

# “Towers of Silence”: The Rise and Fall of the Grain Elevator as a Canadian Symbol

PATRICIA VERVOORT\*

*The grain elevator, an ordinary industrial building of American origin, has over the years emerged as a popular symbol of Canadian life, albeit one that is now vanishing from the landscape. Both the tall, wooden country elevators in Prairie towns and the concrete terminal elevators of port cities have taken on this symbolic role, although praise for “the grain elevator” has often not differentiated the two. The reason for their iconic status is somewhat elusive. The admiration expressed by European architects and historians was the foremost reason that Canadian architects and architectural historians began to identify the terminal elevator as an important element of Canadian architecture. Wooden country elevators have evoked description as “prairie sentinels” or “prairie cathedrals”. The appearance of both types on Canadian stamps and currency has given formal recognition to their symbolic value. As part of Canada’s economic and agricultural histories, as well as the country’s architectural and cultural histories, grain elevators not only are tied to the special knowledge relevant to their use, but also generate shared meaning.*

*L’élévateur à grains, un ordinaire bâtiment industriel d’origine américaine, est devenu au fil des ans un symbole populaire, bien qu’en voie de s’éclipser, de la vie au Canada. Tant le haut silo de bois des petites villes des Prairies que le terminal de béton des villes portuaires ont acquis cette valeur de symbole, même si les éloges s’appliquaient indifféremment aux uns et aux autres. On connaît mal l’origine de cette stature iconique. L’admiration des architectes et des historiens d’Europe à leur endroit est la raison première pour laquelle les architectes et les historiens de l’architecture du Canada ont commencé à souligner l’importance de l’élévateur à grains en tant que symbole architectural du Canada. Les élévateurs à grains de bois ont été surnommés « sentinelles des prairies » ou « cathédrales des prairies ». L’apparition des deux types d’élévateurs sur les timbres et la monnaie du pays en a sacré la valeur symbolique. En leur qualité d’acteurs de l’histoire économique, agricole, architecturale et culturelle du Canada, les élévateurs à grains sont non seulement évocateurs d’une fonction particulière, mais également géniteurs d’un sens partagé.*

\* Patricia Vervoort is professor of art history in the Department of Visual Arts at Lakehead University.

Everybody is familiar with the outlines of grain elevators. Their peculiar shape and enormous height at once attract attention.<sup>1</sup>

[I]t rises blind and Babylonian like something out of legend.<sup>2</sup>

DISTINGUISHED architectural historian Harold Kalman identifies the grain elevator as “the most Canadian of architectural forms”.<sup>3</sup> Its image is evoked in poetry, novels, and plays. It is represented in art, paintings, and sculptures and illustrated in children’s books. The grain elevator garners attention in studies of Canadian history whether the topic is political, agricultural, economic, or architectural. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the grain elevator has merited symbolic status in Canadian life; by the 1980s, as massive numbers of elevators across the country began falling to the wrecking ball, ordinary citizens, historians, architects, and writers eulogized the building type and identified it as a Canadian symbol. In 1935 the number of country elevators was at its peak at 5,758, with a capacity of 189.9 million bushels.<sup>4</sup> By 2004 only 361 primary elevators had licences to operate.<sup>5</sup> For the last 40 years and more, many abandoned grain elevators have become “towers of silence”, as Mark Abley so appropriately describes them.<sup>6</sup>

It is a curious phenomenon that the grain elevator, an ordinary industrial building, has today become a popular symbol of Canadian life. When country elevators were first constructed in the 1880s along the lines of the Canadian Pacific Railway, they were seen as essential to agriculture and trade, a place to process and store grain before it was shipped to eastern markets or overseas. The CPR invited their construction by grain companies, with minimal requirements for capacity and equipment, but elevators were not considered important enough for the railway to undertake their erection or operation. However, the CPR did use photographs and other artwork representing elevators in its pamphlets encouraging immigration and travel. Settlers were attracted by offers of free land, 160 acres each; once this land was cultivated, the farmers needed elevators. On the Prairies, elevators signalled the location of towns; particularly prosperous communities (and richer farm land) possessed multiple grain elevators. For years, images of the Prairies were distin-

1 Dermot McEvoy, “Elevators and Modern Granaries”, *Canadian Magazine*, vol. 21 (July 1903), p. 204.

2 A. M. Klein, “Grain Elevator”, in *Complete Poems, Part 2: Original Poems, 1937–1955, and Poetry Translations*, Zailig Pollock, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 650–651, 1008, in reference to the concrete elevators of Montreal.

3 Harold Kalman, “This Elevator is Going Down”, *Canadian Heritage*, vol. 11 (February/March 1984), p. 19.

4 *Grain and Rail in Western Canada: The Report of the Grain Handling and Transportation Commission* (Hall Commission) (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1977), p. 48. In 1977 there were 3,964 elevators with a capacity of 344 million bushels.

5 Canadian Grain Commission, “How Many Primary Elevators Are There in Canada?” [online document, retrieved January 1, 2006], <<http://grainscanada.gc.ca/FAQ/elevdecr-2.htm>>.

6 Mark Abley, *Beyond Forget: Rediscovering the Prairies* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986), p. 197.

guished by the vertical interruptions of the elevators, often called landscape features by geographers. The Prairie was featured on Canadian money and stamps as rich agricultural land dotted with elevators, but also acquired international recognition as the “breadbasket of the Empire”. Elevators, intentionally or not, became symbols of Canada long before the Prairie provinces were created. This symbolic value has also been evident in efforts to “save” elevators as heritage buildings. The importance of elevators to Canadians continues today, memorialized in photography books such as *Prairie Giants* by Hans Dommasch, poetry books like Barbara Nickel’s *From the Top of a Grain Elevator*, true stories such as Elizabeth McLachlan’s *Gone but not Forgotten: Tales of the Disappearing Elevators*, and as the subject of cartoons in Roy Cullimore’s *A Survey of the Uses and Abuses of the Prairie Grain Elevator*.<sup>7</sup> As the old wooden grain elevators become increasingly rare, their images live on in these publications that cater to memory, both historical and symbolic. The Prairie grain elevator is a symbol of Canada because it initially acted as a lure for settlers and became a means for farmers to sell their grain as part of a larger communication and global system of trade. It is a feature of the landscape, an element commented on by visitors and bound up in the lives of those who depended on it for their livelihood. To most Canadians, the ordinary grain elevator means Western Canada, but to others, it symbolizes Canada.

What makes a symbol? How does a symbol get to be national? What features identify a Canadian symbol? Other countries have architectural symbols such as the Parthenon in Greece or the Eiffel Tower in France, but these are specific structures. Canada’s “grain elevator” is a generic reference. In the words of George Kubler, “A symbol exists by virtue of repetitions. Its identity among its users depends upon their shared ability to attach the same meaning to a given form.”<sup>8</sup> W. T. Mitchell states, “Symbolic representations ... are not based on the resemblance of the sign to what it signifies but on arbitrary stipulation ... because ‘we say so’, because we have agreed to regard it this way.”<sup>9</sup> As Jonathan Hale indicates, “Symbols are tied to emotions, and they are also tied to information, special knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> Margaret Visser further explains, “[S]ymbolism is not ‘pure’. A symbol, unless it is deliberately reduced to being a defined and therefore lifeless sign, is a resonating thing,

7 Hans Dommasch, *Prairie Giants* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1986); Barbara Nickel, *From the Top of a Grain Elevator* (Vancouver: Sandcastle Books, 1999); Elizabeth McLachlan, *Gone but not Forgotten: Tales of the Disappearing Grain Elevator* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2004); Roy Cullimore, *A Survey of the Uses and Abuses of the Prairie Grain Elevator* (Winnipeg: Frye Publishing, 1983).

8 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 74.

9 W. J. T. Mitchell, “Representation”, in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 14.

10 Jonathan Hale, *The Old Way of Seeing* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), p. 71.

making suggestions and connections, pointing in many directions at once; it can never be captured entirely, whether by classification or by analysis.”<sup>11</sup> Identification of the grain elevator as a Canadian symbol is somewhat elusive, as the varying reasons for its symbolism suggest many simultaneous meanings. First, repetitions assure us that grain elevators are symbols because enough people, three groups in fact, “say so”. The grain elevator is a symbol to architects, to architectural theorists, and to architectural historians. Secondly, the grain elevator is symbolic to ordinary citizens and travellers. Finally, the image of the grain elevator has received national recognition in its use on stamps, on money, and at international exhibitions to symbolize Canada.

