

PINSKY SPEAKS

Notes: This article starts out talking about last year's 5th and 6th year crits but gets universal later.

Around the end of April, 1971, much too late, something happened in school called "final crits". For those of you who missed this event - most of 3rd and 4th years, a lot of 5th and 6th years and UI students - a brief explanation is in order.

Final Crit: This is what happens at the end of the School Year after you've worked your ass off competing with your classmates cause you think that's a good thing to do (it's better to compete with your ass and learn from your classmates). In 1971 traditionally, the 6th year students worked on "thesis" projects, i.e. oversized one-man designs, and presented these at the end of the year. In 1969/70, these became group efforts and in 1972/73 5th and 6th years combined (luckily - ah-ha!). Also traditionally, this was the school's finest hour as its senior students presented their best work to a distinguished audience of staff, guest critics, and fellow lackeys.

TRADITION IS DEAD.

Of course! We tried hard enough to kill it. But the new phoenix has not yet risen. Last year's final crits were terrible because:

1. They were held so late that 3rd and 4th years could not attend because they were writing exams and most of the 5th year people missed the last of the crits for the same reason.

2. No one knew when or where crits were being held because an up to date schedule was not posted.

3. Hardly anyone knew why crits were being held and what they were about - let me explain. Many of the presentations concerned work which had developed over the entire year. This work was discussed at least twice during the year, as it was prepared, at formal crits which almost no one attended. The students did not, of course, present this development work over again - so people attending only the final crit had little clue as to what was going on. This was especially true for people in 3rd and 4th year who were safely hidden away during the year. Note that this same reasoning applies for many half year projects.

WHO'S TO BLAME?

The students of course. Why? Because we all knew how fucked up the system was last year and just rode along with it. The staff is never going to do anything unless they get pushed so you can't blame them - you can only get rid of them or push. So here it is:

THE ULTIMATE SOLUTION

Step 1: The year starts off differently in September. Two or three or more days are set aside for the staff to explain their proposed studio projects. Anyone who accepts a project at face value and who does not ask any questions does not pass go, does not collect \$200 and sits out the year. Attendance is **COMPULSORY**, so you will at least know what the project started out to be in September when you attend the first discussions (the word *crit* is henceforth banned; use a *discussion* substitute) at the end of October. Ideally, all staff from UI to UA (6th year) will do this at the same time before the whole school. Moreover, any prof. who is not ready or has nothing to say should also not pass go not collect \$200, and be retired. (I *dislike* note how that I'm out of school).

Step 2: A party is held after these sessions so that everyone can get friendly again. People with choices pick their studios and everyone gets to work.

Step 3: Communicate! People in different years and studios must wander around and talk to each other. An A.U.S. lounge with student exhibitions, night-time seminars given by students, and using the same building would all help. So would Architecture Week - I think the next one should be used to discuss "Architecture". Invite Louis Kahn up for a few days - it'll be worth the expense (and maybe I can get to rap with him too - underlying selfish motive.) It's up to you - DO IT!

Step 4: Intermediate Discussions must be held to keep people informed of what's happening and to make sure we see the staff sometime. Procedure could be as for Step 5 or more informal but in either case an up-to-date accurate schedule should be kept.

Step 5: Final Discussions. (This section is mainly procedural).
A. For one week in the beginning of April, **NOTHING** is done except the presentation of student work and discussion of that work by students, staff, and guests.
IMPORTANT: The whole school, every year presents at this time. They do it at U. of T. so you should be able to do it here.
(note: Mrs. Wilde must be forced to juggle the exam schedule. She's tough but it can be done)

B. A problem: how do you get everyone to stop their work at the same time?
Answer: **Firstly**, everyone is now co-operating and communicating and are interested in seeing everyone else's work. **Secondly**, two lotteries are held on the first day of the final discussions. The first lottery chooses which year starts and the second chooses the order in that year. After the first year or studio is drawn, the second is chosen and so on.
(note: Do not choose the complete order of presentation at once or some of the sheetheads at the end will just suck off - not everyone is a revolutionary.)

C. Notes: Beer, coffee, wine, cheese, doughnuts, etc... should be available - it makes the whole thing more fun and minimizes traffic flow. Also, you need a bigger room than A9.

