenais in the nineties. About 120 people assembled to consider topics related to Place, People, Prosperity and Potential, while considering how a national architecture policy might inspire positive change.

The event began with brief presentations. Director **Jacques Lachapelle** welcomed visitors, while Professors **Jean-Pierre Chupin** (Université de Montréal) and **Lisa Landrum** (University of Manitoba) introduced the CAFÉs and the aim to involve academic communities in describing architectural

quality and imagining the future of architecture in Canada. Dr. Landrum stressed the importance of involving students and educators in the process, and alluded to etymological links between policy and *polis*, which is Greek for “city” – comprised of citizens speaking and acting together.

Why a national architectural policy?

A variety of regional speakers and student delegates addressed the CAFÉ questions and themes. Architect and professor **Anne Cormier** made a presentation about her career leading to the motto of her architectural firm (Atelier Big City): “Make Architecture a Public Policy.” The firm’s slogan emphasizes that architects have the power to question conventions and redefine the contours of the status quo built environment. Architect **Anne Carrier**, president of the Association of Architects in Private Practice in Québec (AAPPQ), addressed the question of “why a national architectural policy?” – arguing that a policy would help define and promote architecture quality in order to improve our living environment. Former president of the Order of Architects of Québec (OAQ), **Nathalie Dion**, presented the work conducted since 2014 to actively support and shape the adoption of a Québec Architecture Policy, summarized in a document titled *Livre Blanc pour une politique québécoise de l’architecture* published in March 2018. **Bruno Demers**, sociologist and director of Architects Without Borders Québec, advocated for a more humanitarian approach to architecture and outlined a variety of concerns, notably architectural illiteracy in Canada; the scarcity of critical architectural journalism; the lack of politicization of

architects; and the need to support climate action, Indigenous communities, social justice, and research. **Maggie Cabana**, an architect with the Montreal-based practice Architecture Microclimat and 2015 graduate of Université de Montréal, presented examples of small interventions having broad community impact, while emphasizing pressing questions and concerns, including the need to advocate for more accessible and just cities. **Maude Tousignant-Bilodeau**, president of the Université de Montréal student association, *Regroupement d’Étudiants en Architecture* (RÉA), described the status of mental health in architecture schools and the involvement of the RÉA in addressing an ethos of care for student well-being. Finally, **Jonathan Kabumbe** and **Noémie Lavigne**, student-delegates from the McEwen School of Architecture at Laurentian University, presented some of the special focuses of their school’s pedagogy, including the valuation of sustainable building materials, especially wood; the integration of regional and international research trips; and community-oriented design projects involving children and Indigenous groups.

Conversations and Complex Consensus

Following the presentations, attendees joined roundtable discussions, each moderated by a student who oriented conversations and ensured all voices were heard.

As a visiting delegate from Carleton University, I joined a table including representatives from McGill University, Université Laval and Université de Montréal to address the topic of People. We asked questions such as what is the most pressing issue regarding the influence of architecture



“ If the future of our profession depends on a specific issue it may be the capacity to contribute to the fight for a more accessible and just city. ”
- Maggie Cabana

We are indebted to the dedicated and generous organizers of CAFÉ Quebec. Too rare are the occasions to gather people from different Canadian universities as well as practicing architects and professional institutions. The CAFÉ was an important way to catalyze serious conversation and intensify thinking about a possible architecture policy for Canada. That timely initiative – following the recent election – has the potential to bring forward changes at the national level in the years to come.

upon individuals and different communities? How can an architecture policy contribute to improving those preoccupations? What are the best examples to illustrate the positive impact of architecture on people? And, what strategies could be employed to help the public better understand the value of well-designed environments?

While it was not difficult to reach consensus about pressing issues, it was more challenging to identify precise strategies to address them. Highlights of the discussion included the suggestion that more education and communication was necessary to generate a better understanding of architecture amongst the general public. It was proposed to give more media attention to the built environment by raising the quality and quantity of architectural criticism in mainstream publications and newspapers. Our group debated if those critics should be architects, academics or unspecialized cultural critics. While there was no consensus on the right background or expertise for critics, there was broad agreement that cross/trans/multi-disciplinary research and collaboration was necessary in architecture. Cross-disciplinarity has the potential to not only deepen appreciation of the built environments in all its complexity, but also to highlight the importance of architecture across diverse domains. Better understanding would mobilize different agents of the built environment, such as entrepreneurs, builders, politicians, institutional boards, and community groups.

Regarding ways that built environments are appreciated, we suggested that the notion of "comfort" might be an accessible way to communicate architecture's qualitative components, thus avoiding a shallow and

ocular-centric interpretation of the built environment. "Comfort" can encompass questions of atmosphere, thermal control, sound quality, natural light, ventilation, safety, aesthetic and synesthetic experience, as well as a sense of community and belonging. Re-considering the place and experience of the human as the center of our concern, leads us to think about the more-than-human issues, like relationships to broader ecosystems. Around the table, the climate crisis was the focus of concern, with sustainability conceptualized in terms of resilience, building regulations and architectural strategies, but also the preservation of historic buildings.

Finally, our group pondered the temporalities of architecture – how we account for the integration of the past, as well as the future and responsibility for heritage. Our table suggested that architects might be involved in projects from their very inception, working with clients early to establish parameters and develop holistic approaches. If time scales might help us to consider differently the processes of the built environment, it also conceptualizes progress, value, growth and prosperity under alternative criteria.

Timely Initiative and Vast Potential

The event addressed the importance of policies and the numerous challenges that built environments confront now and will continue to face in the years to come. More work needs to be done to show specific ways that policies might advocate for reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities, for spatial justice in cities, as well as how research and education might tackle questions of environmental sustainability early on in the education.

Now that we have returned to our respective schools, the reflection is not over. In our capacity as educators, students and researchers, it is important to assess the ways that those discussions might influence how we teach and conduct research, and attune us to various forms of activism to enhance our built environments.

Future CAFÉs

The next CAFÉ will be hosted by Ryerson University on February 6, 2020; followed by CAFÉ Prairie at the University of Manitoba on February 28, 2020; and CAFÉ West at the University of Calgary on March 12, 2020.

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