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Communiqué / press release

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Toplight: Roof Transparencies from 1760 to 1960

An exhibition tracing the origins and evolution of skylights through photographs, prints, and books from the CCA Collection on view 23 October 2008 until 15 February 2009

Montréal, 21 October 2008 – The Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) presents the exhibition *Toplight: Roof Transparencies from 1760 to 1960*, on view from 23 October 2008 until 15 February 2009. The exhibition consists entirely of items drawn from the CCA Collection, and presents over 60 rare photographs, drawings, prints, and books that trace the origins of skylights and the aesthetic, technical, and socioeconomic factors that drove the 200-year design development in a range of building types.

Toplight presents the appearance and evolution of skylights in architecture starting from their origins in projects built or drawn towards the end of the 18th century, when this type of fenestration was first explored in Paris's new corn exchange, the Halle au blé, up to James Stirling's History Faculty Building, University of Cambridge (1963-1968). The exhibition is organised around a series of case studies and typologies that explore how the use of skylights served to illuminate the lifestyle of the upper middle class by providing a supposedly natural light from above – proclaimed both neutral and universal. The design and application of skylights are traced over a long period and in a wide range of buildings including railway stations, factories, world's fairs, museums, department stores, private homes and tenements.

Toplight: Roof Transparencies from 1760 to 1960 is curated by Pierre-Édouard Latouche, CCA Assistant Curator, Collection. Latouche has served as in-house curator for various exhibitions, including *Carlo Marchionni and Saint Peter's Sacristy* (2005), *Out of the Box: Price, Rossi, Stirling + Matta-Clark*, (2004), *Herzog & de Meuron: Archeology of the Mind* (2002) and *1973: Sorry, Out of Gas* (2007).

EXHIBITION CONTENT

Toplight: Roof Transparencies from 1760 to 1960 represents a number of specific building types whose evolution reveals how the emerging upper middle class dwelt, shopped, travelled, entertained itself, accumulated wealth and housed the workers it employed.

The Halle au blé, Paris, 1763–1782, was the first large space to be covered with a glazed roof. Previously, urban grain markets, where corn, wheat, oats, barley and rye were traded, were held in huge roofless enclosures so as to avoid rumours of stockpiling, speculation, or price hiking. During the 19th-century it would also serve as the model for a number of 19th-century stock exchanges, probably in an effort to convince small investors of the transparency of the transactions conducted there.

The idea of illuminating **Museum** art collections from above was first conceived at the end of the 17th century, but truly put into practice in the XIXth century. The goal was to replace lateral windows, “whose over brilliant light dazzles and plagues the eyes,” and free up wall space for display. The introduction of this fenestration and the quest for an “ideal” lighting for artworks coincided with the development of art history as a discipline and its preoccupation with more accurate periodization and classification, dual operations conferring value to the work of art. Specific projects featured in the exhibition are, among others, the Grande Galerie at the Louvre, Paris, where skylights were installed in 1856 by the architect Hector Lefuel, and the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany, whose 1904 museum catalogue claimed that the Pergamon altar could be appreciated in its “original light”.

The 19th century **Exhibition Hall** is best embodied by London’s Crystal Palace (1851). Technically innovative for its time, it featured 93,000 m² of glazing and was built on its original site in Hyde Park within six months. Though initially breathtaking, the transparency actually hampered examination of the objects on display, since it created many dazzling reflections that led to the installation of canvas screens, awnings and other shading devices everywhere except beneath the central transept. The question of the incursion of outside elements was not only technical, and related to the glass structure, but also sociological, and concerned with visitor access to the building according to class. Despite the organizers’ inclusive discourse, an insidious system of entrance fees and opening days was established that aimed at avoiding an undue mixing of different social categories.

The **Railway Station** employed skylights to illuminate the platforms without the need for numerous supporting elements, which would impede passenger traffic and prevent the addition of tracks. In addition, the great height of these glazed roofs protected their metal structure from the burning hot, corrosive steam emitted by the locomotives and allowed it to dissipate into the air. The space illuminated by these vast skylights was also one of order and discipline where the science of dividing moving crowds on the basis of class, schedule, destination, were, for the first time, tested on a mass scale. The exhibition includes Berenice Abbott’s 1936 interior views of Pennsylvania Station, New York City.

Continuous bands of glazed roofing began appearing in English **Factories** between 1850 and 1880, directly inspired by the glass roofs of railway stations. During the same period, industrial workshops and sheds were furnished with sawtooth roofs whose glazed elements were generally north facing. The architect Albert Kahn completely revolutionized the field between 1900 and 1940 – opposed to the widespread practice of orienting the glazed faces of sawtooth roofs towards the north, he favoured a more even light coming from the east or west. The exhibition features examples of Kahn’s innovative commissions for the Ford Motor Company, shown through Forster Studio photographs.

In the 19th century **Department Store**, overhead glazing was one among several new sales techniques featured in every type of retail trade. The illumination offered by this type of fenestration probably threw more light on the shopper than on the merchandise, and was in fact augmented by other sources such as gas lamps. Included in the exhibition are drawings and photographs showing the great hall of the Au Bon Marché department store, Paris, France, the Kaisergalerie in Berlin, and the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Mila

Skylights first began appearing in private residences around 1770–1790, installed in aristocratic dwellings in Paris and London to illuminate staircases, drawing rooms, boudoirs and bedrooms. During the 19th century, however, their use narrowed, and glazed roof openings came to be employed exclusively to light those areas where the numerous classifications of the bourgeois home originated, such as the main staircase – which directed internal traffic vertically and horizontally towards rooms with increasingly specific functions, such as the nursery, the billiard room, the smoking room, the small drawing room and the water closet –, or the service staircase, used by the staff.

The high density of New York’s **Working-class Tenement** neighbourhoods in the 1870–1920 period was a problem from both an architectural and a demographic point of view. Many apartment buildings filled their entire lot and possessed few openings other than those on the main façade, and small ventilation shafts and light wells. The addition of glazed roof openings was considered a practical way of improving existing buildings, and in 1905 and 1906 respectively the New York authorities installed 900 and 4,702 skylights over stairwells and in top floor apartments.

When built in the 1960s many considered **James Stirling’s History Faculty Building at the University of Cambridge** an aesthetically aggressive intrusion into the architectural landscape of Cambridge, key preserve of the British establishment. Although modern architecture existed in Cambridge during the 1960s, and several new colleges were built during this period, they generally adopted a conservative modernist approach. This cannot be said of the History Faculty, which remains a brilliant but highly individualistic contribution to university architecture in the United Kingdom. Photographs,



press clippings and a large model showing the top lit library of the faculty, evoke the aesthetic and ideological controversies that plagued this building for two decades.

RELATED PROGRAM

The exhibition will be inaugurated with a Gallery Talk by curator Pierre-Edouard Latouche on 23 October 2008 at 7 pm, followed by a reception in the Shaughnessy House. Admission is free. For additional information visit www.cca.qc.ca

ABOUT THE CCA

The CCA is an international research centre and museum founded in 1979 on the conviction that architecture is a public concern. Based on its extensive collection, the CCA is a leading voice in advancing knowledge, promoting public understanding, and widening thought and debate on the art of architecture, its history, theory, practice, and role in society today.

FUNDING

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SOURCE

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