By now, some of you, may be asking - why bother? Well if you're in UI you're excused, otherwise wake up! Here's why:

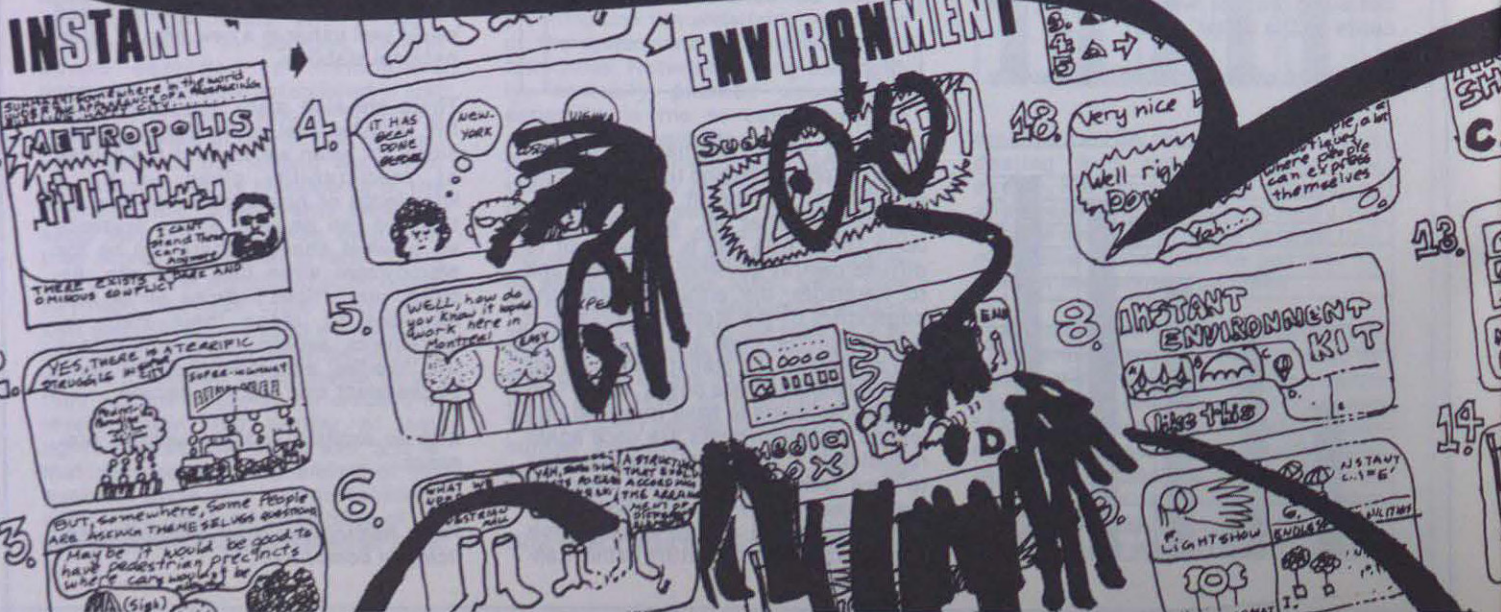
1. You're going to learn a lot more and probably enjoy it. You'll start to talk to a lot more people and be forced to think about what you're doing.

2. A dead School of Architecture will come alive. Nothing will be done by rote - everything will be questioned and maybe even answered but that's tougher.

3. Professors will no longer be able to hide (like in the 3rd year studio or the top of the old Chem. Building) away from the questioning of other profs. and students. Everything will be up front. (See "The Electric Cool-Aid Acid Test" about being up front).

4. Look around you - at the cities, at the shit that architects build, the grey sky above, and butcher everywhere - well, that's what happens when people don't ask questions and aren't honest and open. We are going to do better than that - we have no choice.

That's why. Peace.



Note:

The late sixties and early seventies are generally seen as times of great political awareness of students.

Strikes, marches, sit-ins were common and the cry "don't trust anybody over thirty" was a period slogan.

The fact that in 1983 it is difficult to find a student willing to sit on the Senate while whole universities were closed down by strikes to acquire that very right describes the change of mood concisely.

Since I was a student at McGill in those heady days, I suggested that we invite a very active student of that era to write down his current views on "Politics and Architecture". My good friend Barry Pinsky fits the bill. Through the good offices of Maureen Anderson we also print a copy of an article by Barry in the 1971 AUS handbook.

Pieter Sijpkes

Dear Pieter:

I was pleased to hear from you and to have this opportunity to write on a theme so important to me, one which I was beginning to think had very little currency in the architectural thinking of the Eighties. With so little time between your call and my leaving again for Mozambique, I have abandoned all possibilities for a scholarly treatise but hope that this rambling, personal account will still do the topic justice.

In its most essential, politics is a process of questions and choices. It starts with simple questions: Who pays for and who benefits from the work I am doing? How much control do people really have over the decisions that affect them?

I started asking these questions in the Sixties, apparently a more affluent time and certainly a more heady and militant era than today. Looking back at the AUS Handbook and my first attempts at

social commentary, there are the views of a concerned and, I think, not too immature student questioning the design and content of courses and procedures. Can professors really be as knowledgeable as they sometimes pretend, especially in such a fluid and often subjective field such as our own? Why couldn't there be student input into administrative matters - darkroom hours, choosing a new director? Why did the Dean of Engineering keep political files on myself and other students? Lots of hot stuff in those days and we organized McGill's first ever student strike. It lasted four days and at the end of it, a student-faculty advisory committee was struck. I think it resulted in some constructive discussion but never really overcame faculty intrigues and mistrust of student intentions. The School was not ready for too much democracy.

