

# HAROLD SPENCE-SALES

1907 - 2004

## POET OF SPACE AND PLACE

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The recent death of Harold Spence-Sales at the age of 96 provides a fitting opportunity to reflect upon the scope of his planning legacy. He is well known for having founded the first university planning program in Canada, at McGill in 1947. As a person, he is fondly remembered for his mordant wit, his amazing command of the English language, and his extraordinary ability to persuade bankers, functionaries, politicians and developers of his visions for a better urban Canada.

Born in India, educated in architecture in New Zealand and planning at the Architectural Association in London, Spence-Sales arrived in Canada in 1946. The country was in the throes of post-war recovery. Housing shortages were critical, cities having suffered both the penuries of the great depression and the rigours of the war. Returning military personnel were marrying and starting families; it was the beginning of the baby boom.

It was common in those days that faculty of professional departments practiced their trade, and Harold was no exception. At McGill, in addition to teaching at the School of Architecture and setting up the planning program, he plunged into practice. His experience in Britain during the war, first in the siting, design and building of munitions factories, and later on, in the reconstruction of bomb-damaged cities and the rewriting of building and land-use regulations, stood him in good stead. He was a swift worker and was used to the ways of bureaucracies.

He rapidly became a moving force. While not alone in seeing the trends that would necessitate the expansion of cities, he quickly realized that planning

legislation for the provinces, planning offices for the cities, and mortgages for buyers were essential ingredients for a better Canada.

He wrote the first compendium of Planning Law, for CMHC, published in 1949. He organized planning departments for the cities of Edmonton and Vancouver, revised the Planning Act of Alberta, and later, that of Newfoundland. He was active with the CPAC, wrote a book on “How to subdivide,” an unknown but necessary skill at the time, and another one on “Beautifying Towns.”

He worked on plans for a whole host of cities, sometimes jointly with John Bland, his old classmate at the AA, and by this time Director of McGill’s School of Architecture. These included Edmonton (1948), Vancouver (1949), Sudbury (1950), Corner Brook (1951), Prince Albert (1952), Fredericton (1956), Sept Iles (1957), Moncton (1959), Beaconsfield (1959), Sydney (1960), and Montreal (1960). He designed two new towns, Préville, a suburb on Montreal’s South Shore, and Oromocto, for the Canadian Army in New Brunswick. He was the site planner for Nervi’s Place Victoria and for Cote des Neiges Plaza. He won prizes for the design of Ste-Thérèse-en-Haut.

His trade-mark in all these ventures was his delight in fitting urban development to landscape. His study of landforms, topography, drainage patterns and vegetation shaped his work, and in turn, that of his students, long before ecological planning became popular canon.

Spence-Sales left McGill in 1970 to continue his practice from Victoria, and later, Vancouver. Here his work was mostly the conception of residential projects, and examples are to be found in almost all the prairie towns, in and around Vancouver and Victoria, and at Glenn Abbey, Oakville, Ontario. “Nesting” was Harold’s word to describe the needs of young families and he insisted that all efforts should be made to build real community in the suburbs, so that fledglings might prosper.

In the prairies he introduced the idea of ornamental storm-water ponds to save on heavy engineering costs and to recharge aquifers, used for example to such good effect in Castle Down, Edmonton. Not only did he aim for functional environmental planning, he also sought out the aesthetic linkages that could be moulded to shape legible townscapes.

Spence-Sales raised analytical mapping to an art form. An exhibition of his work done for the GVRD in 1980 evoked the beauty of the landscape through

hand-drawn tinted maps derived from the standard topographic series. His sensitivity to shape, form, colour and texture permeated all his work.

He also pioneered the conversion of old industrial buildings for living and studio space. His first residence in Vancouver was one such building, ironically expropriated for building the skytrain route. His second, the old Purdy chocolate factory, a dull box covering almost all the lot, was converted by cutting an atrium into it and building a belvedere on the roof, along with gardens everywhere. Seeing these buildings makes it hard to believe that concepts such as recycling, live/work, and green roofs have taken so long to be recognized as sound practice.

During the later period of his life, Spence-Sales spent more and more time on art, often in collaboration with his wife, the renowned glass artist Mary Filer. Together they fashioned many installation pieces, Mary laminating multi-hued glass in architectural forms, and Harold providing backdrop detail, often evoking landscape.

A letter of recommendation for Harold Spence-Sales on file at McGill, dated 1941, describes him as “a spirited young man. He is an excellent draughtsman and colourist. He has a broad outlook and an attractive manner.” A candidate who more than fulfilled his promise: he left his imprint from coast to coast.