

Letters

Under the banner of 'Western Canadian Approaches' *THE FIFTH COLUMN* Summer 1983, pp. 26-28, Roger Kemble has created a confused and flaccid argument for a personal methodology. He mixes politics, history, sociology, behavioural psychology and organic visions of natural determinism – all drawn from the mythology of recent Modernism – with architecture and urban design. It is this last subject we wish to address, especially since it is now his consuming interest.

Mr. Kemble states that 'the essence of urban architecture is public space' and 'the essence of urban space is the manner in which it is enclosed'. The project which he then uses to illustrate his concerns, the Kingsway project, reveals instead much in common with other recent modernist work in Canada in its egocentricity and its failure to make a public space. It refuses to use its building mass to define the street edge and devotes its most important street frontage, Kingsway, to parking. The secondary street which also borders the project, is treated to incidental relationships with townhouse fronts and a large landscaped area. The drawing itself indicates no concern for the making of public space; not even a line indicates the other side of the two streets, much less the context of buildings along those edges. There is not a single section or perspective drawing showing the containment of public space; surely what is not drawn is not of concern to the architect.

Mr. Kemble appears to have at least a superficial enjoyment of Georgian architecture but to have missed the essential characteristics which give it its power; the relationships between the building typology and the morphology of the public spaces. The proportions of the great squares, the composition of the garden crescents and the street sections were all the concerns of the public-minded architect. Thus it is the exterior form and detail of the facades which define these public spaces and which makes them appealing to this day. In the Kingsway project, the terrace fronts mimic the curved form of a crescent but do not make a public space, which in this case is subverted to the family's biological need for sun in the garden. Perhaps Mr. Kemble could study a local example of modern-day Georgian terrace housing, the False Creek Townhouse project designed by Peter Cardew when he was with Rhone + Iredale, which provides both an edge to the public space and sunshine for the back garden in admirable fashion.

Mr. Kemble's attempt to provide a lesson in political history as justification for his selection of form further confuses the issue. He states that the terrace house typology is essentially democratic; one wonders what there is more inherently democratic about the type than the hotel or apartment type which forms much of the fabric of Paris. Furthermore, he seems unaware that the *Royal Mile* is thus named because it was commissioned by the King and that it was London's attempt to outdo or at least measure up to the *Rue de Rivoli* in Paris. And finally, these are *palace* facades, behind which exist many doors to many houses, all subordinate to the bourgeoisie's desire to evoke the lifestyle of the aristocracy. Demo-

cratic? Hardly.

For in the practice of architecture in Vancouver there are rare possibilities: because it is located in a superb natural backdrop, the potential exists for an extremely powerful dialectic between that setting and the urban form. In its current state, however, Vancouver can at best be described as *suburban* and it will remain that way as long as architecture like Roger Kemble's Kingsway project is exemplary of Western Canadian Approaches.

Pauline Fowler
Leo DeSorcy

Intellectual jousting has always frightened the life out of me. Yet as an architect with pretensions to write and to be an artist, I must be prepared to take rampant criticism no matter from what direction.

Nevertheless the voids in my knowledge and education stand gaping. All I can say is that only through passionate dialogue may I learn. Heaven knows I've given enough criticism myself, why should I be shy in taking it. I am of course referring to the letter of November 14, 1983 from Pauline Fowler and Leo DeSorcy.

I am pleased that these two western letter writers share with me an admiration for Peter Cardew's work. I first made known my pleasure of his False Creek townhouses, and their Georgian reference, in *The Canadian Architect*, July 1980.

For an appreciation of how Georgian architecture came about, refer to Sir John Summerson's book on that subject. It does not indeed come about from a quasi-democratic process much in contrast to European planning of that time. In the same vein, I doubt that the *Royal Mile* was created in response to their *Rue de Rivoli*. Indeed revitalization works on this latter street were carried out in 1850-2-5. Admittedly it existed before then, but hardly in the same class as *Regent Street* which was completed before 1825. More likely the envy was vice versa.

As for my own work, I regret it seldom lives up to my theorizing but I keep trying. As for the Kingsway project I would caution any student from giving an in-depth critique on the basis of a small birds eye view. In fact the amended surface modulator, more commonly known as the build-to line, is in effect on the Kingsway facade. There is a public space there too. Look more closely.