This questioning quickly extended to the University. At that time the Board of Governors had no student, women, or minority members. Who did it really represent? Why was a group of elite Anglo businessmen making decisions about our education, when in fact the people of Quebec paid eighty percent of the bills and students paid most of the rest? Unfortunately, my fellow students gave me a chance to become even more frustrated over these issues by electing me to the Students Council. At the same time, my neighbourhood, Milton-Park, was under attack by the La Cité developers and the War Measures Act troops were breaking into the house every few days just in case Mr. Cross was in the basement.

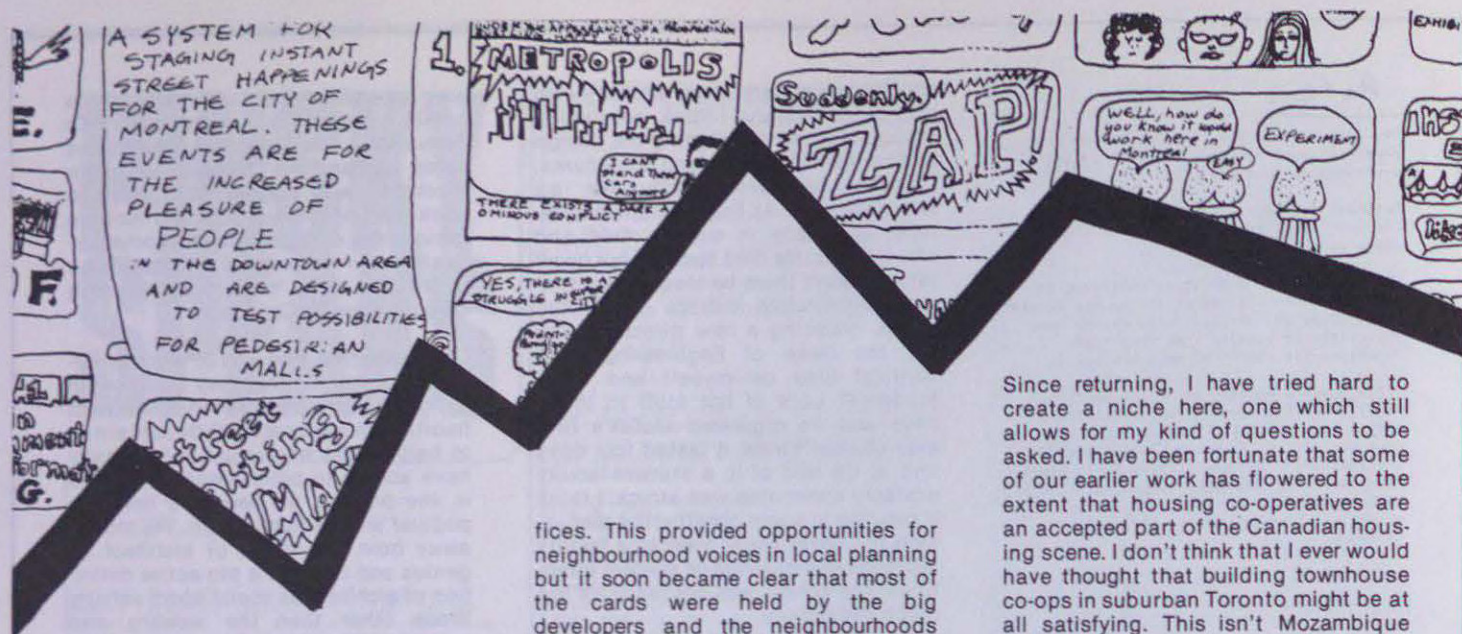
The next logical step seemed to be less talk in the comfortable university climate and more direct action trying to use some of the skills which I had been lucky enough to acquire. (How often do

we remember that university is a privilege enjoyed by a small minority?) Fortunately, Joe Baker was thinking the same way and the Community Design Workshop was created. We began to work with neighbourhood and tenants groups, day care centres and community clinics. In the process we started one of the first three 'modern-era' housing co-operatives in Canada.

Our motivating idea was to work directly with people so that they could begin to make decisions about their own habitat. We were particularly concerned to help people who would not normally have access to professional skills and in the process we began to define a popular architectural idiom. We moved away from the notion of architect as genius and towards a pro-active definition of architect as social agent serving those other than the wealthy and powerful. We found American friends doing similar things and for a while storefront architecture was at least a minor rage.

