



**Raffles Institution**  
**2022 Year 6 Preliminary Examination**  
**General Certificate of Education Advanced Level**  
**Higher 1**

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**GENERAL PAPER**

**8807/02**

Paper 2

**29 August 2022**

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**1 hour 30 minutes**

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**READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST**

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

*Tracy Lindeman discusses the attitudes and issues surrounding architecture and design in Canada.*

- 1 When Ottawa unveiled the design of its new central library in 2020, the mayor promised it would be 'more than just a building with books'. The design of the \$192 million edifice, 'connects the facility to Ottawa's rich history and natural beauty', the city elucidated. 'Its shape is reminiscent of the Ottawa River; its stone and wood exterior reflects the adjacent escarpment and surrounding greenspace'. While some members of the public felt the building was magnificent, not everyone was so generous with their praise. CBC's<sup>1</sup> Facebook polls showed that some were indifferent, some were hoping for better, and many others saw the price tag and wondered why the city was bothering at all: 'Giant waste of tax dollars to pacify a very small number of people and mostly just the employees. Times have changed, people!!!'. All of this, dear readers, is why Canadians cannot have nice architecture. 5 10
- 2 But beautiful spaces are critical for the life of a community. Think of the places you love most in your community and consider how they make you feel. What comes to my mind are fond memories of roaming the narrow corridors of Diocletian's Palace, in Croatia; savouring a cup of coffee on the lively piazzas of Rome; experiencing the thrill of fireworks over the Old Port of Montréal. These are spaces built for people. All kinds of people want to use a lovely library, bike through a lush park, visit a poignant outdoor monument, even use the rooftop patio of their condo building. Consider our COVID-19 experience, which has seen people clamouring for communal outdoor spaces where they can be safely together. When all this is over, buildings will again be gathering points. Do we not deserve beauty? 15 20
- 3 Today, barring the newish Halifax and Calgary central libraries (which opened in 2014 and 2018, respectively), one wonders whether the average Canadian could name a building constructed in the past thirty years the country could be proud of. This is not only a matter of aesthetics: for a country that is ostensibly concerned about climate change, we do not do much to push the envelope on environmental design. That is not to say there are no good, sustainable modern buildings in Canada; there are always exceptions to any rule. They certainly are exceptions, though. It is true that the modernist era was incredible for architecture, abroad and in Canada. The movement inspired Montreal's Lego-like Habitat 67 and more discrete gems like Bauhaus master Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's gas station, which in 2020 was repurposed into an intergenerational community centre in Montreal. 25 30
- 4 Since modernism, though, architecture in Canada has taken a real nosedive. One possible explanation is increasing suspicion of government spending, especially if it appears to involve frivolous design. Then came sprawling suburbanisation, the economic recession of the 1980s, the spread of the megamall, and the fast-and-furious office tower and condo boom that cast a shadow of sameness across cities. In many places, officials ceded visions for cities to private developers, which is why you can now find massive condo towers in low-rise neighbourhoods. Sometimes it feels like 'design' has become a dirty word. 35 40

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

- 5 The reason Canadian cities look so *blah* compared to, say, European ones is only partly because ours are much younger. When it comes to architecture—and, truth be told, a lot of things—University of Calgary architecture professor Graham Livesey suspects that Canadians do not want to make a fuss. ‘I don’t think Canadians are any less informed than anybody else in the world. We are fairly educated, we are fairly sophisticated, and we travel’, says Livesey. ‘But,’ he continues, ‘I think Canadians—and it’s not just particular to architecture—are just a bit passive. You could say the same when it comes to the environment. We’re really not doing that much for the most part, and Canadians aren’t really demanding that their politicians do very much either’.

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- 6 There is a lot of truth in Livesey’s estimation, but I suspect our commitment to accepting ‘good enough’ is not merely about a lack of empowerment or abundance of ignorance. Fundamentally, it represents our aversion to risk. The predominant approach to the design and construction of buildings, especially multi-unit residential housing across Canada, has been, ‘why rock the boat when something functional and cheap will suffice?’. Furthermore, in many instances, ‘build cheap’ also means ‘build ugly’—not because good design necessarily costs more but because we have conned ourselves into believing that it does. In reality, good design simply means making more creative choices with the money you have—something that is simply beyond the capabilities of the people with the rubber stamps. In many ways, our devotion to fiscal conservatism has caused us to settle for buildings that do not meet even the most basic standards of environmental sustainability.

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- 7 While Livesey is not so cynical to think that Canadian architecture as a whole is a chore to look at, he sees many newer private-sector buildings suffering from various ailments. Canada’s downtowns are stuffed with cranes piecing together gleaming towers with floor-to-ceiling glass—a design choice that sucks up excessive amounts of electricity in both the summer and winter months. Private developers push for this kind of design because it is relatively easy and inexpensive to construct; it almost always gets approved by cities, and when combined with cheap materials, it is the quickest way to get returns into the pockets of investors. Unfortunately, these motivations come at a cost. In 2014, the CBC reported glass panels falling off the facades of newly built hotel towers in downtown Toronto, including the Shangri-La luxury hotel, where the most basic room goes for a minimum of \$575 a night. In a Toronto high-rise, residents contend with wildly fluctuating water temperatures due to improperly installed valves. Then there is Vancouver’s enduring leaky condo crisis, in which tens of thousands of homes built in the 1980s and 1990s have been flagged for water leaks.

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- 8 Why we accept it is a patently Canadian phenomenon: our national psyche has us much more interested in checking boxes than in taking chances. Our standard process for contracting buildings often gives projects to the lowest bidders, even if a vastly more beautiful design is just a little bit more expensive. The tendency has been to make fairly functional, reasonably inoffensive, generally mediocre buildings. And those buildings then set the standard. Why succeed and produce a jewel when you are in a sea of mediocrity? We have become so devoted to frugality and bureaucracy, and are so readily appeased by basic functionality, that we have lost the fortitude to take and demand risks, even if the outcome could be the most beautiful thing we have ever seen.

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- 9 Can we hope that passive, suspicious, and cheap Canadians will one day believe that good design exists and that it is an expense worthy of our tax dollars? When the city of Calgary got its award-winning central library, it was striking to see how public opinion shifted. For a long time while it was still in the planning and construction stages, people asked, ‘What are you doing building a library? Aren’t libraries dead? And why is it so expensive?’. People shut up after the library opened, in 2018, to global adulation, however. ‘Suddenly’, the discussion was, ‘Wow, that’s really cool. Did you know that was in the New York Times?’.

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