The grain elevator in Canada is a structure that has acquired mythical proportions, but a number of anomalies are associated with recognizing it as a Canadian symbol. For example, it is a building type that was imported into Canada, even though many assume it was an indigenous creation. Also, the builders are usually considered to have been anonymous rather than known engineers. Moreover, there are two different structural types of grain elevators, yet most commentators neglect to make the distinction between the two and simply praise “the grain elevator”. The grain elevator has great symbolic value to Canadians living on the Prairies, but also to those living in port cities; each of these groups expresses emotional attachment to a different kind of elevator. While people in various professions admire grain elevators, the usage or purpose of an elevator rarely merits discussion. Today the elevator as a Canadian building type is looked upon with nostalgia, but, for previous generations, grain elevators indicated a symbol of prosperity and economic well-being. Moreover, the admirable qualities of grain elevators are somewhat vague, whether in reference to numbers, height, or colour. Further, exactly what the grain elevator symbolizes is not always clearly expressed by the many writers who claim it is a symbol. Identifying the grain elevator as a Canadian symbol is, as Margaret Visser says, a “resonating thing, making suggestions and connections, pointing in many directions at once.”<sup>12</sup> It is “alive” and radiant in the Canadian psyche.

### **What is a Grain Elevator?**

A country, primary, standard or Prairie grain elevator is a building, usually of wood, used for the storage and transfer of grain. It is a vertical structure equipped with elevating machinery for raising loose grain to the top of the building and, from there, distributing it by gravity downward into storage bins or rail cars. The elevating equipment consists of vertical conveyor belts, called “legs”, lined with cups or buckets for scooping up the grain. Vernon C.

11 Margaret Visser, *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* (Toronto: Harper Flamingo, 2000), p. 221.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

Fowke explains, “[A]n elevator’s essential features in addition to the elevating ‘leg’ are a variable number of bins, a weighing and unloading platform with a receiving hopper beneath, and a hopper weigher for loading cars. The structures themselves vary.”<sup>13</sup> A typical country elevator is square in plan, 30 by 30 feet, and 75 feet tall.<sup>14</sup> Most elevators also include equipment for grading the grain as well as for drying it, if necessary. In operation, a farmer delivers a truckload of loose grain to the nearest elevator, and it is dumped into receiving pits located below ground level. From here, the elevator legs lift the grain (that is, elevate it) and begin processing it. To reach markets in Canada and abroad, the grain in a country elevator is transferred into rail cars and delivered to terminal elevators, the large concrete structures that operate on the same principles as country elevators, but on a much larger scale.

Concrete terminal elevators are generally found in port cities. However, between 1913 and 1916, Dominion Government Elevators were built at Saskatoon, Moose Jaw, and Calgary and were among the earliest large-scale concrete structures built on the Prairies.<sup>15</sup> In a terminal elevator, the working equipment is located in a tall, vertical workhouse, and the storage bins, the round silos, are clustered nearby. A “grain elevator”, then, is a term used for two different building types: the tall, wooden country elevator and the mammoth concrete terminal.

Before the invention of grain elevating equipment, grain storage and shipment necessitated great labour for the lifting and moving of grain either loose or in sacks. Oliver Evans is credited with inventing the elevator leg in 1780, but it was not in use until 60 years later.<sup>16</sup> Joseph Dart, an American grain merchant, and Robert Dunbar, a Scottish engineer, are identified as the inventors of the equipment and the process of elevating grain inside a building. Dart’s terminal elevator was built in Buffalo, New York, in 1841. With the elevator, 2,000 bushels of grain could be processed in an hour; previously that amount took an entire day.<sup>17</sup>

In Canada, the first wheat was shipped from Manitoba down the Red River in 1876, before the railway and before there were any elevators. The very first elevator in the West was constructed at Niverville, Manitoba, in 1879;

13 Vernon C. Fowke, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 107.

14 John S. Metcalf Co. Limited, *Grain Elevators* (Montreal: John S. Metcalf Co. Limited, 1926), p. 12.

15 Patricia Vervoort, “Industrial Building in the West: The Dominion Government Elevators at Saskatoon, Moose Jaw and Calgary”, *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin*, vol. 16, no. 3 (September 1991), p. 62. Additional Dominion Government elevators were constructed in Thunder Bay, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Lethbridge.

16 Albert E. Macdonald, “Grain Elevator Design and Construction – Part I”, *Contract Record and Engineering Review*, vol. 43, no. 3 (January 16, 1929), p. 47.

17 Guy A. Lee, “History of the Chicago Grain Elevator Industry, 1850–1890” (dissertation, Harvard University, 1938), pp. 36–37; Joseph Dart, “The Grain Elevators of Buffalo”, *Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society* (1879), pp. 391–404.



**Figure 1:** Fleming, Saskatchewan. This photograph displays three different shapes used in the construction of country elevators. On the left is the earliest, a square elevator with a gable-roofed cupola, Pool B No. 1164. The other two United Grain Growers elevators, sharing the same railway siding, are taller in form with gable roofs. The machinery for elevating the grain is housed in the cupolas. This photograph was taken in 1996; now only the oldest elevator, a heritage building, remains standing.

although it was round in shape, it was equipped to handle grain in bulk.<sup>18</sup> A more practical solution was The Ogilvie Milling Company's first country elevator at Gretna, Manitoba, built in 1881; this tall, wooden structure with a pitched roof was the building type now recognized as a typical country elevator.<sup>19</sup> Ogilvie constructed a series of these elevators along the railway lines and hence they became known as "line elevators". Other companies built line elevators as well. By the turn of the century, according to the *Report of the Royal Commission on Shipment and Transportation of Grain*, there were 447 elevators in Western Canada,<sup>20</sup> although in fact only 421 country elevators were listed by the Canadian Grain Commission.<sup>21</sup>

William Van Horne developed the Canadian Pacific Railway's policy of encouraging the construction of country elevators at regular intervals, every

18 Michael McMordie, "Grain Elevators", *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1988), vol. 2, p. 921.

19 C. F. Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain: Government Policy to 1951* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), pp. 13–14; McMordie, "Grain Elevators". The earlier flat warehouses for handling grain did not have mechanized equipment, and grain was shovelled by hand into the rail cars.

20 *Report of the Royal Commission on Shipment and Transportation of Grain*, 63 Vict., Sessional Paper No. 81a, A, 1900, p. 9.

21 Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain*, p. 15, n. 38.

seven to ten miles along the CPR tracks. This distance was considered suitable for pulling horse-drawn wagons full of grain. Van Horne cited the efficiency of elevators in “Minnesota and Dakota” as an example.<sup>22</sup> While the CPR did not build its own country elevators because of “limited capital resources”, it did offer incentives to milling companies and grain dealers to build them.<sup>23</sup> “Free elevator sites and other privileges” were offered to builders of standard elevators provided they had the proper equipment for elevating and cleaning grain as well as a capacity of 25,000 bushels.<sup>24</sup> As time passed, the capacities of country elevators grew with larger constructions and annexes. Farms became larger, and more mechanized equipment created enormous volumes of grain. As the railways discarded branch lines, farmers had to truck their grain further and further beyond the local wooden elevator. Sloped-bin grain elevators constructed of pre-cast concrete were introduced around 1980, the first in Magrath, Alberta. Designed by Buffalo Engineering of Edmonton, this new elevator type has virtually replaced the wooden country elevators.<sup>25</sup> Also called “high-throughput grain-handling centres”, these new elevators have ten times the capacity of the traditional country elevators.<sup>26</sup> As the grain business evolved, the country elevator has become obsolete.

The first Canadian terminal elevators, owned by the CPR, were erected of wood, but early in the twentieth century these were replaced with concrete constructions. Canada’s first terminal elevators were built at the Lakehead or Thunder Bay (formerly Fort William and Port Arthur) in 1883–1884.<sup>27</sup> Montreal had two wooden CPR terminals by 1887.<sup>28</sup> Wheat shipments overseas from Montreal began in 1883, and by 1918 Montreal was “the largest grain port on the North American continent”.<sup>29</sup> Stephen Leacock once described Canada’s grain moving system: “A huge network, complicated in its outline and ramifying in its relations, spread out from the Head of the Lakes to the confines of the grain country. You can view it either as a thing of beauty or of horror, a work of God or of the devil, according to the type of mind you have. But at least it was intricate.”<sup>30</sup>

22 W. C. Clark, *The Country Elevator in the Canadian West* (Kingston: The Jackson Press, 1916), p. 4.

23 Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain*, p. 14.