Anyway I appreciate Fowler's and DeSorcy's response. In all the twenty years I have been trying to set up some intellectual discourse on architecture in Canada, this is about the third response I've had. Mostly my work is greeted by a dull thud. Obviously they have lacked interest. Thank you anyway. You haven't heard the last of me and I hope I haven't heard the last of them.

With appreciation,
Roger Kemble

Mississauga: A Posthumous Glance

by Georges Bulette

Le projet pour un Hôtel de Ville à Mississauga consiste en un exercice académique tirant profit de l'intérêt renouvelé pour la forme urbaine traditionnelle, la réappliquant de façon simpliste et sans discernement.

C'est un ensemble indépendant, conformiste et implosif, dépourvu de toute signification précise quant à la forme du centre urbain duquel il doit faire partie intégrante. Conçu dans le contexte du débat actuel sur l'architecture urbaine, ce projet n'est en fait qu'un mélange informé issu d'un urbanisme plus traditionnel qu'il essaie d'égaler et de la planification moderne qu'il dit rejeter.

Assuming the Regional Municipality of Mississauga has cause to exist as such; that urban sprawl and functional zoning have any continuing need to be administered; that the establishment of an urban centre to a dead stretch of this kind has the validity to be considered; the Project for a Mississauga Regional Municipal Hall – as manifest in the competition proposals and the competition programme itself – is an academic exercise capitalizing on the current renewed interest in traditional urban form, uncritically reapplying it in a pedantic and simplistic fashion.

The field of the chosen site – largely vacant or underused land, a large shopping scheme, high-rise office buildings, some very wide roads – can be said to solicit two types of responses: implosive and explosive. Both are valid reactions to the bleakness of the surroundings.

The implosive response consists of an entity closed in upon itself. Its significance lies in that, standing alone, it disassociates itself from its bland entourage whose friendship it does not seek and strives to be its antithesis. It is a hermetic response.

The explosive response – while still attempting to be antithetical to its surroundings – is not self-referenced but rather seeks to generate potential relations with its future context and serve as a catalyst for its development. It is dynamic and multidirectional and a primary element.

To build an urban centre from virtually nil, its nucleus must be the result of an explosive reaction. When this nucleus is a major civic building in which accessibility is of fundamental importance the proper choice is unequivocal.

The chronological element of an undertaking of this nature is crucial. As the first physical manifestation of a broader project, the nucleus must be able to remain alone – undiminished – until, if ever, its immediate vicinity becomes properly

built up. It must allow its external spatial nature to be transformed by the future building it is to generate. It must allow these subsequent buildings to contribute to and consolidate the spatial structure of this new and evolving urban environment.

The nucleus, therefore must be a purely freestanding construction that permits itself to be enclosed and redefined by the fabric that engages it. This is not to say that all building types considered monuments be freestanding. A building is freestanding according to its social importance and strictly subservient to the demands of the context and the opportunities it provides.

By an additive process, the chronological nature of the undertaking is embodied in form. As an anchoring point of reference, the nucleus serves as a culmination point where multiple and diverging images, axes, and directions come together since it was the point of origin. The absence of a complete general plan – even if never implemented – is a compromise and could deny considerable coherence in the ongoing formulation of the problem.

The Mississauga Regional Municipal Hall Project is a conformist, implosive, freestanding package of an infill nature with minimal generative power and devoid of any precise significance as to the form of the urban centre it is to be an integral part of.

It is static, uniaxial, unidirectional; fixed in the bondage of its own plaza. Its rigidity suppresses the role of later buildings in altering external spaces and deprives the whole of much dynamism. Proposed urban space is seen as an integral part of the building and the project thus becomes an entity unto itself.

The potential offered by such empty surroundings is virtually ignored, a deplorable fact, especially when one considers that legal and economic factors – such as land ownership and property lines, for example – can be manipulated by the political authority intent on building the project. The lack of a specific plan for the entire centre – or at least an early phase of it – is an opportunity missed and an indication of the impotence the project engenders.

In Mississauga – as elsewhere – genuine progress is an inoperative term. The Mississauga Regional Municipal Hall Project negates its own good intentions and is thus regressive. Conceived in the current discussion of architecture of the city, it is, ironically, the bastard child of the more traditional urbanism it tries to emulate and the modern city planning it professes to repudiate, rendering the project ultimately insignificant.