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It's hard to believe now, but in 1954 when the [Ontario Association of Architects](#) opened its new headquarters at 50 Park Rd., it was a bit of a sensation.

No less a personage than the Governor General himself, Vincent Massey, showed up to herald the occasion and declare the new building the coming of age of Canadian architecture. It was another sign of the Great White North's entry into the modern age. The future had arrived, and Ontario's architects were leading the way.

Today, the building rarely gets a second look from passersby. The small glass-and-brick structure is one of countless like it in the city: boxy, orthogonal, generic and even anonymous. The OAA moved out in 1992, but 50 Park remains, occupied, appropriately, by [an architectural firm](#).

Though modernism has always been a hard sell, its emergence as the pre-eminent architectural language of the 20th century was perhaps inevitable. At a time of unprecedented technological progress and change, modernism would lead us into the Brave New World — whether we liked it or not.

Toronto was dragged into the modern age kicking and screaming. The city prefers to stay just a little behind the times, perhaps to avoid the mistakes made by others. Or maybe it's just traditional Toronto timidity, the kind that paralyzes the city to this day.

So when the late, great architect John C. Parkin designed 50 Park in the early '50s, he wasn't creating just an office building; he was making a cultural statement about Toronto and, indeed, Canada. Fresh from Harvard where he studied with Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, Parkin wasn't just a pioneer of modernism in Canada; he was one of its prophets.

Though we may be blasé today, 50 Park is actually a finely wrought essay on the elegance of simplicity. The glass front and the windows that extend along the north façade are early instances of the love of transparency that now characterizes contemporary architecture.

The building itself has been reduced, revealed and pared down to basics. No pitched roof here, no gables, no decoration at all. The issues that matter here are practical — space and light — more than aesthetic.

Fitted carefully into the sloping park-light landscape of lower Rosedale, the former headquarters is well-mannered and respectful of its context. Though the stairwell leading to the main entrance is a bit too steep, the building nestles in its site comfortably.

Sixty years later, the city awash in architectural boxes, the shock of the new has given way to a fear of the future. The enthusiasm for change so evident in 50 Park is a thing of the past.

As practised today, modernism — neo-modernism — has dropped the messianic overtones. Architects are less prone to the temptations of social engineering. They design to meet human need, not change it.

The renovations made by the current occupants, DTAH Architects, enhance that aspect of the building. Inside it feels surprisingly large, airy and connected to the city.

Though there's general agreement the 1950s, '60s and '70s were bad for architecture, not to mention cities, this groundbreaking structure (and several others in Toronto including, most notably, Mies Van Der Rohe's [Toronto-Dominion Centre](#)), remind us that before its fall into mediocrity, modernism was, if not decorative, preoccupied with material quality.

Parkin, who went on to design landmarks such as the original Terminal 1 at Pearson airport (now demolished), an addition to the Art Gallery of Ontario and many other projects, was widely recognized as one of Canada's most important architects. Though much of his legacy has been demolished, his influence can still be felt.



This small glass-and-brick structure helped usher Toronto, and Canada, into the modern age.