

# Culture Crates

*You employ stone, wood, concrete, and with these materials you build houses and palaces: that is construction....But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good. I am happy and I say: This is beautiful. That is Architecture.*

**Le Corbusier, architect**

Architecture is the art and science of designing and constructing buildings and other physical structures for human use. Evolving out of the dynamics between needs for shelter, security, worship and other human functions, the practice of architecture gradually became recognized as one of the arts, housing aspects of human culture and, in some cases, directing the cultural expressions of a society. The analysis of building types provides insights into past cultures and behind each of the greater architectural styles lies periods of experimentation directed toward answering the needs of a specific way of life.

Over the past two decades much of new 'public' architecture in Alberta has been directed towards the construction and/or renovation of cultural facilities, such as art galleries. While we often think and talk about artwork, however, we do not usually consider the 'containers' art is presented in. The actual physical structure of Art Galleries - or the buildings which have been used to display art - are works of art themselves, however, and can tell as much of a story as the artworks found within them. Sometimes this 'story' is fraught with controversy with debates about everything from the financial costs of such constructions to the design of the buildings and the actual need for them. In celebration of the first anniversary of the new Art Gallery of Alberta the exhibition **Culture Crates** takes a peak 'behind the scenes', examining the architecture of art galleries to determine both the reasons for the development of art galleries and the stories these 'culture crates' can tell.

The cities of Medicine Hat, Grande Prairie and Edmonton have all witnessed the construction of new or renovated art institutions. **Culture Crates**, utilizing archival photographs from the City of Edmonton Archives, the Art Gallery of Alberta, the Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre in Medicine Hat, and the Prairie Art Gallery in Grande Prairie, as well as artworks from the collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, explores the architecture of art institutions in these cities.

**Culture Crates** was curated by Shane Golby and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA Travelling Exhibition program is supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.



The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

## Travelling Exhibition 2011-2013 Season

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition for the 2011-2013 season. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves up to 50 venues in approximately 35 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition, each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide for the show. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

### Our Thanks

The Art Gallery of Alberta  
The City of Edmonton Archives  
The Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre  
The Prairie Art Gallery

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts  
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### Contact

Shane Golby, Manager/Curator  
AFA Travelling Exhibition Program Region 2  
Art Gallery of Alberta/CSF  
10550-107 Street  
Edmonton, AB T5H 2Y6  
T: 780.428.3830  
F: 780.421.0479  
shane.golby@youraga.ca

Front Cover Images:

Top: Edmonton Public Library, Image Courtesy of the City of Edmonton Archives, EA-160-1461  
Left: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1968, Collection of the Art Gallery of Alberta  
Right: Art Gallery of Alberta, Main Entrance, 2010, Photo Courtesy of Shane Golby



The Alberta Foundation for the Arts  
Travelling Exhibition Program

## Culture Crates

*Museums, with their malleable programs, have enabled architects to interpret contemporary reality, to create emblems of who we are, and to redefine the meaning of the physical places we inhabit.*

**Architectural Record**, January, 2006

Government  
of Alberta



Alberta



art gallery of alberta

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Edmonton Public Library  
Image Courtesy of the City of  
Edmonton Archives  
EA-160-1461

The exhibition *Culture Crates* provides a glimpse at the history of some of the major art institutions in the Province of Alberta as well as an overview of architectural and visual art expressions in North America from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. The institution of the Art Gallery of Alberta, in the buildings it has occupied or the structures built expressly for the display of visual art, exemplifies trends in architecture and art during these centuries.

The first home of what is now known as the Art Gallery of Alberta was in the **Beaux-Arts** styled Edmonton Public Library in 1924. The style was very prominent in public buildings in Canada in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As part of the Romantic Movement which characterized the arts during the mid 18<sup>th</sup> to mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, the Beaux-Arts style embraced a number of different styles from past periods. Beaux-Arts training emphasized the mainstream examples of Imperial Roman architecture and also looked to the architecture of the Italian Renaissance and the French and Italian Baroque models for inspiration.

