

Amazingness and Incredibility

by Rebecca Chu

Les discussions dans le milieu de l'architecture cherchant à déprécier toutes oeuvres qui ne furent pas basées sur des précédents, dissimulent l'importance d'une approche culturelle. Ces oeuvres qualifiées de "provinciales" cherchent à redonner une direction aux phénomènes culturels. Ces derniers cependant sont perçus comme avant-gardistes et créent ainsi un déchirement entre le mouvement culturel et le mouvement à la mode. Plutôt que d'évoluer dans un contexte culturel, on forme à partir des oeuvres avant-gardistes les mieux reçues des icônes que l'on manipule par la suite à titre de gestes ou de symboles. Il est par conséquent très difficile de critiquer ou de synthétiser de tels travaux, laissant ainsi le provincialisme se perpétuer.

To get out, go in deeper Barthes

There is a certain set of emotions that surround the birth of an exotic animal for the first time in captivity. A hopeful and expectant silence should be maintained; better, a bright-eyed optimism for the future. The climate into which the animal's parents have been forcibly transported is harsh and unfamiliar; the infant's survival is by no means assured.

Culture mutates faster than nature, however, and in the case of culture, it is often only the mutant that can survive. Yet it is also often true that, in order to fulfill the expectations surrounding the transplantation of cultural breeding stock, the mutant is often mistaken for the native-born specimen.

In media and in casual speech, a widespread degradation of the superlative may be observed. A person or phenomenon may be designated *astonishing* or *extraordinary*, *amazing* or *incredible*, but nothing more. To offer no more specific judgement, no attempt to determine what gives rise to one's astonishment or incredulity, is to recognize the existence of what is observed, and acknowledge (approvingly) that it has some degree of intensity to which one is responding; but it is also to stop short of thought. It is an attitude that considers stupefaction to be an entirely adequate response to experience. Since a certain amount of slackmindedness is to be expected in any given population, this attitude would be of no particular significance had it not become so common, and had it not achieved such a high degree of social acceptability. Indeed, it almost comes to be expected.

The catch-all attribute that this attitude so readily perceives we shall call *Amazingness and Incredibility*. Clearly, as in any circumstance where consistent response occurs unaccompanied by reflective thought, and is triggered by social code or expectation, *Amazingness and Incredibility* are the stuff

of which myths are made. (For the sake of brevity, we shall refer to them henceforth as *A & I*).

In the architectural milieu, such myths should be understood as a mutant form of culture. The idea of *A & I* denotes both a human attribute and an attribute of actual production. The sensibility to which the idea of *A & I* is central is one that informs both self-image and appreciation, and the environment in which it most readily occurs is that of provincialism. When the attempt is made to import culture from a more sophisticated milieu into a provincial environment, convulsions occur in the relationship between culture (of the less popular variety) and fashion. The question that concerns us is what happens to twentieth-century architecture's cherished myth of avant-gardism when it arrives in culturally provincial circumstances?

At least three kinds of provincialism may be discerned. In the first, one supposes the confines of one's immediate surroundings to be the limits of the world. A variation on this involves deliberate censorship of what comes from beyond those cultural *Pillars of Hercules*; a kind of self-imposed isolationism occurs, similar to that practised in Utopian settlements. The second variety of provincialism is wistful; beyond familiar horizons are seen glittering lights. But it is the third variety of provincialism that interests us most. Here, what are perceived as the cultural characteristics of a world beyond are *simulated* within one's immediate confines, and, by tacit agreement, the act of simulation is not recognized as such by those participating. A kind of miniaturization of the world takes place, and as in the miniaturization of physical things, certain anomalies occur that alter the nature of that which is miniaturized.

It is generally the intention of this third variety of provincial sensibility to *re-enact* those cultural phenomena of the outside world that are perceived as avant-garde. This re-enactment *simulates the presence of an avant-garde* within the confines of the provincial setting. What allows this third variety of provincialism to occur, rather than the first, is greater media input. But there is an inevitable time lag. The frantic attempt continues to be made, and engenders a number of identifying characteristics of provincial avant-gardism.