24 Clark, *The Country Elevator*, p. 5.

25 Trevor Boddy, “Notes for a History of Prairie Architecture”, *Prairie Forum*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1980), pp. 137–139.

26 Greg McDonnell, *Wheat Kings: Vanishing Landmarks of the Canadian Prairies* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1998), pp. 10–11, 85.

27 Patricia Vervoort, “Lakehead Terminal Elevators: Aspects of their Engineering History”, *Canadian Journal of Civil Engineering*, vol. 17 (1990), pp. 404–412.

28 Stuart Howard, *Construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway Grain Elevators* (Canadian Society of Civil Engineers, [1887?]), Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, CIHM 60297.

29 Edward Porritt, “Canada’s National Grain Route”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 3 (September 1918), pp. 344, 360.

30 Stephen Leacock, *My Discovery of the West* (Boston and New York: Hale, Cushman & Flint, 1937), pp. 80–81.

The grain elevator, then, as a building type, was imported from the United States, not invented in Canada. This is true as well for other building types such as houses, churches, or office buildings, but Canadian architecture books are filled with “Canadian” examples distinguished by particular forms and extensive use. The “Canadian grain elevator” is part of Canadian history because of this extensive use. Architects and architectural historians lavish great praise on grain elevators, an irony because grain elevators were the products of engineers who built industrial structures. Nevertheless, on the whole, grain elevators are accepted as architecture with little discussion about this classification. Are grain elevators indeed examples of “Canadian architecture”, or of architecture at all?

### European Admiration

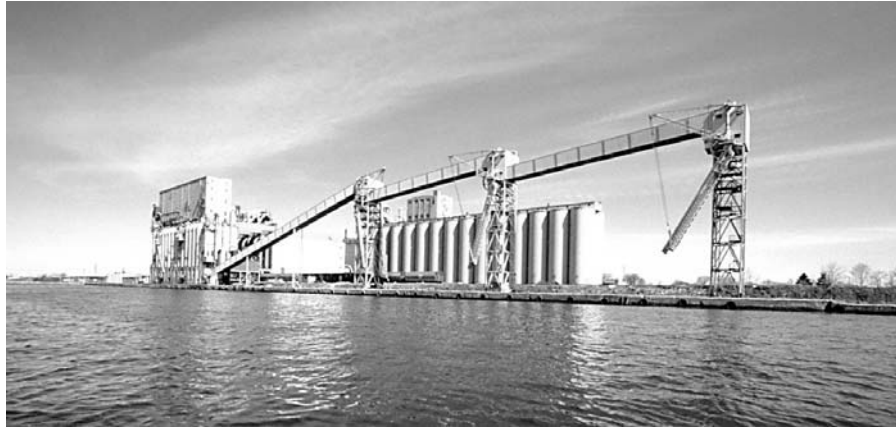
The traditional approach to architectural history encompasses only major buildings designed by architects. Exemplifying this attitude, Nikolaus Pevsner opened his history of architecture with the statement: “A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture.” He elaborated: “[T]he term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.”<sup>31</sup> Pevsner made a clear distinction between low and high art, directing attention to the uplifting qualities of the cathedral; he did not discuss bicycle sheds or other similar structures. To Pevsner, the grain elevator would probably fall into the category of bicycle shed rather than cathedral. However, today’s concept of what constitutes architecture is much broader and more inclusive. As well, current views of aesthetics permeate to include the ordinary. For example, *Learning from Las Vegas* begins with the statement: “Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect.”<sup>32</sup> Robert Venturi’s colleagues and students demonstrate that parking lots and strip malls merit attention, if not for replacement, then for enhancement. Earlier writers praising industrial buildings, including grain elevators, have, in part, generated this more inclusive characteristic of architectural theory.

One main reason for the ready acceptance of grain elevators as architecture in Canada is that European architects and theorists, early in the twentieth century, admired terminal grain elevators in their writings about modernism. To the Europeans, grain elevators merited attention because of their anonymity, huge scale, and the use of concrete slip-form construction. The method is swift and the resulting forms, either straight or curved, are geometric and unadorned. These theorists considered concrete construction, which had been used by the Romans, a “new” material. The built form they most admired was the grain elevator.

31 Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, 5th ed. (1943; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 23.

32 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, revised ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), p. 3.





**Figure 2:** Cargill Elevator, Thunder Bay. The section to the far left is the original Grand Trunk Pacific Elevator in Thunder Bay, 1908–1910; this is the elevator celebrated by Le Corbusier in *Vers une architecture* (1923). The present configuration shows additional storage bins and the movable facilities for loading grain into ships. On March 26, the *M.V. Algoville* arrived at the Cargill Elevator, the southernmost elevator in the Port of Thunder Bay, to open the 2006 navigation season.

In 1913 Walter Gropius (1883–1969), a German architect, in one of the earliest treatises admiring industrial buildings, wrote: “The grain elevators of Canada and South America ... are almost as impressive in their monumental power as the buildings of ancient Egypt.” Further, Gropius remarked, “their designers” had an “independent and clear vision” that was unlike that of European builders because of the latter’s “sentimental reverence for tradition”, that is, the continued use of ornament. To support his remarks, Gropius included photographs, among them two Canadian grain elevators identified only by city names: the Harbour Commissioners Number Two (1911–1912) in Montreal and the Grand Trunk Pacific (1908–1910) in Thunder Bay, then Fort William.<sup>33</sup> Architectural historian Siegfried Giedion comments that, before this publication by Gropius, grain silos were only “mere containers of grain”.<sup>34</sup>

The most quoted European theorist was architect Charles Jeanneret-Gris, who used the pseudonym Le Corbusier (1887–1965). His *Vers une architec-*

33 Walter Gropius, “Die Entwicklung Moderner Industriebaukunst”, *Die Kunst in Industrie und Handel. Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1913), pp. 17–23, plus 15 illustrations, and “The Development of Modern Industrial Architecture”, in Tim Benton and Charlotte Benton, *Architecture and Design 1890–1939: An International Anthology of Original Articles* (New York: Watson-Guption, 1975), pp. 53–55. Jean-Claude Marson, *Montreal in Evolution* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1981), mistakenly claims the Montreal Harbour Commissioners Elevator #2 (now demolished) “was the first of its kind to be in concrete” (p. 251). See Vervoort, “Lakehead Terminal Elevators”, for earlier examples in concrete.

34 Siegfried Giedion, *Walter Gropius* (1954; New York: Dover, 1992), p. 22.

ture, first published in 1923, appeared in English translation in 1927 as *Towards a New Architecture*; it is still in print. He began his discussion of grain elevators by praising primary forms such as the cube and the cylinder and stated that, “working by calculation, engineers employ geometrical forms, satisfying our eyes by their geometry and our understanding by their mathematics; their work is on the direct line of good art”. He continued with the famous and often quoted phrase, “grain elevators and factories, the magnificent first-fruits of the new age”. Le Corbusier’s illustrations included the same two Canadian elevators used by Gropius, but this time, in the captions, the Montreal elevator became “American” and only the Grand Trunk in Thunder Bay was “Canadian”.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, while Le Corbusier borrowed most of his elevator photographs from Gropius, he also trimmed and cropped them to emphasize the streamlined character of the grain elevators.<sup>36</sup> For example, in the photograph used by Gropius, the Montreal elevator dwarfs the dome and façade of the nearby Bonsecours Market, whereas, in Le Corbusier’s photograph, the Market is cropped away to emphasize the elevator alone.<sup>37</sup>

Le Corbusier’s book also included a photograph by Harry Pollard of the Dominion Government Elevator in Calgary.<sup>38</sup> According to architectural historian Trevor Boddy, the Calgary elevator became “the most internationally renowned piece of Alberta architecture” because of its inclusion by Le Corbusier.<sup>39</sup> American historian Reyner Banham makes the same point, but dismissively; he says the Calgary elevator is “notable chiefly because it was illustrated by Le Corbusier”.<sup>40</sup> Not included in Gropius’s publication, the Calgary elevator was completed only in the fall of 1915; the supervising engineer for its construction was C. D. Howe.<sup>41</sup>

Some idea of the popularity of these elevator photographs is evident from their reproduction. Valentine & Sons of Dundee, Scotland, published a post-card of the same view of the Grand Trunk Pacific Elevator used by both Gropius and Le Corbusier; Valentine had Canadian branches in Toronto and Montreal by 1909. When another German historian used the same Grand Trunk Pacific photograph in 1959, the caption again changed to become “Fort

35 Le Corbusier (Charles Jeanneret-Gris), *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1946), pp. 23, 33; Walter Gropius, “Memories of Le Corbusier”, *Apollo in the Democracy: The Cultural Obligation of the Architect* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), p. 174.