**The first Edmonton Public Library** was an excellent example of the Beaux-Arts amalgamation and referencing of older architectural styles. Constructed in 1922 and 1923, this building was designed by Edward L. Tilton of New York. Constructed of cream coloured terra-cotta clay brick and Bedford stone, the library was described as a grand French Renaissance structure with Italian detailing. The central entrances were flanked by four fluted Doric columns while the roof was of red tile and the gutters, decking, flashing and skylights were of copper. Inside, the entrance was lined with Caen stone while the stairs were finished with terrazzo and marble. The central portion of the main floor was crowned by a massive skylight carried on Ionic columns.

This version of the Edmonton Public Library survived until 1969 when it was demolished and replaced by the Telus Tower.



Edmonton Art Gallery, 1968  
AGA File Photo  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Alberta

**Modern Architecture** refers to a set of building styles with similar characteristics. While the first examples were conceived early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until after World War II that the style gained popularity and became the dominant architectural style for institutional and corporate buildings from the 1930s to the 1980s. Social changes, technical and engineering developments, and changing aesthetics have all been cited as reasons for the development and popularity of this style.

Architects who worked in the modern style, also referred to as the International Style, wanted to break with architectural traditions and design simple, unornamented buildings. The most commonly used materials are glass for the facade, steel for the exterior support, and concrete for the floors and interior supports. **The most common characteristics are:** an adoption of the principle that the materials and functional requirements determine the result (form follows function) - a rejection of ornament and a simplification of form and elimination of 'unnecessary detail'. The Modernist style became most evident in the design of skyscrapers but is also expressed in homes and public buildings such as city halls, public libraries, university buildings and art galleries.

An off-shoot of the Modernist style is that of **Brutalism**, popular during the 1950s to 1970s. Brutalism was a response to the 'glass curtain wall' that was overtaking institutional and commercial architecture in the 1960s and was a foil to the light airiness of the International style's steel and glass construction. The style involved the development of *béton brut*, a type of concrete with no formal finish. Brutalist buildings usually are formed with striking repetitive angular geometries and, where concrete is used, often reveal the texture of the wooden forms used for the casting. The design of the building is largely dependent on the shape and placement of the various room masses.

**The Edmonton Art Gallery**, designed by Bittorf and Wensley Architects and completed in 1969, was the earliest and perhaps the best example of modern Brutalist architecture in Edmonton. Intended to exemplify the beauty and power of concrete, the design was meant to convey honesty, comfort and security and to provide a tough exterior in order to protect works of art from the harshness of climate and light.



Art Gallery of Alberta, Main Entrance,  
2010  
Photograph  
Courtesy of Shane Golby

**Postmodern Architecture** is an international style which began in the 1960s and continues to influence present day architecture. The style is a response to the formalism of the International Style of modernism which, to postmodern architects, was seen as soulless and bland. Postmodern architecture borrows elements and references from the past and reintroduces colour, symbolism and ornamentation to architecture.

Postmodernism has its origins in the perceived failure of Modern architecture. Modernism's preoccupation with functionalism and economical building meant that ornaments were done away with and the buildings were cloaked in a stark rational appearance. Postmodernist architects felt the buildings failed to meet the human need for comfort both for the body and the eye and did not account for the desire for beauty. These architects believe that ornament and historical allusion add a richness to architecture that modernism had foregone. Further to this, form was no longer to be defined solely by the building's functional requirements; it could be anything the architect pleased.

In turning to the past, post-modern architecture quotes aspects of various building styles and melds them together to create a new means of design. One aspect to this was the return of the 'wit, ornament and reference' seen in older buildings in the decorative facades and bronze or stainless steel embellishments of the Beaux-Arts period. Postmodernism with its diversity also possesses sensitivity to the building's context and history, and the client's requirements. Postmodernist architects consider the general requirements of the building and its surroundings or context during the design phase.

The new **Art Gallery of Alberta**, opened in January of 2010, is an excellent example of Postmodern architecture. While the firm of Randall Stout Architects Inc. does not follow a singular style, on his visits to Edmonton Randall Stout noticed both the urban grid system and the meandering nature of the North Saskatchewan River. The ribbon of steel which dominates the overall geometric nature of the building and runs within the atrium symbolizes this dichotomy and references the structure's physical surroundings. The architect was also asked to preserve as much of the old brutalist building as possible. Stout's design, with its geometric units, adheres to this and so quotes aspects of past building styles.