First, because styles arrive from outside fully developed, they must be assimilated wholesale if the simulation of simultaneity is to occur. At the very least, second-hand avant-garde exploits must be seen to be performed during the time lag between their original media presentation and the appearance, in the same media, of evidence that such exploits have become *passé* in their original milieu. The possibilities for criticism, and for critical transformation and synthesis, are

thus severely limited, if not effectively negated. In their original milieu, however, avant-garde positions develop over time, and are generally more accessible in the everyday cultural context during their development. Their acceptance or rejection, by what audience, at what time, may therefore not be clear-cut. Media presentation, however, dramatizes the adventures of its chosen subject. In the provincial context, it follows that if a new received avant-gardism, intensified by this dramatization, must be assimilated instantly and wholesale, its predecessor must be rejected likewise. Sudden and convulsive inversions of fashion therefore characterize the cultural life of the provincial avant-gardist.

Secondly, because speed is of the essence, and because assimilation must occur uncritically, a certain cogitative economy must be practised. The most intense phenomena of any received avant-gardism must be elected as *icons*, which are then pressed into service as a shorthand of the image. In design and in writing, just as in presentation of the self, an avant-gardist posture can be quickly manifested and efficiently sustained by means of the practice of *icon-manipulation*.

Icon-manipulation is a kind of prestidigitation without product: it is the conjurer's *Prestos!* with no rabbit and no hat. It too is a simulation, a reference to something beyond; pure sign or gesture, rather than content. In popular culture, verbal icon-manipulation is what occurs in the texts of, say, *GQ* or *Interview*, and differs little from the strange spectacle of texts on architecture that choose as their model incompetent translations from the Italian. The process as it manifests itself in design is exactly parallel, and has the same effects on its base material. The most important of these effects is the aforementioned negation of the possibility of criticism. As a mechanism of the cycles of fashion, the icon-manipulation must serve fashion's requirements. One of these is that, once achieved, fashion must be *so visible as to be invisible*; that is (as Barthes might observe), culture aspires to be nature. Avant-garde fashion, moreover, unlike other aspects of culture, *cannot be talked about*; at the instant that it is acknowledged, it disappears. The cycles of fashion are inherently acritical. No intellectual operation is required to set or to follow fashion. The provincial avant-garde acts, in fact, as a policing body: if the capacity for instantaneous response to news from the outside world is to be maintained, certain avenues of research must be rigorously censored lest they linger too long.

For fashion, as manifested in icon-manipulation, promotes an *absolute interchangeability of ideas* rather than a cumulative structure. The space to be occupied by ideas, so to speak, is limited, like the surface of the body on which clothes can be worn; a new set of ideas ousts the old set en-

tirely, the old set leaves no trace; or, if it does, it is a true contamination, an impurity, an embarrassment above all. Icons, as we are discussing them here, possess no *inherent* value but only transient value, as gestures appropriate only to a specified moment.

Ultimately, *Amazingness and Incredibility* define themselves as measures of the success with which a person or cultural event manipulates icons. This success depends in turn on the correctness of the icons used; the speed with which they are deployed after coming into currency; and the quantity in which they appear. To deal first with the matter of correctness: we have already remarked upon the necessity of a hermetic exclusivity in the changeover from one set of icons to the next. This process of censorship must be maintained as well during the reign of any particular set of icons. The metropolis, generally the source of avant-gardisms, generates high fashion but tolerates dissenting style; provincial situations insist on conformity to received fashion. Although fashion is a social necessity in the metropolis, it wields a far greater coercive power in the small town, which is at the point of an inverted pyramid of possibilities. This is of significance because Canada is - as far as culture is concerned - a nation of small towns. By and large, when its cities affect a metropolitan style (rather than conceiving of themselves, as is more usual, as unfortunate but inevitable economic necessities, in opposition to the rural idyll), they do so by acting as net importers of urban postures from elsewhere.

To get out, go in deeper Barthes

This suggests that, in the provincial context, eligibility for recognition as *amazing and incredible* depends on a certain *lack* - a lack of critical inclination, a lack of inclination towards independent research and intellectual reflection, a kind of active passivity. The *A & I* personality, then, is a kind of weathervane, capable of near-instantaneous changes of ideological direction whenever the winds from overseas and across the border themselves change; so near instantaneous, in fact, that he may be found ridiculing his own immediate past work. But, of course, this avant-gardism has no past nor future, *it has nothing but present*. Past exploits fall away like ash from a cigarette: the avant-gardist wants only to be the travelling glow. This avant-gardism has no future either, because to predict the changes in the wind would be to nullify the breathless immediacy of the present moment. There can be nothing more *en avance* than the avant-garde ... a true avant-

garde, however, defines itself in relation to history and a proposal for the future. Provincial avant-gardism is shorn of these dimensions.