36 William J. Brown, “Walter Gropius and his Grain Elevators: Misreading Photographs”, *History of Photography*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Fall 1993), p. 307.

37 Melvin Charney, “The Old Montreal No One Wants to Preserve”, *The Montrealer*, vol. 38, no. 12 (December 1964), p. 22.

38 Vervoort, “Industrial Building in the West”, pp. 60–71.

39 Trevor Boddy, *Modern Architecture in Alberta* (Edmonton and Regina: Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism and University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 1987), pp. 56–57, 134.

40 Reyner Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture, 1900–1925* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 155.

41 Vervoort, “Industrial Building in the West”, p. 70.

William, U. S. A.”<sup>42</sup> When Walter Behrendt summed up the German interest in grain elevators in 1937, the location had been moved to “grain ports all over South America”.<sup>43</sup> Part of the problem with these elevator photographs, as demonstrated here, was that they were not labelled. Further, most of these writers only “knew” elevators from photographs, not first-hand.<sup>44</sup>

An elevator identified by Gropius as being in Buenos Aires became “Canadian” in Le Corbusier’s book. Gropius’s photograph displays a succession of small gables along the roof, but, in the photograph used by Le Corbusier, the gables have been trimmed away.<sup>45</sup> This cropped photograph was reproduced again by Wilhelm Worringer in 1928 in his book *Egyptian Art*; he titled it “Grain Elevator in Canada” and juxtaposed it with a photograph of the Egyptian Gate Building of the Temple of the Dead of King Sahu-Ra.<sup>46</sup> Thus a non-Canadian elevator became identified as a Canadian one, perhaps countering the number of Canadian elevators identified as American in these various publications. This problem of identification, of course, also emphasizes that early in the twentieth century many countries constructed large-scale terminal elevators; Canada was only one of these.

Nevertheless, this admiration shown by European architects and historians for Canadian grain elevators was the foremost reason that Canadian architects and architectural historians identified the terminal elevator as an important element of Canadian architecture. The Europeans’ linking of the elevators to ancient Egyptian structures must have had a special appeal, as it connected Canadian building to a long-standing historical tradition of erecting mammoth structures. However, two factors are overlooked. First, the Europeans clearly admired industrial buildings and terminal elevators for their construction materials and straightforward geometric shapes; they suggested that architects follow this honesty of approach to material and function. Le Corbusier, however, did admit, “Our engineers produce architecture.”<sup>47</sup> Secondly, the large concrete terminals intrigued the Europeans by their sheer scale and their implied pristine character; the actual functions of grain terminals did not merit the theorists’ attention. Canadian commentaries on elevators as architecture tend to join the two building types together, the country elevator and the terminal elevator, as if there were no distinctions in size,

42 Jurgen Joedicke, *A History of Modern Architecture*, trans. James C. Palmes (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1959), p. 59.

43 Walter Curt Behrendt, *Modern Building: Its Nature, Problems and Forms* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937), pp. 99–100.

44 One German architect and writer on grain elevators did visit North America, but not Canada. Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum (1926; New York: Dover, 1993).

45 Gropius, “Die Entwicklung Moderner Industriebaukunst”; Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, p. 27.

46 Wilhelm Worringer, *Egyptian Art*, trans. Bernard Rackham (London: G. P. Putnam’s, 1928), plates 21–22, p. vi.

47 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, p. 19.

material, or capacity. European architects did not include country elevators in their discussions.

### Canadian Terminals as Architecture

While Canadian architectural histories include the grain elevator as a building type and note its role in Canada's built heritage, Alan Gowans voiced concern about identifying the grain elevator as architecture. In his discussion of a distinctly Canadian culture as expressed in architecture, published in 1958, Gowans stated that grain elevators "embody qualities admired by 'modern taste' — simple shape, straightforward use of materials [and] fitness to function".<sup>48</sup> Gowans made reference here to Vitruvius, the Roman writer and the first architectural historian who judged buildings on their firmness, commodity, and delight.<sup>49</sup> Robert Venturi, the contemporary American architect and theorist, claims, "[A]rchitecture is necessarily complex and contradictory in its very inclusion of the traditional Vitruvian elements of commodity, firmness and delight."<sup>50</sup> Gowans remarked that "to argue on these grounds that grain elevators are Canada's most distinctive architectural expression is to imply that Canadian culture must be impoverished indeed". Gowans, then, raised two pertinent questions: not only "whether they are distinctly Canadian (grain elevators are not exactly unknown in the American Middle West, after all), but whether they are architecture at all". To illustrate his discussion, Gowans included two pictures, a row of country elevators at Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, and a concrete terminal, the N. M. Paterson Elevator at Fort William, now Thunder Bay.<sup>51</sup> By including the two types of elevators, Gowans extended his questions to both types of buildings. Questioning the architectural status of grain elevators, however, sets Gowans apart, as most other Canadian architects and historians have accepted unquestionably that grain elevators are indeed examples of Canadian architecture.

Gowans generally reflected the traditional approach to architectural history, as championed by Pevsner, to encompass only major buildings designed by architects and to exclude practical or industrial buildings. He also must have been aware of Le Corbusier's book, however, for he included photographs of grain elevators and acknowledged them as prominent examples of

48 Alan Gowans, *Looking at Architecture in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 216–217.

49 Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, trans. Frank Granger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), vol. 1, pp. 34–35 (*firmitatis, utilitatis, venustatis*).

50 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 16.

51 Gowans, *Looking at Architecture*, pp. 216–217. Elevators are also symbolic to Americans, as noted by Lisa Mahar-Keplinger, *Grain Elevators* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), pp. 11, 83; John C. Hudson, "The Grain Elevator: An American Invention"; Frank Gohlke, *Measure of Emptiness: Grain Elevators in the American Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 96–97; Robert B. Riley, "Grain Elevators: Symbols of Time, Place and Honest Building", *AIA Journal*, vol. 66 (November 1977), pp. 50–57.

Canada's built environment. More recently, architectural history has become more inclusive and embraces the vernacular, the ordinary buildings in which people work and live. John Warkentin, a Canadian geographer writing on elevators, states: "It does not matter ... that the buildings may or may not be distinguished examples of architecture: the essential thing is that they are a part of the reality which is the Canadian plains."<sup>52</sup> Writers such as Gropius and Le Corbusier may indeed have encouraged this more comprehensive approach to "architecture". Canadian architectural historian Trevor Boddy also counters the traditional approach: "The conscious accretion of meaning into built forms is what distinguishes architecture from building...."<sup>53</sup> Although not designed by architects, the grain elevator is accepted today as an important and meaningful example of Canadian architecture, praised by many contemporary architects. Canadian architect John C. Parkin proclaims: "Perhaps our most fine and original design is the grain elevator: spare, clean-lined, candid about its function."<sup>54</sup> In another speech on architecture, Parkin declares, in comments that could refer to either type of elevator, "Canadian design shares with the grain elevator this same unassuming honesty. It is neither radical nor experimental, but it is in good taste, it is modest, it is appropriate."<sup>55</sup> Architect Eberhard Zeidler reflects on the terminal elevators in Toronto: "[T]hese silos are a vital part of the history of Canada in the same way as the brooding castles of Europe reflect the past." Further, Zeidler adds, "The silos are not useless in the memory of a collective Canadian consciousness."<sup>56</sup> This reference to memory is important in the creation of symbols, in terms of grain elevators and people's responses to them. Elevators are buildings, but their construction and function have depended on people. As part of the landscape across the Prairies and in port cities, elevators are structures that physically cannot be overlooked. With their height and scale, they dominate small towns and ports.

Describing a terminal at the Lakehead in 1919, Buller called it "a mighty building, beautifully specialized to handle grain in the most efficient and economical manner."<sup>57</sup> In *Viewpoints: One Hundred Years of Architecture in Ontario*, four photographs of terminal elevators "at Port Arthur and Fort William" (Thunder Bay) appear, but are unnamed; their designers are indicated as "various engineering, construction companies", a reiteration of the idea of

52 John Warkentin, "Time and Place in the Western Interior", *Artscanada*, nos. 169–171 (Autumn 1972), p. 20.

53 Boddy, *Modern Architecture in Alberta*, p. 124.

54 John C. Parkin, "Blueprint for the Nation: Build for a Canadian Image", in Geoffrey Simmins, ed., *Documents in Canadian Architecture* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1992), p. 261.

