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# AN ARCHITECTURE POLICY FOR CANADA

INTERVIEW WITH Lisa Landrum, with input from Darryl Condon, John Stephenson, Toon Dreessen

**SINCE 2016, A GROUP OF EDUCATORS AND PRACTITIONERS HAVE BEEN DEVELOPING A PROCESS TO ADVANCE A NATIONAL ARCHITECTURE POLICY FOR CANADA. THEY ARE NOW ON-TRACK TO BEGIN COAST-TO-COAST CONSULTATIONS ON THE INITIATIVE—A KEY NEXT STEP TOWARDS CREATING AN OFFICIAL FEDERAL POLICY. CANADIAN ARCHITECT EDITOR ELSA LAM INTERVIEWED LISA LANDRUM, ONE OF THE WORKING GROUP MEMBERS, TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE INITIATIVE.**

## What is a national architecture policy?

A national architecture policy is an aspirational document that shows how well-designed environments enhance social, cultural and economic well-being, and provides guidance to politicians, professionals and the public on how to achieve more sustainable, equitable and engaging communities. A national architecture policy empowers people to pursue positive change and sustainable growth. It informs public debate, influences legislation and inspires citizens to create meaningful and resilient development amid climate change, rapid urbanization, threatened heritage, and other 21st-century challenges.

## When did the initiative to create a national architecture policy for Canada get started?

In October 2016, the Canadian Architectural Licensing Authorities (CALA) formed a working group to develop a process of engaging the public in a national conversation about the value of architecture. The desire to have this conversation grew from a variety of concerns—such as perceived public indifference toward the built environment, increased specialization, and the relatively low rate of incoming registered architects. CALA invited members of the Canadian

Council of University Schools of Architecture (CCUSA) to participate.

In 2017, the conversation of this 10-person working group turned to national architecture policies. We reviewed existing policies of Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and other European countries. We got excited! We recognized how these policies can serve as catalysts in creating a culture of design excellence by enhancing government support for quality architecture and public appreciation for well-designed environments. We realized that mobilizing an architecture policy for Canada would be an engaging and potentially rewarding way to have a public conversation about the value of architecture.

## Who is involved at this point?

This is a joint initiative of CALA, representing the provincial and territorial regulators; CCUSA, representing Canada's 12 university schools of architecture; and the RAIC. With complementary mandates to regulate, educate and advocate, this trio comprises an informed and inspiring voice to effectively move this initiative forward. We are also beginning to involve other participants, including individuals from the RAIC Indigenous Task Force, the Canadian Architecture Students Association, allied design and planning profession-



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als, industry leaders, community activists, and public officials. Soon, everyone will have a chance to become involved through public consultations and a new interactive website to be launched soon.

#### **How is a national architecture policy different from the building codes and regulations that are already in place?**

Whereas a building code stipulates minimum enforceable technical standards, an architecture policy sets forth ambitious goals and calls to action with compelling arguments, images and case studies. An architecture policy considers social and cultural benefits that extend well beyond the footprint of individual buildings. It aims to establish a shared, yet open, vision for what constitutes “quality” in the built environment. This is no easy task. To begin, we have prepared a framework for understanding quality architecture in relation to place, people, prosperity and potential. These four themes are intended to orient conversations about architecture’s manifold significance and impact on things like regional identity and cultural vitality; individual and collective well-being; sustainable urbanism and environmental stewardship; as well as the role of creative research, innovation, education and global partnerships in bolstering architecture’s potential.

**OPPOSITE** The Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, was completed by Alfred Waugh of Formline Architecture in 2018. This project exemplifies Waugh’s synthetic approach to cultural sensitivity and environmental responsibility, and demonstrates the transformative potential of collaboration between federal government, First Nations communities, institutional leadership and architects.

**LEFT** The Canadian Museum of History (formerly Museum of Civilization) in Hull, Quebec, sits across from Ottawa’s Parliament Hill. Douglas Cardinal’s design of this national museum remains an important symbol for contemporary Indigenous design and organic architecture, integrating beauty, balance and harmony. Completed in 1989, the structure was also a forerunner in the profession for using computer-aided design to generate its curvilinear complex forms.

#### **Does Quebec have a provincial policy similar to this already?**

Québec has a roadmap for adopting a policy. In 2018, the Ordre des architectes du Québec (OAQ) published *White Paper for a Quebec Policy on Architecture: Support, Vision, Milestones* ([www.oaq.com/lordre/pqa.html](http://www.oaq.com/lordre/pqa.html)). This document, which results from four years of research and consultations, calls on a range of provincial ministries to form unified strategies that incentivize design excellence and raise awareness of best practices in Quebec. In April of this year, the Minister of Culture and Communications, together with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, announced that they are beginning to work with the OAQ to develop a Québec Architecture Strategy based on the document.

#### **What other countries have architecture policies, and what effects have they had?**

About 30 countries have already adopted or are developing a national architecture policy. In the 1990s, policies proliferated across Scandinavia. Supported by these documents, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands are now each recognized for distinctive design and for fostering resilient cities and healthy, happy citizens. In the last 15 years, at least 18 more European countries, from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Slovenia, have created similar policies.