Where *Amazingness and Incredibility* depend on the quantity of icons and the speed with which they are deployed, a collusion with expediency is revealed, and perhaps also the key to the true nature of avant-gardism in provincial circumstances. Where quantity is pursued, *parti* may disappear in a demented orgy of articulation. The project becomes, as a result, a forced assembly of icons rather than the expression of an ordering idea; a cacophony of parts whose hierarchy has all but dissolved into visual noise. It is an aesthetic of excess, a display of exploits of pure production. In its most extreme state, the project may present itself as an iconography of pure linework. Ultimately, it can be understood as nothing other than a demonstration of productive capacity; as an assertion of the marketability of one's labour. In such an assertion of pure technique, the architect always out-labours the world.

But since labour *per se* will not sustain any simulation of avant-garde activity, it must be masked by an intermediary myth, which is that of pure creativity. In this myth, the architect always takes the world by surprise. And genius, moreover, knows no progenitor. *Amazingness*, in this manifestation, resists analysis once again. It is a necessary delusion that the project, in all its iconic density, is seen as springing full-grown from the forehead of its creator, without process or labour. A binary condition is proposed in order to categorize the characters who inhabit the architectural milieu: amazing/not amazing, right stuff/no stuff. As far as *A & I* as characteristics of the individual are concerned, either one has them or one doesn't; learning, experience, the development over time of skills and abilities, taste and judgement, do not enter into the matter. He who is *Amazing & Incredible* is *irreducible*, to attempt to explain him would be to undermine the most dearly cherished myth of twentieth-century architecture: that of individual genius.

The outward persona of the *A & I* character will alter with time, according to trends in personal style, but what it symbolizes remains essentially the same. In the 80's, the *A & I* character sees himself perhaps as a James Dean or a young

Brando, a street-smart Kerouac type, deadpan but with a ready curl of the lip; at worst, a slightly more *déshabillé* member of the Roots Brigade. This image embodies a certain anti-intellectualism, a social phenomenon that necessarily recurs more frequently and persistently in provincial circumstances than does its opposite. For, in provincial circumstances, the intellectual is traditionally seen as charlatan, con man, liar. There is always the underlying implication of the academic as voyeur, the *A & I* character as authentic participant, as real man. But as has been suggested, verbal icon-manipulation is sometimes a necessary component of the *A & I* persona. The importation of European Marxist theory and criticism, in particular, precipitated the appearance of locally produced texts in which chains of iconic words and phrases, connected by a kind of expedient verbal glue, produced an aesthetically desirable opacity. At such times, verbal icon-manipulation, simulating intellectual activity but involving no actual criticism, discourse or exposition of a theory, allows the mythology of *A & I* to remain intact. In sum, youth and pure potency present themselves as essential, and in this way *A & I* define themselves by what they exclude.

Architecture has sometimes been described as an old man's game. The maturity of judgement, refinement of sensibility, clarity of ideals, and sureness of touch in the later work of a master are generally cited as evidence. But *A & I*, with its emphasis on youth and speed, proposes the *planned obsolescence of the individual*: the profession is renewed not by the research and exploration undertaken by its more mature members, but by the consumption of youth. Hence we obtain the myth of the 'hot young designer'. Youth does, of course, have its real economic advantages to the shrewd employer: greater energy and stamina, lower salaries, fewer family ties, and – most importantly – recent emergence from a school of architecture. The school, typically, acts not so much as an education, which in the context of liberal idealism is thought of as liberating – a liberation that allows independent thought – and acts not even so much as vocational training, but as a *socializing experience* – socialization into acceptance of a particular pattern of labour. Canadian architectural avant-gardes, after all, tend to base their patterns of production on the

model of the school of architecture, with all its petty heroisms; and, as a consequence, absorb the tendency of provincial schools to promote a state of perpetual adolescence in their students.