55 "Grain Elevator Best Design, Architect Says", *Globe and Mail* [Toronto], October 30, 1976, p. 36.

56 Eberhard H. Zeidler, "Silos are like Castles", letter to the editor, *Globe and Mail* [Toronto], September 5, 1987, p. D7.

57 A. H. Reginald Buller, *Essays on Wheat Including The Discovery and Introduction of Marquis Wheat, The Early History of Wheat-Growing in Manitoba, Wheat in Western Canada. The Origin of Rebo and Kitchener, and The Wild Wheat of Palestine* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 61.

the “anonymous” engineer.<sup>58</sup> Here, too, Ruth Cawker cites Le Corbusier’s “primary forms” and “classic simplicity” in her discussion of the “heroic, ultra functional cylinders”.<sup>59</sup> While these comments indicate awareness of twentieth-century theoretical writing, that of Le Corbusier in particular, these sentiments pervade contemporary architectural literature. It makes one wonder whether Canadian elevators would be so important now if outsiders had not written about them.

Grain elevators have inspired writers to make grandiose comparisons that are no doubt a response to their huge scale. Historian Anthony Rasporich, for instance, describing the construction of Thunder Bay’s Saskatchewan Pool #7 in 1928, wrote, “[O]ne of the world’s modern wonders, it rose like an oversized Greek temple ... and projected an endless wall of alabaster pillars beyond the shoreline of Lake Superior.”<sup>60</sup> The “alabaster pillars” are, of course, the concrete silos. Much earlier, in 1918, an anonymous writer for *The Grain Dealer’s Journal* also conveyed a sense of wonder: “[A] great elevator reared against the sky has a rugged aspect which invites attention. Every line speaks of absolute utility and efficiency and one is reminded of the clean lines of a thoroughbred [*sic*].”<sup>61</sup> He was describing the Grand Trunk Pacific Elevator, made famous by Gropius and Le Corbusier. The possibilities for comparisons are endless, as these analogies to classical temples and thoroughbred horses indicate, but they also convey concepts such as timelessness and modernity.

Other comparisons claim terminal elevators “rise like windowless skyscrapers”.<sup>62</sup> In 1954 Yousuf Karsh, in a photographic essay on Port Arthur for *Maclean’s Magazine*, stated, “I treat grain elevators just like cathedrals.” He remarked further that their “sleek and formal beauty” fascinated him.<sup>63</sup> In a more contemporary comment, John Bentley Mays, art critic for the *Globe and Mail*, in a review of a photographic exhibition of Montreal industrial buildings, writes of “the strikingly modern hymn of tall cylinders and blocks at the Canada Malting Plant”.<sup>64</sup> Earlier in the century, Reginald Buller, a professor of botany, described the Lakehead terminals as having “imposing bulk

58 Ruth Cawker, *Viewpoints: One Hundred Years of Architecture in Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Association of Architects, 1989), pp. 11–12, 48–49, 52–53. Thunder Bay was formed in 1970 by the amalgamation of the cities of Fort William and Port Arthur. Norman R. Ball, “*Mind, Heart, and Vision*”: *Professional Engineering in Canada, 1887 to 1987* (Ottawa: National Museum of Science and Technology, National Museums of Canada, in cooperation with the Engineering Centennial board, 1987), includes only two photographs of grain elevators, those of the United Grain Growers under construction in 1927 in Thunder Bay (p. 96). The caption, however, stresses the later political career of C. D. Howe.

59 Cawker, *Viewpoints*, p. 12; Le Corbusier *Towards a New Architecture*, p. 29.

60 Anthony Rasporich, “A Boston Yankee in Prince Arthur’s Landing: C. D. Howe and his Constituency”, *Canada: An Historical Magazine*, vol. 1 (Winter 1973), p. 27.

61 “Grand Trunk Pacific Elevator, Fort William, Ont.”, in Charles S. Clark, ed., *Plans of Grain Elevators*, 4th ed. (Chicago: The Grain Dealers Journal, 1918), p. 17.

62 Phil Ault, *These are the Great Lakes* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972), p. 127.

63 “The Lakehead – Core of Canada”, *Maclean’s Magazine*, vol. 67 (February 15, 1954), p. 17.

64 John Bentley Mays, “Photos Freeze-frame a Slice of Industrial Culture”, *Globe and Mail* [Toronto], August 15, 1992, p. C11.

and curious form” to “make a never-to-be-forgotten impression”.<sup>65</sup> To Walter Herbert, speaking in 1933 as publicity director for the Canadian Wheat Pool, terminal elevators were “castles of the new world” because “they are fortresses of peace, storehouses of plenty, essential links in a chain of peaceful trade and commerce”. He concluded that they “constitute one of Canada’s offerings to the goddess of progress”.<sup>66</sup> Herbert is actually one of the few to have commented on the use of grain elevators as storehouses and their connection with trade. Other authors have said little about the function or purpose of elevators, but Herbert was an insider: he was in the grain business.

For the past 20 years, as more and more elevators have faced demolition, efforts have been made to preserve them. Again, the identification of elevators as architecture is stated with certainty and the chosen vocabulary and comparisons are grand. For instance, the Victory Soya Mills Elevator in Toronto is described as an “unlikely choice as an architectural treasure, its supporters saw it as an icon, a classic symbol of an age of heroic industrial architecture and boundless hope”.<sup>67</sup> To Adele Freedman, architectural critic for the *Globe and Mail*, Toronto terminal elevators “evoke the power of pyramids”; “[W]e have no alternative but to save our silos.”<sup>68</sup> The efforts by the public to save the Victory Soya Mills Elevator succeeded, and it is now recommended for designation as a heritage property. Among the reasons cited for its heritage status is its representativeness as a “rare surviving example ... of cylindrical reinforced concrete silos”.<sup>69</sup>

### Impressions of Country Elevators

Country elevators, too, have evoked similar reactions in viewers who continuously express their awe at the size of the buildings, stressing their height and sustaining the compulsion to compare. Professor of architecture Michael McMordie describes wooden elevators as “familiar Canadian landmarks” and “the most distinctive architectural symbol of the Prairies”.<sup>70</sup> When architectural historian Harold Kalman writes that grain elevators are “the most Canadian of architectural forms and ... to many of us are as much a part of our culture as apple pie is to our southern neighbours”, he too refers to the wooden country elevator.<sup>71</sup> In his *History of Canadian Architecture*, Kalman

65 Buller, *Essays on Wheat*, p. 60.

66 Walter B. Herbert, “Castles of the New World”, *Canadian Geographical Journal*, vol. 6, no. 5 (May 1933), pp. 241–243, 255.

67 Peter Cheney, “Stubborn Grain Silo Facing Final KO”, *Toronto Star*, February 10, 1996, p. A4.

68 Adele Freedman, “Silent Silos Evoke Power of Pyramids”, *Globe and Mail* [Toronto], January 30, 1988, p. E15.

69 City of Toronto, letter from the City Clerk’s Office, Toronto Preservation Board, to the Toronto and East York Community Council, recommendation of the Board for the inclusion of Victoria Soya Mills Silos on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties, September 23, 2004, and report of September 9, 2004.

70 McMordie, “Grain Elevators”, p. 921.

71 Kalman, “This Elevator is Going Down”, p. 19.

discusses “‘prairie sentinels’ — those quintessentially Canadian structures, the country grain elevators”.<sup>72</sup> *Prairie Sentinels* is also the title of an architectural video by Geoffrey Simmons, produced by the University of Calgary.<sup>73</sup> Standing “sentinel” or on guard is a frequent analogy; in fact, the Saskatchewan Association of Architects identifies “grain elevators” as “the architectural sentinels of the prairies”.<sup>74</sup> Herbert explains the term: “An English visitor once said that he watched expectantly for a 40-foot soldier to emerge from each elevator, so much did these buildings appear to him as giant sentry boxes before an imaginary Buckingham Palace.”<sup>75</sup>

Associations between the Prairies or the Northwest, then British North America, and the British Empire have long standing in Canadian history. For instance, Alexander Morris saw the potential of the Prairies as the “new Britannic Empire”.<sup>76</sup> The CPR emphasized this connection with its pamphlets seeking settlers and travellers; one of these displayed the cover title: *Western Canada, the Granary of the British Empire*.<sup>77</sup> Later, the English writer Rudyard Kipling described the “high-shouldered, tea caddy grain elevators”.<sup>78</sup> Much later, Sir Barry Jackson, the British theatre director, claimed that he wanted “to see Canadian cities take as much pride in their theatres as they do in their grain elevators”.<sup>79</sup> The elevators and the grain they stored were of international importance, not merely a Canadian phenomenon.

