

FIVE HOUSES IN WINNIPEG

by Jill Bambury and Larry Richards

One of the clear successes of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada's 1982 Assembly held in Winnipeg, Manitoba was the May 31st program of Charette Workshops. Following the theme of the RAIC Assembly, "Born Again Buildings", five teams made up of architects, architectural students, and local developers focused on the formulation of ideas for preserving and rejuvenating the fabric of Winnipeg's historic "warehouse district" - an area just north of the intersection of Portage and Main Streets which contains a surprising number of architectural gems from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (warehouses as well as constitutional and commercial buildings).

Although riddled with windswept lots, edged by a neglected river bank, and anchored by what must be Canada's worst example of "mole city",¹ the district clearly has the potential to be transformed into a vital, urban neighbourhood. But it became obvious to the charette teams working under the leadership of Vancouver's Randle Iredale and Montreal's Peter Rose that the district lacks the key ingredients needed to create a convincing urban quarter: about 5000 people. And that means housing for 5000 people.

Accepting this need for housing, we became convinced that although the RAIC Charette Workshop participants could (and did) churn out provocative magic-marker-on-yellow-trace drawings of urban schemes for a happy future, something more could be done in the six-hour charette period set aside by the organizers to prove that "The dynamics of the urban context as expressed in the scope of the Assembly's Theme is best realized in some form of active participation."²

So as real May 31st action for ourselves and as a symbol of the need for people of Winnipeg to act - to participate in the rebirth of their marvelous downtown buildings - we built in a period of two hours, five "houses" in the historic district. Each of the five (constructed from materials found on the individual sites) represented a type of housing which we believed to be appropriate for the district (see box inset).

Beyond the immediate needs and possibilities of providing housing in downtown Winnipeg, these five constructions represent two more general concerns: 1) the importance of doing more with less during a period of general scarcity and hard times, and 2) the importance of being committed to architectural ideals, to architectural

participation, and to action.

The FIVE HOUSES IN WINNIPEG were built quickly from fragments from the place. They have no doubt already returned to various fragmentary states. But for us, for others who participated in and reviewed the Charette Workshops and, maybe, for those citizens of Winnipeg who came across the little houses on their daily journeys, memories remain of the mysterious, symbolic housing which seems so necessary for the birth of what could be one of Canada's new and great neighbourhoods.

Notes

1. The underground shopping concourse at the intersection of Portage and Main is boring and unnecessary; but the real horror show is at grade/street level where fixed concrete barricades prevent pedestrians from crossing the streets; i.e. everyone is forced underground.

2. 1982 RAIC Assembly Registration Information, page 3.

Jill Bambury received a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the Technical University of Nova Scotia in 1982. Larry Richards was appointed Director of the School of Architecture at the University of Waterloo in 1982.

TYPE OF HOUSING

Low-rise, enfronting park and forming edge along Red River

Tower, forming gate-way to park along Red River

Infill, reinforcing existing system of streets.

Rehabilitation and conversion existing buildings.

Houseboats, along edge of Red River.

LOCATION

Along path in grassy field overlooking Red River

At the foot of McDermott Avenue.

In parkette on McDermott Avenue, east of Main Street.

In vestibule of No. 141 Bannatyne Avenue.

In Red River at foot of McDermott Avenue.

MATERIALS

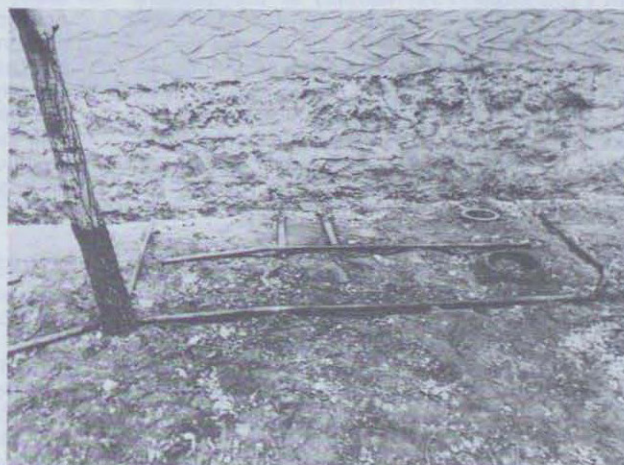
Three wooden crates; red cotton drapes.

Existing wooden post; long twigs; leather jacket; plastic frisbee; red cotton flags.

Four steel pipes; two air filters; steel transformer box; red cotton square.

Two bricks; one triangular piece of concrete; red bunting.

Styrofoam fragments; twigs; steel rod; clear plastic; red cotton awning.



and the fifth one floated away...