

Letter to the Editor

The Celebration of Andrew Randall Cobb

Andrew Randall Cobb, described as “one of Canada’s great architects”, would have preferred if you called him Andy. After years of architectural studies at MIT and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Andy returned to Halifax to be the first formally educated architect to practice in the Maritimes. His career was prolific and his impact on the profession was large. Andrew Cobb was a founding member of the Nova Scotia Association of Architects. In 1940 he became the first Canadian architect east of Montreal to be elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects. Andrew Cobb was also a founding member of the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts, today known as the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

The impact of Andrew Randall Cobb on the planning of Mount Allison was also large, you might say monumental. His first building was the cenotaph to honor the brave students and alumni who lost their lives in the Great War. It was dedicated at the opening in 1927 as ‘MEMORIAL LIBRARY 1914 1918’. His second, third and fourth designs were prepared for the ‘Million Dollar Campaign’ which was launched in January of 1929. A new University Women’s Residence accommodating twenty double and sixty single bedrooms was planned to be located on York Street directly opposite Landsdowne Street. A new building for Biology and Chemistry was proposed for the corner of York and Salem Streets. A new school and laboratory building was designed to be sited just to the southeast of the Men’s Academy on Main Street where the present residence complex is positioned. This fundraising campaign was not successful and these three buildings were never built. Then the University commissioned Andrew Cobb to complete his fifth design, a new Science Building, now known as the Flemington Building, which opened its doors in 1931. It was carefully positioned by Cobb to complete the university quadrangle formed with the Centennial Hall, Old Science Building and the Memorial Library. Cobb used the same palette of materials and forms as he used in the Memorial Library. In March of 1933 disaster hit; three buildings were destroyed by fire, first the Third Mount Allison Academy and two weeks later the Old Science Building and the Centennial Hall on the same night. Cobb was asked to redesign the Centennial Hall on the same foundation, reusing some of the old masonry. Thus Centennial Hall was the sixth and last building to be designed by Andrew Randall Cobb at Mount Allison. But for over 40 years his quadrangle was the academic focus of the university ... and the Memorial Library was its heart.

There was a sweeping expansion of university facilities in the 1960s. Chancellor Ralph Pickard Bell directed his architects Brown, Brisley and Brown to repeat Cobb’s idea of the old academic quadrangle by creating a new quadrangle anchored by the Chapel at one end and the Library at the other. For the last 40 years this new quadrangle has been the heart of academic life on the campus. Today the three buildings constructed by Andrew Randall Cobb still stand proudly. In my opinion they are the most attractive buildings on the campus, adding an undeniable richness to the visual fabric, and a significant part of the reason that Sir Charles G. D. Roberts declared, “It is the most beautiful campus that I know in Canada”.

The contribution of Andrew Randall Cobb to Mount Allison and the Town of Sackville in terms of his planning and the architectural quality of his buildings has been immeasurable. Not only was he a great architect, Andy was an accomplished painter, lover of music and held a special passion for theater. Andrew Cobb certainly merits a page in the teachings of the History of Art at Mount Allison and his buildings deserve official heritage designation. And how perfect it would be if his ‘MEMORIAL LIBRARY 1914 1918’ were to become a component of the proposed new Centre for the Fine and Performing Arts. Andrew Randall Cobb is an architect to be celebrated in the history of Mount Allison.

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