Mark Abley describes his travels across the Prairies: “The standard comparison likens an elevator to a sentinel, but I had decided, after thousands of miles and hundreds of grain elevators, that they resemble giant Monopoly hotels and act like medieval churches — dominating, identifying and justifying the villages in their dusty shade.” He continues, “In their brooding speechlessness, their solemnity above so many withered communities, the elevators are also Canada’s towers of silence: its watchers of the prairie dead.”<sup>80</sup> To mention the dust is rare in general grain elevator literature,

72 Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 525–526.

73 Geoffrey Simmons, *Prairie Sentinels*, VHS, 28 mins. (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1996).

74 Saskatchewan Association of Architects, *Historic Architecture of Saskatchewan* (Regina: Saskatchewan Association of Architects/Focus Publishing, 1986), p. 58.

75 Herbert, “Castles of the New World”, p. 243.

76 Alexander Morris, *The Hudson’s Bay and Pacific Territories, a Lecture* (Montreal: J. Lovell, 1859), p. 39; Doug Owsram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 56–58.

77 Canadian Pacific Railway, *Western Canada: Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan and New Ontario: How to Reach it, How to Obtain Lands, How to Make a Home* (Montreal, 1908), the cover title: *Western Canada, the Granary of the British Empire*.

78 Rudyard Kipling, *The Writings in Prose and Verse of Rudyard Kipling: Letters of Travel* (New York: Scribners, 1920), vol. 24, p. 173.

79 As quoted by Maria Tippett, *The Making of English-Canadian Culture, 1900–1939: The External Influences* (North York: York University, Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies Lecture Series, 1988), p. 8.

80 Abley, *Beyond Forget*, p. 197.



whereas dust, a major occupational hazard, is a prime issue for professionals in the grain business. The silence, of course, occurs only when an elevator is not in operation or when it is seen from a distance. Up close, elevators in operation are very noisy and extremely dusty.

Other comparisons evoke tall images; for instance, Hugh MacLennan writes, “[T]he grain elevators are like ships.”<sup>81</sup> According to a rail guide, “the prairie’s most outstanding feature” is “the colourful clusters of grain elevators poking into the sky.”<sup>82</sup> Comparison with churches is also frequent in grain elevator literature. Andrew Malcolm, like Yousuf Karsh on terminals, likens a prairie grain elevator to “some darkened prairie cathedral at midnight”.<sup>83</sup> The cathedral is an apt comparison for the tall Prairie elevator on the flat terrain.

Not only are grain elevators frequently compared to cathedrals and churches; they are also called icons. Traditionally, an icon is a devotional image or statue, though nowadays an icon also refers to a computer image; another interpretation for icon is an object of particular admiration or a “representative symbol of something”.<sup>84</sup> Grain elevators “have established themselves as a Western Canadian icon”, says Jane Ross, curator of the Provincial Museum of Alberta.<sup>85</sup> The religious implications of these terms tend to raise elevators above the status of ordinary buildings and therefore suggest they are more important. “Icon” and “Prairie Cathedrals” are terms used together by Sandra Cordon of Regina to record the plight of elevators facing the wrecking ball.<sup>86</sup> Le Corbusier, in addressing architectural abstraction, noted that “while it [the elevator] is rooted in hard fact it spiritualizes it”.<sup>87</sup> This reverence for the elevator is widespread.

In attempting to identify distinctive Prairie architecture, Trevor Boddy claims the grain elevator is the “most persistent and pervasive symbol”. He continues, “For poet, farmer, architect, and artist alike, the grain elevator is the building which is formed by and reflects back the landscape, economic wealth, and social structure of the prairies.”<sup>88</sup> Geographer George Sitwell declares that height is a positive value; since elevators were found in every community, they represented the commercial success of the area.<sup>89</sup> Both

81 Hugh MacLennan, *The Colour of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967), p. 91.

82 Bill Coe, *Scenic Rail Guide to Western Canada* (Toronto: Greedy de Pencier Books, 1982), p. 44.

83 Malcolm, p. 16.

84 Katherine Barber, ed., *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 753.

85 Charles Mandel, “Grain Pictures”, *The National Post* [Toronto], May 15, 1999, p. 7.

86 Sandra Cordon, “Prairie Icon Falls to Wrecking Ball”, *Chronicle Journal* [Thunder Bay], April 29, 1996, p. A12.

87 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, p. 26.

88 Trevor Boddy, “The Look of the Prairies: Prairie Architecture”, *Canadian Heritage*, no. 37 (October–November 1982), pp. 26–28.

89 George Sitwell, “Why Did the Grain Elevator Become the Chief Symbol of the Canadian Prairies?”, *The Albertan Geographer*, vol. 16 (1980), pp. 3–11.

Boddy and Sitwell identify the elevator as a “landscape” element prevalent enough throughout the Prairies of Canada to become a part of almost every vista.

Ronald Rees wrote in 1969, “Only the grain elevator really belongs — its height, firm lines and strong colours harmonizing with the bland prairie.... It is a self-assured form, confident of its function. It is also symbolic, as well, for in many of the small communities only the elevators may survive.”<sup>90</sup> Today, history demonstrates the opposite result: once the elevators disappear, the towns usually die. In fact, in Mansel Robinson’s play, *Street Wheat* (2002), one of the characters complains, “That’s me ... trying to figure out how to get home. But the elevator. It was like a sign from God giving me directions. And I always knew where home was. But they knock down most of our elevators and I’m driving blind looking for the towns I used to recognize.”<sup>91</sup>

Not everyone is enamoured of country elevators. Heather Robertson glibly states, “Prairie towns all look alike — identical grain elevators, identical banks....”<sup>92</sup> Herbert wrote, “Architecturally, the country elevator is nothing to inspire delight....”<sup>93</sup> For most observers, however, country elevators represent more than mere buildings; they have associations and meanings. “Something about prairie grain elevators touches our emotions,” writes Ingeborg Boyens. “They are a potent symbol of the social and economic lifeblood of the region.” She continues, “[T]he demolition of an elevator tugs at some memory, some emotion, that lies within each of us, no matter how distant our connection to the land. Perhaps part of our reaction is shock at the ease with which an elevator is flattened.”<sup>94</sup> Memories are tied up with emotions, as Sophi Hicken states in the short introduction to her book of elevator photographs; her photos “can help keep them still standing in our memories.”<sup>95</sup> A few communities have managed to “save” an elevator for historical reasons. These include Dawson Creek, British Columbia; Alberta’s Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village; the Hepburn Wheat Museum in Saskatchewan; and Inglis, Manitoba, whose five elevators constitute the Inglis Grain Elevators National Historic Site, described as “a unique and enduring architectural symbol.”<sup>96</sup>

Elevators are symbols, we are told, for regions, for individual provinces, and for the entire country. For example, the grain elevator is “the most obvi-

90 Ronald Rees, “The Small Towns of Saskatchewan”, *Landscape*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Fall 1969), p. 32.

91 Mansel Robinson, *Street Wheat* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2003), p. 36. Thanks to Jeanie Wills of the University of Saskatchewan for this reference.

92 Heather Robertson, “Prairie Feudalism: Homesteading in the Nineteen-Seventies”, in Henry C. Klassen, ed., *The Canadian West* (Calgary: University of Calgary/ Comprint Publishing Company, 1977), p. 17.

93 Herbert, “Castles of the New World”, p. 243.

94 Ingeborg Boyens, *Another Season’s Promise: Hope and Despair in Canada’s Farm Country* (Toronto: Penguin/Viking, 2001), p. 55.

95 Sophi Hicken, *Still Standing II: The Grain Elevators of Central & Northern Alberta* (Lethbridge: Paramount Printers, 2003), p. 5.

