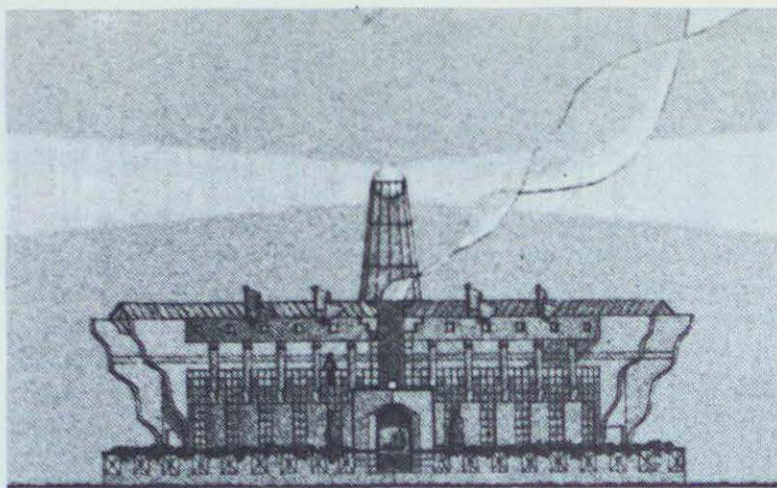


“... getting away from patriarchal ideals or monumentality, dominance and power...”

The Brooks scheme



The invention of new architectural forms within a specific headquarters building in the city was attempted in some projects: the women's club given a dash of feminist expressionism. The Chapman/FitzJames scheme dealt with the image of women in culture by literally taking masks of complicity, social caricatures of women, as facades to the building. The Brown/Storey/Heywood scheme placed three buildings on the site, the City Building, the Working Building and the Garden Building. The authors propose the device of the Omphalos and the "use of the disjuncture and uncertainty to create a new spatial order" in their project.

Two schemes which took their cue from the brief in regard to new forms of social organization (the Laundomat-Bar) are, interestingly enough, both on the same site. This is more than a coincidence. The site itself engages the issue of private and public, located as it is at the intersection of Queen Street (art scene/commerce) and a residential street. One scheme (McAuliffe) literally grafted the typical Toronto row house onto the public areas of the Headquarters; the other (Romaine) posed the dual nature of the Headquarters in a poetic manner as a place of private reverie behind a high wall-cum-do it yourself's flashing screen to the city beyond.

The Snakes and Ladders scheme (Firth/Spiegel) did not attempt an architectural embodiment. It chose to outline the historical predicament, obstacles to growth, and potential theatre (literally) for women's culture. The scheme raised the essential issues of the competition, but given that it did not attempt architectural expression one might have asked more of it at a conceptual level. One could not, in fact, play the game, since in a sense, the game board was an ordered collage and not a game plan.

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, the problem of feminine representation in culture is a complex one, one not fully resolved by the competition. The reluctance of the WCBC members to imagine an appropriate positive embodiment of themselves and the focus of the entries on either issues or architecture, attests to the problem. The predicament poses four alternatives in my view. The first position would be that women are lacking a symbolic language - in architecture as in culture - and it must some how be made anew, *tabula rasa*. Otherwise, one can subvert existing architectural codes of representation in order to expose their ideological underpinnings. If, however, one simply co-opts existing structures and cultural images for the WCBC, its identity is rendered invisible. Without the essential ingredient of ideological rupture in this project, the Collective can hardly help being ab-

sorbed into the status quo as has been demonstrated. The third option is infiltration. The network schemes proposed the systematic transformation of the city by means of symbolic devices. Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, are the schemes that reexamined the relation of public and private in order to come up with new forms that engaged both domains within the representation of women's culture.

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## A Critique of the Five Winning Schemes

by Graham Owen

*The following text was presented as part of the panel discussion held in conjunction with the exhibition of entries to the Women's Cultural Building Competition. It was, and is, intended as the opening statement in a debate that may now occur in a wider forum.*

The Women's Cultural Building Competition raised the fundamental issue of whether architecture is an appropriate medium for the examination and expression of women's culture. In both the published programme and the judging, the consensus of opinion in the Women's Cultural Building Collective appeared to be against the idea of a headquarters building designed specifically for their own use. The feeling seemed to be that such a building would institutionalize the Collective, and thus negate the possibility of their acting subversively. Indeed, they themselves would presumably be more readily subverted by dissenting factions once the Collective was installed, and therefore represented, by a single building.