In some cases, as in the Netherlands, an architecture policy led directly to the creation of new cultural institutions, local architecture centres, and government funding programs for design competitions and research on the built environment. An architecture policy in New South Wales, Australia, led to the creation of guidelines for better heritage protection. The greatest effect is the cultivation of public understanding about architectural value, which ideally leads to better decisions about the built environment.

#### **How would a national architecture policy help Canadian architects in their day-to-day work? How would it benefit the built environment in Canada?**

An architecture policy will not magically make architects’ day-to-day work easier or more lucrative, but it would provide a shared framework to talk to clients, consultants, other stakeholders, and to each other about why design matters. It would help foster a more visionary outlook and a greater sense of collective purpose among everyone who contributes to designing, building and preserving the built environment.

An architecture policy can help create buildings and public spaces that are more culturally vibrant and environmentally responsible. Through calls to action and design principles, a policy would guide decision-makers at all levels of government on long-term investments.



GERRY KOPELOW, COURTESY KPMB ARCHITECTS

**Would a national architecture policy affect procurement—for instance, in compelling public agencies to shift from lowest-bidder procurement towards a quality-based-selection model?**

While the intent of the policy is not directed at procurement, we anticipate an indirect positive effect on these types of issues. The policy would foster understanding about architectural value in ways that go beyond the lowest-bid as the deciding factor.

Procurement processes are intended to ensure that public goods and services are procured in a competitive, open and transparent environment, delivering the best value to taxpayers. An architecture policy will help politicians and the public understand what “best value” in architecture and architectural services entails in a more holistic manner.

**Would this policy help Canadian architects to work abroad?**

An architecture policy would celebrate Canadian design successes, thereby helping Canadian architects position themselves on the world stage. A policy would lead to more international recognition for Canadian architects and greater global appreciation for Canadian design expertise. The policy may include calls to action that prompt governments to incentivize participation of Canadian architects in international design competitions or subsidize Canadian contributions to international venues where design talent is on display, such as the Venice Biennale.

**What are the other benefits of a national architecture policy?**

**What are its potential pitfalls?**

There are social benefits, such as stronger communities that care for their neighborhoods because they are more informed and involved in their design. Other benefits may include bolstering local pride; generating tourism; attracting foreign investment; stimulating economies; advancing research; and inspiring the next generation of designers and thought leaders. One of the most important benefits for Canada is that an architecture policy could assist in developing Indigenous design and planning principles and help to advance calls to action established by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

**LEFT** KPMB Architects’ Manitoba Hydro Place was North America’s first large-scale office tower to achieve LEED Platinum certification. It is the third most energy-efficient large-scale building in the world, with a 77% energy reduction over a typical building of its size. Features include six-storey winter gardens that act as “lungs” to pre-treat air entering the building, and 78-foot indoor waterfalls that regulate humidity levels. The building makes use of solar and wind energies harnessed from Winnipeg’s unusual abundance of sunshine and gusting south winds.

Pitfalls? Architecture, as we know, is political. An architecture policy is inherently political. The initiative will need to be steered in a way that maintains a spirit of listening and openness, aiming always for the public good. Another challenge will entail balancing specificity and generality, and ensuring the policy is not focused only on big city issues. While sustainable urbanism is important, so, too, is the responsible development and dignity of northern and remote communities. Ideally, an architecture policy would be adaptable to Canada’s diverse geographies, climates and cultures. The initiative must also resist being a policy contrived narrowly by and for architects. The built environment is created by diverse multi-disciplinary teams working in collaboration. An architecture policy must be informed by a range of disciplines and stakeholders.

**What is the cost of this undertaking, and who is funding it?**

To date, CALA, CCUSA and RAIC have supported travel and related costs for their working group members, who are from different parts of Canada and volunteering their time, to get together to brainstorm, review existing policies, discuss strategic planning, and draft discussion papers. Upcoming consultation sessions will be aligned with various conferences and events hosted by provincial regulators and the RAIC. We continue to seek other sources of funding to expand the consultation.

**What are the next steps in this initiative? What is the timeline?**

The immediate next step is to start spreading the word and soliciting feedback. Some provincial architectural associations will include the initiative on their agendas for upcoming meetings and conferences. The first session, hosted by SAA, took place in Regina on May 3rd. The AIBC is hosting consultations in May and June. The Ontario Association of Architects has a plenary session and workshop on the policy in its upcoming conference, May 22-24 in Quebec City. The NSAA is hosting a session on May 30th in Halifax. The RAIC festival in Toronto, from October 26-30, includes a plenary session on the project. Beyond this, we anticipate a series of events at some of the university schools of architecture in the 2019-20 academic year.

The steering committee is currently working with consultants to create a website and organize broader public consultations in the year ahead. Input from these consultations will help refine the tone and tenets of a declaration document calling for an architecture policy for Canada. If all goes well, such a declaration will be shared in October 2020. Concurrent steps will also involve identifying local and regional champions to endorse and advocate for the initiative.

We encourage all members of the profession to get involved by participating in local consultations and welcome the involvement of local design advocacy groups. We hope that everyone with a stake in the built environment will seize this opportunity to have a much-needed discussion about the future of architecture in Canada. ▲▲

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