96 Inglis Grain Elevators National Historic Site [website], <[www.ingliselevators.com](http://www.ingliselevators.com)>.

ous and most admired symbol of western Canada".<sup>97</sup> The Honourable J. Michael Forrestall, when speaking in the Senate in 2002 on the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Bill, mentioned "our Western Canadian grain elevators" in his list of "monuments to the Canadian way of life".<sup>98</sup> Sharon Butala writes, "For more than eighty years the wooden grain elevator had been the most telling symbol of the Canadian prairies, partly because it was our only truly indigenous architecture after the sod shack...."<sup>99</sup> Bob Weber maintains it is a provincial symbol: "If Saskatchewan has an icon, a symbol that says prairie to people everywhere, it has to be the grain elevator."<sup>100</sup> Such images are reiterated on a national scale in statements such as the following: "Grain elevators are often said to be the most distinctive architectural feature of Western Canada."<sup>101</sup> "Some authorities say that the prairie elevators are Canada's most distinctive style of architecture. Brightly painted in their owner's colours, the sentinels of the plains tower stiff and silent above towns, villages, and hamlets."<sup>102</sup> In offering remarks about what authorities say, writers further contribute to keeping grain elevators in the public eye and giving them symbolic value.

The idea that the grain elevator is indigenous is firmly ingrained in the Canadian psyche since it is mentioned so frequently. The wooden grain elevator is certainly ubiquitous enough to convince people that it belongs here and that it originated in Canada. Butala states firmly that it is indigenous, but so do others. Robert Enright refers to the country elevator as "this indigenous architectural form".<sup>103</sup> The search for buildings native to Canada can be futile. Tepees, sod huts, and other homes are not indigenous, but people adapt these to the locale. Kalman, for instance, carefully says, "The Plains Indians lived in portable conical shelters called tipis."<sup>104</sup> He does not claim tepees as indigenous to Canada, and describes sod houses as imported.<sup>105</sup> Unfortunately for those claiming indigenous status for the grain elevator, its invention and development are well documented.

Colour is constantly mentioned as a feature of elevators. The original

97 Brock V. Silversides, "Introduction", in Dommasch, *Prairie Giants*, p. 1.

98 Debates of the Senate (*Hansard*), 1<sup>st</sup> session, 37<sup>th</sup> Parliament, Volume 139, Issue 116, May 28, 2002 [online document, retrieved July 10, 2004], <[http://sen.parl.gc.ca/pca/ne/english/SenatorPat/heritage\\_lighthouses/lighthouse\\_protection\\_bills\\_s\\_43\\_forrestall.htm](http://sen.parl.gc.ca/pca/ne/english/SenatorPat/heritage_lighthouses/lighthouse_protection_bills_s_43_forrestall.htm)>.

99 Sharon Butala, "Absences" [introduction], in McLachlan, *Gone but not Forgotten*, p. xv.

100 Bob Weber, *Saskatchewan History Along the Highway* (Red Deer: Red Deer College Press, 1998), p. 89.

101 John Warkentin, "Time and Place in the Western Interior", *Artscanada*, nos. 169–170 (Autumn 1972), p. 33.

102 Andrew Hocking, *Saskatchewan* (Toronto: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1979), p. 62. The elevator is a building type, not a style.

103 Robert Enright, "Barns of Western Canada: An Illustrated History and Prairie Giants" [book review], *Border Crossings*, vol. 6, no. 4 (October 1987), p. 41.

104 Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture*, vol. 1, p. 319.

105 *Ibid.*, pp. 349–350.

country elevators were painted CPR red or railway red, a rusty shade; a few were painted white. Not until 1962 did Pioneer introduce a combination of brilliant orange and yellow to distinguish its country elevators from those belonging to other grain companies. The first to be painted was at Brooksby, Saskatchewan.<sup>106</sup> In 1980 Pioneer's Richardson's terminal elevator at Thunder Bay was painted in the bright company colours, orange and yellow, making the terminal visible from one end of the harbour to the other;<sup>107</sup> It was repainted in 2001, white with dark blue accents.<sup>108</sup> Other country elevator companies, following Pioneer, also painted their elevators, most emphasizing the company's logo on a large scale in company colours. Some elevators remain railway red or white. United Grain Growers' blue and white shield remains distinctive, as does the yellow and red "Pool" on Saskatchewan Pool elevators. Manitoba Pool's circular logo in white and green with golden wheat sheaves differs from Cargill's white, green, and black circle. Alberta Wheat Pool's solid green elevators are distinguished from the white Paterson Elevators with a giant "P" inside a diamond outlined in black. These identifying colour schemes make Prairie elevators visible from a long distance and immediately signal which elevator companies are operating in a particular location. Colours provide identity for Canadian country elevators, a feature that is distinctly Canadian. There are some colourful American country elevators, but they are not painted consistently with company colours.

The country elevators, according to Elizabeth McLachlan, are "monuments to prairie life. Prairie people gave them breath and meaning. People built them, ran them, relied on them, lived in them, and died in them."<sup>109</sup> A recent article in the *Edmonton Journal* enlarged this list by adding the elevators' relevance to railway workers and the merchants of farming supplies.<sup>110</sup> Both types of grain elevators are examples of Canadian architecture because they are so prevalent in the built environment, as noted by Gowans, McMordie, and others. To many individuals and groups, grain elevators as built forms have meaning and evoke emotional responses, as Boddy, Butala, and others remind us. The urge to compare the elevator to obvious architectural structures such as skyscrapers or cathedrals tends to enhance its status. These reactions to the elevator indeed indicate that it is not merely a building, but architecture.

### Federal Symbolism

The third factor in the status of the grain elevator as a symbol of Canada is its use by different departments of the federal government. Operating on behalf

106 D. L. Aiken, "125 Years of Richardsons", *Manitoba Business*, vol. 4, no. 1 (January-February 1982), p. 26.

107 "Elevator Spruced Up", *Chronicle Journal* [Thunder Bay], October 1, 1980, p. 3.

108 Ward Holland, "Out with the Orange at Elevator", *Chronicle Journal* [Thunder Bay], July 12, 2001, p. 1.

109 McLachlan, *Gone but not Forgotten*, p. 6.

110 "Grain Elevators: Vanishing Giants on the Prairies", *Edmonton Journal*, May 27, 2005.

of all Canadian citizens, government agencies select images for postage stamps or money based on the recognition of an image's inherent symbolic value. These values do not have to be explained, but they must be acceptable to the majority of people. The grain elevator has gained status as a national symbol by the appearance of its image on dollar bills, on postage stamps, and at Canada's exhibits at world fairs in Paris and New York. Further recognition of the grain elevator occurred, in a roundabout fashion, under the sponsorship of the National Gallery of Canada. These federal agencies have contributed to the recognition of the grain elevator as a Canadian symbol by bringing the elevator to the attention of even wider audiences of the public.

Every citizen uses money and stamps. From 1954 to 1967, the Canadian dollar bill featured a Prairie view with a grain elevator in the distance.<sup>111</sup> Various Canadian stamps have featured both country and terminal elevators. In 1930, for example, a 20-cent stamp illustrated grain harvesting with three Prairie elevators in the background. The same stamp was reissued in 1933, this time with the inscription, "World's Grain Exhibition and Conference, Regina, 1933". Among a series of stamps depicting war activities issued in 1942, one image showed a Great Lakes ship being loaded with grain at a terminal elevator. In 1967 a 50-cent stamp titled "Summer Stores" displayed Prairie elevators. Postage stamps represent the country that issues them, and the use of grain elevators on Canadian stamps indicates that this image has federal approval as a symbol.

The National Gallery of Canada in 1935 sponsored a cross-country lecture tour for John Vanderpant (1884–1939), a Vancouver photographer. Ostensibly, the tour was to promote photography as an art form, but one of Vanderpant's favourite subjects was grain terminals, and these were the focus of his lectures. His photographs, taken from dramatic angles, exploit the unusual fall of shadows on the silos or box-like workhouses. His abstract compositions are often not immediately recognizable as grain elevators, and their evocative titles such as "Towers in White", "Blackbird", "Shadow Castle", or "Colonnades of Commerce" do not immediately conjure images of industrial buildings.<sup>112</sup> "Architectural Importance of the Grain Elevators in Canada" was the title of Vanderpant's lecture in the Lakehead.<sup>113</sup> Vanderpant called elevators "some of the world's finest art" and "symbols of confidence, strength and stability". To illustrate his lecture, Vanderpant "showed a number of enlarged photographs, all made of elevators and elevator environs, pointing to cylinders and other lines of construction and explaining the rela-

111 J. E. Charlton, *Standard Catalogue of Canadian Coins, Tokens and Paper Money* (Toronto: Charlton International, 1978), p. 214, BC–29 series.