The new role we were playing not only involved the nitty-gritty of renovating hundred year old slums, it also meant kitchen and community meetings, demonstrating for welfare rights, and building our own version of Berkeley's People's Park in Montreal's Pointe St. Charles. Taking the idea of direct action to one of its limits, and much to our retrospective credit, I think, three McGill architects were arrested defending Milton-Park along with fifty-five other residents. Not incidentally, we were also fighting the architects who work for block-busting developers - 'someone has to design it and we are going to do the best job possible'. Cité Concordia was the result! (Much to his credit, Ray Affleck gave up the job.) I still don't talk to some of the others and they will never work on one of our new





co-ops.

At this point, my own career became somewhat checkered, moving along from grant to grant, sometimes sustained thanks only to Unemployment Insurance. I defined myself as an activist who happened to be an architect and continued to work on co-ops, seniors housing, playgrounds and other community projects all leading up to a serious case of 'burn-out'. Ready for a new place and some new thoughts, I enrolled in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Toronto.

Once there, it seemed that I picked up where I had left off at McGill. Could it have been that the transformation was permanent? I was turned down for a job teaching design because I was "too radical". Was that because I didn't think design was entirely a mystical, philosophical and intellectual process? Instead, I was still looking for ways to involve the too often victims of design. Perhaps it was because I was a little too noisy about the absence of a student voice in choosing a new Dean - some things never change!

In any case, I at least added a new set of questions to my repertoire. These concerned appropriate sizes and types of organizations for human development and social change balanced with a new concern of the natural environment. Visions of a decentralized, rural/urban society danced in my head although not without many questions about how to get there.

Turning outward once again, I did some volunteer work with an east end Toronto community group trying to develop a recreation centre and I became excited by the potentials of neighbourhood planning. Almost unbelievable, at least to a Montreal lad, the City actually hired planners to work in neighbourhood of-

fices. This provided opportunities for neighbourhood voices in local planning but it soon became clear that most of the cards were held by the big developers and the neighbourhoods were most often being saved for those who could afford them. The architecturally pleasing effects of 'gentrification' were only a slightly less insidious form of slum removal - removing the people instead of the buildings. The same old questions popped up - who benefits and who pays? Still, compared to Montreal, the temperature level of debate at City Council was hot and a lot of housing, including many non-profit co-ops, have been built downtown.

In 1976, with my Master's degree almost in hand, I went to the biggest human settlements show in the world - the UN Habitat Conference. Lo and behold, there were a whole lot more people asking questions about their work as architects and planners, only the context had been changed. The slums were in Asia or Africa, physical problems were that much more acute and the vast majority of people seemed to have very little to say about their own environments, indeed, their own futures. Of course, the logical happened and soon I was off to the People's Republic of Mozambique. (Doesn't that have an odd ring to the North American ear?) Mozambique is a country which, having suffered mightily at the hands of Portuguese colonialism, gained its independence only in 1975. With few skilled people and a massive unprovoked exodus by the settlers, there were only twelve architects in the National Housing Directorate when I arrived and most of those were expatriates. Having decided on a strategy of pilot projects to develop housing, I soon found myself working with community groups to improve basic living conditions in a huge shantytown around the capital, Maputo. There was no room left for the grandiose architectural fantasies of the colonial architects; people needed roads, water, electricity and better latrines. In a way, I was at home for the first time. I wasn't working on the fringe, our work set the guidelines for national policy.

Since returning, I have tried hard to create a niche here, one which still allows for my kind of questions to be asked. I have been fortunate that some of our earlier work has flowered to the extent that housing co-operatives are an accepted part of the Canadian housing scene. I don't think that I ever would have thought that building townhouse co-ops in suburban Toronto might be at all satisfying. This isn't Mozambique and our movement is a small one, but we do work closely with people and empower them to control at least one part of their lives - their housing. At the same time, I am about to join the board of a community centre in my own neighbourhood and I stay active in activities related to both city politics and more recently to Third World solidarity.

I started out by suggesting that politics is a simple thing - asking questions. It quickly becomes more difficult if you don't like the answers and try to do something about them. It may be especially hard for an architect to combine politics and her or his profession. It means helping to create a new system of self-valuing. Shantytowns and suburban housing co-ops do not look great in the glossy mags and the clients often don't have too much to pay. The real satisfaction is in knowing you are part of creating a new world based on new values of individual worth and community participation.

Another satisfaction is knowing that you are not alone. Lots of us late Sixties types still seem to be at it. Jai Sen works in the shanties of Calcutta and Richard Beardmore has been building co-ops in Lesotho. Cassie Gottlieb has been helping to save neighbourhoods in Baltimore, Herb Stovel is trying to preserve Ontario's architectural heritage, and of course Joe Baker never ceases his activities. I hope that we are not all dinosaurs, relics of a lost era. There is too much to be done, the questions are getting bigger. How big a pile of dust will all our architectural masterpieces make when hit by twenty megaton bombs?

Pieter, I hope this is what you were looking for. Thanks again for the opportunity.

Best Regards,

Barry