

**communiqué /press release****For immediate release****Architects of the Image: Photography in the Heroic Age of Construction**

From 11 October 1995 to 4 February 1996

In the main galleries

**Montréal, 11 October 1995** – The Canadian Centre for Architecture presents ***Architects of the Image: Photography in the Heroic Age of Construction*** from 11 October 1995 to 4 February in the main galleries. The exhibition gathers some 75 outstanding examples of construction photographs from the early years of the medium to the 1930s. This personal selection of works chosen from the collection of the Canadian Centre for Architecture explores the relationships between camera images and the making of exciting, new, large-scale architectural and engineering structures that stirred public imagination in the first hundred years of photography.

The exhibition is predicated on the notion of the photographer as architect, an analogy that suggests parallels between the process of designing structures and that of constructing photographic images. By capturing a transitory moment and point of view that could never be seen again, the photographer, like the architect, deliberately arranges elements and spaces into an original and permanent construction of his or her own.

***Architects of the Image: Photography in the Heroic Age of Construction*** covers a spectrum of photographic responses to the new scale of building projects. The photographs range from straightforward descriptive records to daring pictorial experiments. Images from the first years of photography include the early 1840s views by William Henry Fox Talbot, a pioneer of photography and the first to use the new medium to depict a major monument in the making, record the Nelson Column in London's Trafalgar Square and the vast iron-and-glass Crystal Palace which was photographed in the 1850s during its re-erection at Sydenham by Philip Henry Delamotte, who readily

recognized the visual potential of transitory stages in the building process. The great building projects of late nineteenth-century Paris – Garnier’s Opéra, Sacré-Coeur, the Tour Eiffel – are captured in film by Louis-Émile Durandelle, who made construction photography a specialty of his practice.

Bridges and railroad viaducts, with their new sense of speed and mobility, provide an opportunity to examine a range of representational strategies for a given construction type over an extended period of time. Notable among these are chromolithographs in the publication *Construction of the Great Victoria Bridge in Canada* (1860), reproducing the work of Montréal’s premier nineteenth-century photographer, William Notman; views of masonry viaducts taken in the 1860s by Charles Clifford, J. Duclos, and Auguste-Hippolyte Collard, three key figures of nineteenth century railroad photography; and structural studies of the Forth Bridge by Evelyn Carey, an assistant engineer on the project who used his privileged access to create a unique body of photographs. Carey’s extraordinary geometric abstractions heighten the tension implicit in the large engineering works by showing partly completed spans as if suspended or in flight. Other works of civil engineering portrayed in construction include German zeppelins, such as the ill-fated *Hindenburg*, and the gigantic Goodyear Airdock in Akron, Ohio. Here, as in other photographs of iron or steel construction, the photographers intimate the finished form inherent in the skeleton.

Popular fascination with high-rise structures is evident in images of archetypal New York skyscrapers such as the Flatiron and Empire State buildings, whose photographers worked within different sensibilities. Particularly revealing are three 1929 renditions of the Chrysler Building, encompassing Gordon Coster’s pictorialism, Ira Martin’s astonishing view from above, and Walker Evans’s rigorously formalized description. The diversity of visual response to the skyscraper can also be observed in works by Alfred Stieglitz, whose approach reflects his view of photography as a means of symbolic expression, Lewis Hine, who drew attention to the skill and courage of steelworkers on the Empire State Building, and Berenice Abbott, for whom the Rockefeller Center’s extensive grids of unsheathed steel girders reduce construction workers to nameless automata. The exhibition concludes with the celebration of technological achievements in the American West where the vast scale of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and the Hoover Dam are echoed by photographers in their own appropriately overscaled images.

In the post-war era other areas of endeavour, most notably the conquest of space, began to vie with building construction for public attention. Meanwhile, new visual media, among them television, began to compete with still photography to chronicle the latest newsworthy undertakings. Some photographers began to view new building in a more cynical or ironic light, and popular excitement about new technologies became mixed with dread. As a result, the idea of great civil and civic constructions offering an index of progress has faded. But the supremely inventive images in this exhibition recapture the sense of promise once represented by new buildings, new techniques, and a new medium with which to record them.

The exhibition is curated by Claude Baillargeon, formerly Curatorial Assistant, Photographs Collection, at the CCA and currently writing a Ph.D. thesis on Durandelle at the University of California, Santa Barbara.