

## REVIEW:

# Rome Architectural Student Exhibit

By Allesandro Cortona

*Le programme d'étude en Italie entrepris par les écoles d'architecture ontariennes avait pour but d'introduire les problèmes apportés par les contextes urbains et architecturaux lors d'une intervention contemporaine. Les projets résultants de ces explorations furent par la suite présentés lors d'une exposition à Rome.*

The exhibition of student work in Italy represents the culmination of the three different programmes in Italy from Ontario schools of architecture. It risks—perhaps necessarily—selling them short by exhibiting (in the cases of Waterloo and Toronto) only one of the space components in the programmes, albeit the largest; the design of an institution within the historic centres of Rome and Florence. It is unfortunate that one gets no general idea of the type of studies, research, and smaller exercises the students undertake during the three months here. Nevertheless, given its narrow scope, the show does succeed in exhibiting a collection of projects of a surprising range of capability, intellect, and graphic ability. And in all but graphics, that variety is spread throughout the three schools. If one takes the show as one, rather than as three (as the organizers seem to wish) certain questions are raised which, while perhaps not placing in doubt the programmes, should certainly be addressed by the teaching staff responsible.

Very obviously the study-abroad programmes attempt to introduce and come to terms with the issue of urbanistic situations and architectural languages unfamiliar to North Americans. These are interventions in historic centres. Perhaps the most crucial question is therefore one of propriety, and it is precisely this issue that the programmes seem not to have explored at length. Several projects in the Roman Forum area are simply impossible to consider in complete seriousness, given their apparently cavalier approach to rendering comprehensible an extremely delicate and infinitely abused remnant of ancient civilization. Indeed, one almost detects a certain uncomfortable insecurity in dealing with the ruins translated into exaggerated, and occasionally self-indulgent, displays of architectural ostentation. One begins to yearn for reserve, a talent presently quite rare. Given three months in Rome, the students should realize that any contemporary intervention in that area would be spectacularly conspicuous. Frequently oversimplistic forms and dispositions are drawn from an array of the very slightest of references; fragments on the ground of an ancient apse become gigantic rotundas, remnants of a disappeared colonnade are translated into enormous "wall" structures, and so on. It seems a process which inspires propositions one is relieved will never be built.

And yet, there is a kind of sweet tantalization involved and there is clearly a certain joy in much of the work. If they have, in some cases, gone a bit too far, they nonetheless seem fascinated with what they are doing, and use a rich vocabulary of formal components, texture, proportion, and colour in these buildings. As well, the group works extensively in sec-

tion and facade, in addition to their often imaginative planimetric solutions. The students have learned to make the most of their ideas, and if one is a little uncomfortable with the implications, one is nevertheless enthralled by the presentation. The drawings are a pleasure to study, and fulfill a crucial responsibility to eloquently state their case. In so doing, they invite a discourse larger than their individual strengths and weaknesses.

The work of the University of Toronto in Florence was in many ways in contrast with that of Waterloo, with an apparent emphasis on large scale plan development and less on the articulation of facade, with almost no identification of materials. Again the work varied widely in quality; yet again, taken as a whole, the projects raise the question of what is appropriate for a modern intervention in an urban context of considerable complexity and characteristic unity. There is the sense that the students were not challenged beyond the confines of the literal site boundaries, and were encouraged to concentrate on the intricacies of planimetric accommodation of programme, rather than coming to terms in any way with the city or with a rapport between modern positions and classical architecture. Conspicuously absent was information about the city (Florence) or any polemical statements of the kind one would expect to accompany projects which seem in many cases to be surely polemical.

If the Waterloo work raises some important doubts, it nonetheless forcefully declares an approach or attitude toward the place in which it rests. There appears in the Toronto work a more general confusion, or perhaps an avoidance of the central issue. One consequently wonders just why they felt it so important to be there.

However some of the work was quite capable, particularly those few projects which seemed to break from the group norm and pose, through for example neo-rationalist or neo-modernist alternatives, serious questions about the validity of a singular interpretation of context, precedent, and response.

The work displayed from Carleton University attempted a more general description of a programme of three months and varied projects. Graphically skillful and adventurous, the work presents an interesting taste of a programme whose direction or objectives are less than clear. There is the distinct impression that certain intriguing questions served as the basis for explorations which developed away from them, into individual preoccupations. One wants to be privy to discussions these drawings provoke, to see where they point. Certainly in terms of a kind of sensual record of the impressions of a great city, the Carleton work is the richest, and if none of the schools can convince by developed argument, then perhaps the greatest gift is indeed the chance to be touched, in ways as unseen as numerous, by cities as remarkably challenging, and as simply glorious, as Rome.

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