The WCBC members interviewed in the programme imagine the physical analog of a sustained subversive role as a kind of storefront network; a popular anti-institutional decentralist icon of the late 1960's left liberalism, making a reappearance here. In both instances, but more conspicuously in the case of the Competition programme, there is a kind of subtext of nostalgia or romanticism about the city, a *nostalgie de la boue*, nostalgia for the mud, or for a kind of watered-

down demi-monde. The city is seen almost as a forsaken landscape, to be infested rather than possessed. In a sense, it is an aesthetic of dispossession, since the city as collective intellectual construct is seen as an artifact of male culture. Authenticity (of sentiment, or of action) is assigned to the street. This is not the street as public realm, dignified and gracious, such as one might find in Otto Wagner's Vienna or Daniel Burnham's Chicago, but something closer to the street life of William Burrough's *Junkie*.

The result of this is an attitude to the city in which traditional notions of public and private become blurred and hence, so do traditional relationships between building types within the structure of the city, the structure that had hitherto given them meaning.

This state of affairs has several important consequences for the competition entries. For instance, some of those that propose a single building are put in the predicament of falling between typological stools. They appear ambiguously as fabric or institution, but ambiguously in a negative sense, in that they benefit neither from the anonymity of the one nor the singularity and idealized form of the other. If indeed the Rationalist idea of the city as an entity with a clear and precise conceptual structure is taken to be a construct of patriarchal culture, then conceivably any project that set out to disrupt the conventional relationships of that structure could be considered anti-patriarchal in intent, but perhaps could not be considered anything else other than incoherent. Novelty in architecture, which is explicitly asked for by the programme, is unlikely to be available if architecture is understood as an autonomous and closed formal discipline subject to its own internal rules.

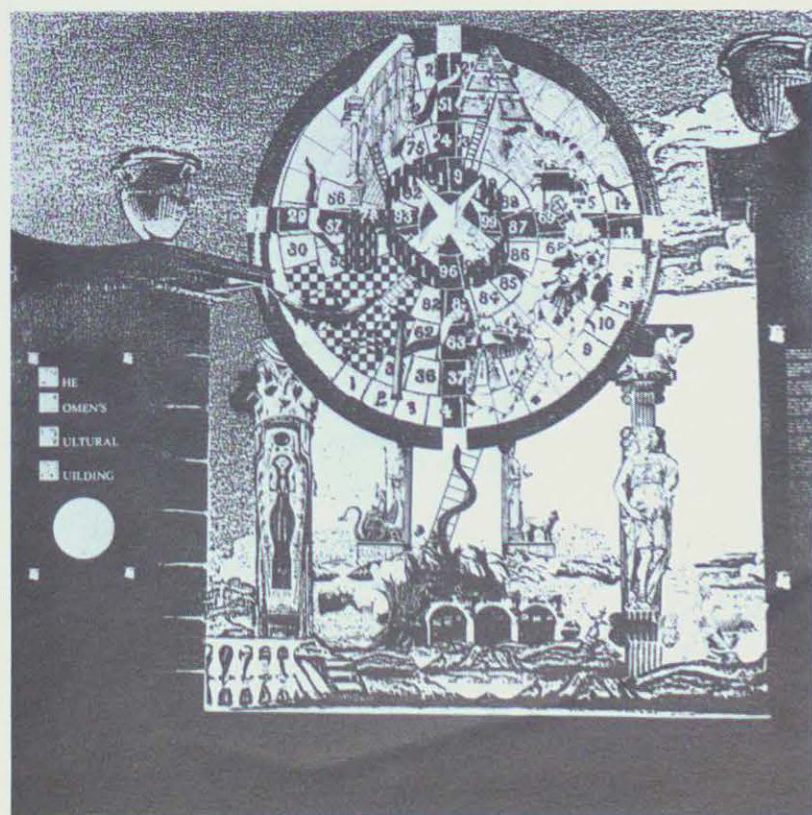
Of the winning entries, two would fall into the category of the single isolated building, as opposed to the network: that of James Brown, Kim Storey and Peter Heywood, and

that of Ken Brooks. The Brooks scheme, a floating amphitheatre-cum-lighthouse, deals with the question of the WCBC's relationship to the city by removing the building from the city altogether.

