

**communiqué /press release****For immediate release****ERNEST CORMIER AND THE UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL**

**Montreal, 2 May 1990** – The Canadian Centre for Architecture is presenting a major exhibition **Ernest Cormier and the Université de Montréal**, in tribute to one of the most important Canadian architects of the 20th century. This exhibition will be held in the Main Galleries of the CCA from 2 May to 21 October 1990.

Ernest Cormier (1885-1980) was an extraordinary figure of his time. As an architect and engineer personally involved in every aspect of the art and science of architecture he worked at the cutting edge of technology, making powerful buildings based on an innovative vocabulary and syntax of architectural forms. This is the first major exhibition devoted to the work of Ernest Cormier – drawn, in large part, from Cormier's archive which came to the Canadian Centre for Architecture in the six years following Cormier's death in 1980. It focuses on one of Cormier's masterworks – the Université de Montréal, built high on the northwest slope of Mount Royal between 1928 and 1943 – and situates the architect and his work within the context of international thought where European and North American cultural and architectural ideas converged.

Cormier spent the years 1908 - 1918 in Europe, mainly at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. His Beaux-Arts training – not a common practise among Canadians – introduced Cormier to the major changes occurring in technology and architectural ideas in Europe. With this training, his earlier formation as an engineer, and his two years at the British School in Rome, Cormier was consciously preparing himself for practise in the public domain. As architect and man of culture involved in music, literature, painting, sculpture, furniture design and other métiers, he was an active participant in the cultural milieu of Montréal. His close circle of friends included painters, sculptors, writers, and composers. Many of them had been in Paris at the same time as Cormier and when they returned to Montréal during the first years of World War I they brought with them the modernism and sophistication in the arts to which they had been exposed in Europe.

In 1924, Ernest Cormier was awarded the major commission to design the campus and buildings for the Université de Montréal. His designs for the university were the fruit (newly

established) of an exceptional encounter between an institution in search of a public image and a young architect who wanted to rejuvenate architecture in Canada. Cormier's mandate was to provide the intellectual community of French Canada with a "modern" image and in response to this challenge he formulated a design that was an original synthesis of sources virtually unknown in Montréal. The building that resulted was the first instance of institutional architecture in Canada free of historicism, and it served as a catalyst in the debate over architectural modernism in Montréal.

Cormier's earliest work, executed upon his return to Montréal in the 1920's, reveals a tension between advanced technology and traditional modes of architectural expression. The commission to design the Université de Montréal afforded Cormier the opportunity to bring together rationalist structure and the Beaux-Arts principles of building organization and major processional spaces. This exhibition clearly shows the continuing presence of these attitudes in the work of Ernest Cormier Engineer and Architect, and the way in which he worked - from his student projects in Paris and Rome to his earliest buildings in Montréal, and his later major commissions for public buildings in Ottawa, Québec City, and Toronto, as well as his own house in Montréal.

In its complexity and its symbolic import, the Université de Montréal transcends questions of style. It is a work that is at once North American in scale and also profoundly informed by the long tradition of the Beaux-Arts and of the engineer's aesthetic in contemporary French architecture. It also belongs uniquely to French Canada. Ultimately the centuries of French presence in Québec join, through Cormier, a particular moment in history - a rational, scientific vision that transformed architecture in Europe and French Catholic education in Montréal.

The exhibition Ernest Cormier and the Université de Montréal establishes a context for the symposium **Cormier and his time/Cormier et son temps** that will be held at the CCA on September 28th. This symposium, organized by the CCA and the Université de Montréal, will bring scholars and historians together to discuss the intellectual and artist environment of Cormier and his milieu in the 1920's, and their relationship to major issues of art and architecture today.

The CCA is pleased to be presenting this exhibition on a major Quebec architect during the centennial year of l'Ordre des architectes du Québec and while Montreal is host to the 17th Congress of l'Union internationale des architectes.



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