112 Charles C. Hill, *John Vanderpant: Photographs* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976), p. 17, plates 9–12, 20, 37–46; Sheryl Salloum, *Underlying Vibrations: The Photography and Life of John Vanderpant* (Victoria: Horsdal & Schubert, 1995), p. 80, n. 43.

113 "Elevators Topic of Club Address", *Daily Times Journal* [Fort William], September 27, 1935, p. 3; "City Items", *Daily Times Journal* [Fort William], September 25, 1935, p. 3.

tionships among shapes which appealed to the artistic temperament".<sup>114</sup> According to Charles Hill, Vanderpant used elevators to represent "the dynamic commercial spirit of the west".<sup>115</sup>

Walter J. Phillips, painter and printmaker, who reviewed Vanderpant's Winnipeg lecture on the same topic, expressed scepticism about photography as an art form and about Vanderpant's subject matter. He begrudgingly said Vanderpant achieved "interesting patterns": "[I]n many the massive dignity of these despised temples of commerce was plain to the most hardened cynic. The motive in nearly all of them is the play of light on the huge concrete bins — monstrous, engaged columns devoid of ornamentation ... black shadows contrasts with the primitive simplicity and whiteness of these cylinders."<sup>116</sup> Phillips seemed at a loss with this subject matter, and his negative vocabulary is at odds with the general adulation found in the considerable grain elevator literature. Ironically, Phillips depicted country grain elevators in some of his own paintings.<sup>117</sup>

International exhibition buildings are another expression of Canada, intended to represent the nation and its citizens to people in other parts of the world. In 1937 the *Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques appliqués à la vie moderne*, or Paris Exhibition, included a building to "represent" Canada. This was a model terminal grain elevator with six cylindrical silos placed next to an entrance labelled, in oversized letters, "Canada"; it was attached to the British Pavilion and situated beside one of the bases of the Eiffel Tower.<sup>118</sup> The structure resembled a concrete grain elevator.

The Canadian pavilion was designed by Emilio Brunet, a sculptor from Montreal, and by the London office of the Canadian Government Exhibition Commission, Department of Trade and Commerce. This elevator form was supposed to characterize Canada "as the greatest individual exporter of wheat".<sup>119</sup> However, the critics missed this symbolism. During the First World War, Canada had been the empire's breadbasket, but by the mid-thirties the Canadian wheat trade had plummeted. As an anonymous commentator for the *Architectural Record* wrote, "Canada is represented by a dwarfed imitation of grain silos. Here is perhaps the best stone fakery at the Fair."<sup>120</sup> Moreover, inside there were exhibitions on forestry and agriculture, but no emphasis on grain. American architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock summed up his reaction: "The ludicrous Canadian pavilion, a grain ele-

114 "Beauty of Elevators", *News Chronicle* [Port Arthur], September 27, 1935, p. 3.

115 Hill, *John Vanderpant*, p. 17.

116 Walter J. Phillips, "Art and Artists", *Winnipeg Tribune Magazine*, November 23, 1935, p. 8.

117 Roger Boulet, *The Tranquility and the Turbulence: The Life and Works of Walter J. Phillips* (Markham, ON: M. B. Loates, 1981), pp. 128–129, 169, 226.

118 Elspeth Cowell, "The Canadian Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair", *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin*, vol. 19 (March 1994), p. 23.

119 C. A. Bourgeois, "International Exhibition, Paris, 1937", *Canadian Geographical Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2 (August 1937), p. 109.

120 "The 1937 International Exhibition, Paris", *Architectural Record*, vol. 82 (October 1937), p. 82.

vator at miniscule scale, is also no addition to the exposition.”<sup>121</sup> John M. Lyle, a Canadian architect, commented that “an Exhibition building, to be successful, must not be regarded as purely a shell to house exhibits”.<sup>122</sup> Lyle, in fact, agreed in principle with Bauhaus artist Lazlo Moholy-Nagy that exhibition buildings should be designed for “attention-arresting display”.<sup>123</sup> These objections to Canada’s exhibition building as architecture cited its lack of authenticity in use, scale, and construction, judgements again based on Vitruvian criteria.

Despite the negative reactions to the exhibition building by architects, art curators have taken a different view as Sandra Shaul demonstrates in her catalogue *The Modern Image: Cubism and the Realist Tradition*; she remarks, “The Canadian Government accident[al]ly designed a modern pavilion for the Paris World’s Fair of 1937....” Shaul, however, assumes that a “foreign aesthetic” is being explored here, evidently unaware that this aesthetic was derived in part from grain elevators.<sup>124</sup>

The negative criticism of Canada’s contribution to the Paris Exhibition led to a change in approach for Canada’s entry into the 1939 New York World’s Fair. W. F. Williams of British Columbia won the architectural competition with a design that fulfilled the requirements of “modern lines with simplicity of form and surface detail”. Curiously, enormous cylindrical forms, called “huge modernistic cylinders” or “overscaled cylinders”, flanked the main entrance. The resemblance of these shapes to the 1937 pavilion and to a terminal elevator escaped comment. Humphrey Carter complained about the Canadian exhibit and stated: “It is an opportunity to project our national ideals and ambitions into three-dimensional form, that they may be seen and understood.” The Pavilion “has not fulfilled the early promise of the competition drawings ... its façade appears a little solemn and small in scale....”<sup>125</sup> While the elevator references of these exhibition buildings did not find favour with contemporary architects, the fact that these were sanctioned by federal departments as representative of Canada adds credence to recognition of the grain elevator as a Canadian symbol.

### Conclusion

What is it about elevators that has caused so many Canadians to look upon them as symbols? The vocabulary associated with descriptions of grain ele-

121 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., “Paris 1937”, *The Architectural Forum*, vol. 67 (September 1937), p. 168.

122 John M. Lyle, “The Paris Exhibition of 1937”, *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal*, vol. 14 (October 1937), p. 201.

123 Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, “Moholy-Nagy, Picture Hunter, Looks at the Paris Exposition”, *Architectural Record*, vol. 82 (October 1937), p. 92.

124 Sandra Shaul, *The Modern Image: Cubism and the Realist Tradition* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1982), p. 41.

125 Humphrey Carter, “Canada at the Fair”, *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal*, vol. 16 (August 1939), p. 184.

vators is generally positive: high, spare, clean-lined, unassumingly honest, in good taste, modest, and appropriate. Their importance is vaguely referenced by terms such as sentinels or sentinels of agricultural prosperity. A symbol, in addition to being tied to special knowledge, must also generate shared meaning. The special knowledge includes an elevator's use to farmers, to grain handlers, and to the Canadian economy in general. Elevators are landmarks on the Prairies and identify, from a distance, the location of towns. On the water in port towns and cities, they indicate to the public what types of industry provide local work. The rise and fall of elevators has to do with shifting priorities in the grain and grain handling business, but also with changing technologies, particularly with improved machinery that continually speeds up the various grain-handling processes. Elevators form part of Canada's economic and agricultural histories, but also part of this country's architectural and cultural histories. Grain elevators permeate the "collective Canadian consciousness".

The status of the grain elevator as a Canadian symbol stems from a concept that is repeated over and over. Sometimes the elevator is identified as a symbol of economic prosperity or of the richness of agricultural land on the Prairies. It has also been called a symbol without any indication of what is symbolized. As an architectural image, it has been accepted as a building to represent Canada. The remarks of architects and members of the public, combined with the use of the grain elevator by the federal government, certainly fulfil Kubler's criterion of repetition and W. T. Mitchell's assertion that symbols exist because "we say so". In the earlier part of the twentieth century, the grain elevator indicated economic prosperity and recognized the contributions of individual farmers and small towns to the international wheat trade. By the end of the twentieth century, changes in grain handling and in world agriculture and trading practices affected not only the small towns of the Canadian Prairies, but also the port cities.

Elevators are disappearing with unprecedented speed. The emotions and nostalgia grain elevators evoke indicate that, for many Canadians, the image of the grain elevator is connected to special knowledge and a way of life, as well as being part of the social fabric of Canadian life on the Prairies and, to a lesser extent, in port cities. The Canadian grain industry no longer needs all of its elevators; as a result, more and more of them are silent. They remain generic images rather than specific ones. If we apply Visser's comments on symbols, these grain elevators are "making suggestions and connections, pointing in many directions at once". The value of grain elevators "can never be captured entirely". The continuing effort to eulogize the grain elevator provides a glimpse into the ways in which symbols are formed and into an architectural form that has meaning for many Canadians.