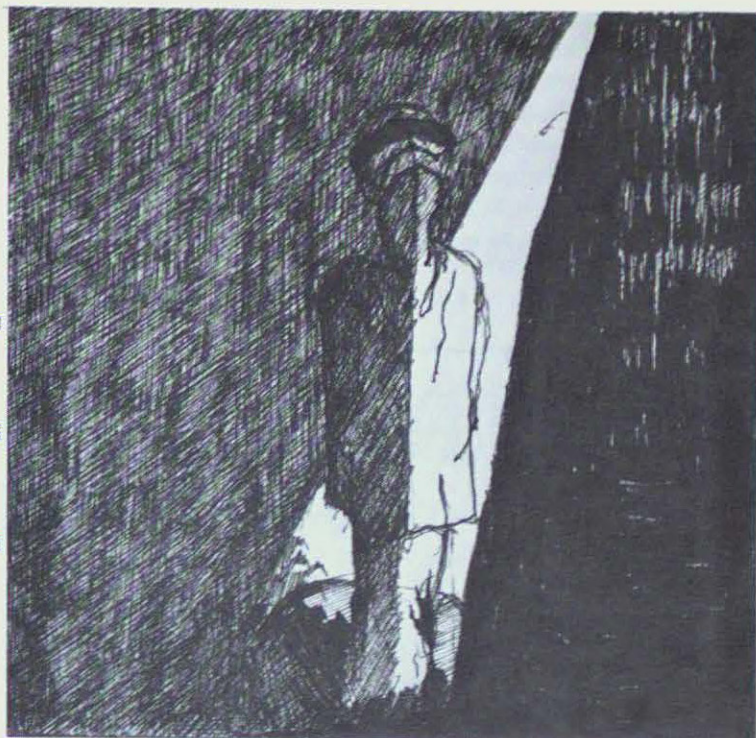
To get out, go in deeper

Barthes

This tendency on the part of schools has an effect both on mainstream production and on the would-be avant-garde. The process of refinement in a work of architecture involves considerable periods of time: witness the work of Carlo Scarpa, whose ruminative process of design might extend over several years for a single project. In the Canadian context, the economic facts of fee structure and the control exerted over the profession by the development industry promote, in the mainstream, the reduction of architecture to the most rudimentary styling. Where *A & I* depend on the speed with which a *design* is produced, the judgement is, in effect, made on the *lack* of subtlety and refinement in the work.

Hence the tendency, in the mainstream, for the *big idea*, the *concept*, the *bold statement*; in other words, large-scale pseudo-sculptural moves in the pursuit of *visual interest* with no attention to integrity in detail or in conceptual order, and a notable absence of intellectual context. A reading of Klaus Herdig's *The Decorated Diagram* suggests that these are the characteristics of a fifth-hand Harvard-Bauhaus postwar modernism, the legacy represented by the majority of Canadian senior designers today; and although these men will shortly become obsolete, and be replaced by the next generation of 'hot young designers', the situation will remain essentially unchanged. A new set of icons assimilated in school – icons that initially had some intensity and variety – gradually become cruder and more inflexible with constant re-use, and the process repeats itself ad infinitum.

In the provincial avant-garde, on the other hand, production depends on the continuous consumption and regurgitation of new icons – the image of *A & I* as pure potency. Typically, then, pseudo-avant-garde production in Canada has a tendency towards the *caricature* or *cartoon*. Both mainstream



and pseudo-avant-garde ultimately lead, however, towards the same result: the Canadian architectural landscape reveals itself as a great used car lot of second-hand ideas.

This is not to suggest, however, that originality or some kind of regional authenticity are, in and of themselves, desirable or even possible in architecture. Nor is it to deny the importance of the energy and inspiration that are generated by formal research into hitherto unmined areas. Architecture is defined by and is made out of its own history: the issue is the quality of critical intelligence involved in its making. Originality is not the primary issue in the work of, for example, Stirling, Torre, Scarpa, Koolhaas, or that of Isozaki in the mid-70's; in these examples though, one finds a concern with and respect for the history of the discipline, such that when references are synthesised they undergo a process of critical transformation. One finds, further, self-critical tensions within the work that recognize (but do not necessarily seek to express) the conditions under which cultural production must proceed at this point in history. In addition, there is evident in such work a sense of materiality absent from icon-manipulation (since icons are pure image, and have no necessary material presence, hence the ease with which they degenerate into caricature or cartoon).

But the historically illiterate architect (still, it seems, the dominant species in Canada in spite of the events of the past twenty years) is doomed to repeat the mistakes of history as soon as the unfashionability of those mistakes begin to fade. This will occur all the more quickly in a cultural milieu that has no *tradition of criticism*; that is, a cumulative body of critical ideas, rather than a simple interchange of patricidal polemics that are themselves second-hand. In such a situation of historical illiteracy, the repeated mistakes of history will not be recognized as such. Until such time as a continuous and truly critical discourse can be established, provincialism will perpetuate itself, and the choice will remain the same: amazement and incredibility, or self-acknowledging banality – a choice that is really no choice at all.

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