What makes this scheme particularly intriguing is the presumably unintentional number of readings that one can make of it. The lighthouse conventionally marks a point to be avoided, yet in the Brooks scheme this point is always changing position. One is reminded of the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*, luring sailors to grisly deaths. Although the scheme is referred to as *the steadfast description of a purpose*, this purpose seems to be constantly changing, with consequent implications of ideological instability. In this scheme, the answer to the WCBC's programme is seen not as a mechanism of integration, such as the storefront network, but rather a more pronounced physical segregation; one thinks of a kind of floating Ellis Island or worse, a kind of Alcatraz.

Although this particular cultural colony can move, its designated destinations - the Harbourfront, Ontario Place, the Premier Dance Theatre, Olympic Island - are all manifestations of state-sponsored mass entertainment. Thus it is implied that women's culture is to be regarded as another form of mass entertainment, ideologically operated by the welfare state. The Women's Cultural Building thus becomes conceptually equivalent to the floating discotheque paddle-steamer that follows a similar itinerary around Toronto's waterfront during the summer, and it does appear that the project is intended for summer use only, since its amphitheatre is left uncovered.

Both the Shim-Sutcliffe and Sinclair-Walker schemes fall into the network category. The Sinclair-Walker project, involving the re-use of a number of existing inner-city gas stations as neighbourhood women's cultural buildings, raises some particularly provocative implications, perhaps uninten-



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The Firth-Spiegel entry

tional, but relevant nonetheless to the question of how women's culture is to be represented architecturally and urbanistically. If, as the authors propose, all personal motorised vehicles could be removed from the centre of the city, the shells of the automobile infrastructure would be kept in place, rather than be replaced by (ideally) new construction that would take advantage of the reappearance of the pedestrian city, or (realistically) by new construction that would take advantage of the developable value of the sites. What comes out of this is an apparent attitude of economy and expediency which acts as a mask for the same kind of nostalgia referred to earlier. At the same time, there is the problem that women's culture comes to be represented by the remains of corporate franchise chains, with the consequent implications of homogeneity, habitual consumption and centralized control, all of which go against the notion of the network as a countercultural device.

In trying to determine whether this is indeed a real problem with the project, one might compare it to the transformation of Roman temples into Christian churches. Although the pagan origins of the temple might have been seen as a problem, what made the transformation possible was, as Perez d'Arce puts it "the appropriation of the symbolic value of the temple as a sacred building". Thus there is the question of the relative power of the gas station's reading as part of a network to the power of its reading as an element in a corporate chain.

The Shim-Sutcliffe entry takes risks similar to those involved in the Sinclair-Walker scheme. It proposes the rehabilitation of storefront properties into a WCBC network, each serving a different function. In each case, the presence of this network is announced architecturally, by means of an elaborate front door, whose narrative content deals with the public persona and private struggles of the artist. This entry and Carl Blanchaer's (proposing an arbour applied symbolically to an expanding network of buildings taken over by the Collective) are probably the most successful and intelligent

of the network projects. However, the fact that it is unclear whether the Shim-Sutcliffe door is to be a single artistic work in each case, an object or a mass produced item (since it is the same door in every location) renders its representative meaning ambiguous. There is also the question of why the door would specifically represent the WCBC and not just any artist's collective. The Blanchaer scheme, although architecturally even more minimal, is symbolically more specific. Once the arbour-clad network has been established, the first building occupied (a detached house, symbolic of domestic labour) is to be demolished, leaving only the arbour as its ghost. All three schemes propose deliberately minimal interventions, and raise a nagging question: if in this competition the best architecture is the least architecture, was it really an architectural problem in the first place?

The third and final category, represented in the winning entries by Kathryn Firth and Susan Spiegel, is that of the metaphorical project. Instead of seeing the object of the exercise as the production of an integrated architectural project with a symbolic dimension, architecture or architectural elements are used metaphorically to refer to conditions or sentiments outside architecture itself. The scheme calls to mind Cavino's *Castle of Crossed Destinies*, where Tarot cards are understood as a metaphor for life; and since the cards contain all the possibilities of life, life may be seen as a metaphor for the Tarot. In this project, architecture has become the figurative layer of a Snakes-and-Ladders game, just as the imagery of feudal culture served as the figurative reference for Calvino's Tarot set. Paradoxically, since this entry deals with architecture as a deliberately removed symbol, standing for something more than for itself, the scheme can be read as a subtle commentary on the unavailability of architecture appropriate for the specified purpose. Architecture is extraneous to the specified purpose of expressing women's culture.

Graham Owen is a recent graduate of the School of Architecture at the University of Toronto.

"... getting away from patriarchal ideals or monumentality, dominance and power..."

The Shim-Sutcliffe entry / Inside

