

REORDERING THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AT TORONTO

by Philip Beesley

The only function of order, this side of Evil, is to make chaos livable.

— Peter Prangnell, quoting
Aldo Van Eyck

One yearns for a free world, for a generous human nature. A generosity of trust attracted me to the School of Architecture at Toronto. The absence of grades trusted in self motivation. The parity of students and staff in the making of decisions trusted in responsibility. The belief was that design was an integrative process allowed theory and technique to be brought together with the design studio to form comprehensive projects, running throughout the year. The connections drawn between things would be proven — my design work would show my understanding. Becoming a stranger to one's self, a stance to aid to the discovery of quality in things, would be encouraged by the equal respect of innocence and experience. My opportunity was to understand both Robert Venturi and the summer camp experience of my thirteenth year.

If intelligence, vitality, responsibility, and initiative were available in each person, then a working community of people was also available. A model of the world wished for... Newcomers to the school would join with those ready to leave, each to learn from the other.

Such a level of trust, of generosity in our relationships was guided by the structure of the school. Peter Prangnell, founder of the program, designed a curriculum to act as a fertile arena, inviting discovery and sharing. Like the parallel 'friendly object' he advanced, where material things would act as our 'peers', rather than as servants or masters, the structure was active. Hot titles were used for the core design problems: 'camp' and 'motel' were replaced by 'summerplace' and 'oasis'. Poetry in design was anticipated by the curriculum. Issues of arrival and orientation had a mandate: 'welcoming a stranger', 'being There'.

The stance of a peer is a finely balanced one. A peer participates, adapts, provokes, accommodates... a peer will play with us if we are willing. Enthusiasm has waned for Prangnell's curriculum. It is commonly perceived now as either too nebulous, with freedom becoming vacuous, or too dominant, its behaviour-centred study interfering with other interests — a master or a servant, no longer a peer. Fewer students want to play.

The school will change this year, relinquishing its informal stance to a traditional university structure: technical courses, grades, and quiet design projects titled 'camp' and 'motel'. It might be said, however, that the cooling of the school curriculum sets up a greater trust than before. Trust in the ability to connect things makes unnecessary an integrated core. Instead, a generosity of undigested information sources is offered, to be taken by choice. Development, integration, is for the student, not the structure. Likewise, judgements of teachers will be made tangible by grades: the ability

of students to use these judgements is trusted. Moreover, a deliberate ordinariness of design themes allows poetry to be discovered rather than preconceived. An original design, whether a summerplace or a cemetery of monuments, will no doubt have no more energy than a mandated one.

Like a symmetrical table setting, which springs to life when one starts passing pepper and salt, the new formality of the school's curriculum is workable. It is clear, though, that such an order falls short of the 'peer' stance that Prangnell has hoped for in the things to be built. If a system is rigid, I will complete it by using its limits as a frame for my free activity. But a pecking order comes of this, of humans, the lyric ones, dependent on walls and machines to do the dirty work of making limits. I don't want, as a human, to be only a poet, and I don't want the objects around me to be only mechanical. Mechanical rituals are as viable in me as lyricism — the same is true for any built thing. A cue might be taken from Le Corbusier's use of rigid structure together with free plans in building... the variety of the building allows me to find pleasure in uniforms and bowing, against a wavy wall, no less than dancing erratically through a column grid.

The new formality of the architecture school at Toronto will prompt many more romantic designs, seeking in improvised forms what rigid courses lack. Formalism, as a style, currently energized by the *ad hoc* curriculum, may very well wane. What will be less available, as a cue for design work, is the example of a school structure that wished to make participants independent, by virtue of its own integrity. Prangnell's vision was hardly realized at Toronto, and my regret is deepened by the new changes at the school.

Philip Beesley is a student in the Faculty of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University of Toronto.

Editor's Note

THE FIFTH COLUMN is a forum for many points of view. It is by now well known that in the past few months there has been a great deal of discussion at the School of Architecture (Faculty of Architecture and Landscape Architecture) at the University of Toronto. There are almost as many opinions as there are students, and in this issue we are printing three of these as an indication of just how varied, and with what conviction, students involved in the program are presenting their points of view. Out of just this sort of respectful dialectic many hope for the most challenging atmosphere for the learning of architecture.

— Kathy Dolgy