

MICHAEL CARROLL

## THE READING OF CONTEXT

### Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer

He stood on a point  
on a sheet of green paper  
proclaiming himself the center  
with no walls  
no borders  
anywhere; the sky  
no height above him, totally  
unenclosed and shouted:

Let me out!

Margaret Atwood



Architects are like pioneers in that they inhabit vacant landscapes and try to cultivate them and increase their potential as habitable places in the world. If we work in an 'open' field, how can we be contextual? What informs us in the making of form? What gives meaning to a form?

The design process can address a wide spectrum of subject matter including political, social, economic, and technological issues. However, in architecture, it is the physical location that provides an immediate starting point. It is through location that we make contact with cultural and scientific issues on a national, regional or local basis. The physicality of the site, its ruins, traces and shifts are cues upon which we can build. The location, literally, provides a physical context that gives definition to a design. It is the context of the situation that gives significance to the utterance, (the architectural intervention).<sup>1</sup> Unlike the other arts, architecture deals specifically with a physical site and from its location draws meaning.<sup>2</sup>

If a work of architecture is context-dependent, how does it not become stagnated by the immediacy of the context? How can a work gain an objective distance to avoid nostalgia? If a work is to give commentary on where we are (i.e. location) and who we are (i.e. culture) we must interpret the physical context in a critical fashion. In order to interpret the context we must read it.

1. In linguistics, the context of the situation, is a term applied to the non-linguistic environment of the utterances (words, gestures, etc.). Meaning is seen as a complex of relations operating between linguistic features of the utterances and the features of the social situation in which the utterances occur. (eg. occupation of the speaker, the number of listeners present etc.) Contexts of situation are a means of specifying and classifying those situational features that are necessary in order to understand the full meaning of the utterances. *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*.

2. "A boundary is not that at which something stops but as the Greeks recognized the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing. That is why the concept is that of *horizon*, that is, the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that which is that which room has been made, that which is always granted and hence is joined, that is by virtue of its location, that is by such thing as a bridge. Accordingly, spaces receive their being through location and not from space."

M. Heidegger, "Poetry, Language, Thought", *Building Dwelling Thinking*, London, Harper & Row, 1971, p.154.





CAST OF THE PLAY (in order of appearance):

.....STAGE MANAGER (S.M.)—slick and composed, her or his voice a smarmy replication of the whispering television golf tournament commentator.

.....CHORUS—three stagehands, dressed in black turtlenecks, black pants, black high-top sneakers, their hair in ridiculously short ponytails.

.....FIELDING LLOYD MELLISH (F.L.L.M.)—a student in the final moments of attaining the degree Master of Nouvel Architecture (MONA) at the Technical University of Nouvel Architecture (TUNA). Eager to please, nervous to the point of clumsiness, but strangely prideful. Unfortunate subject of a too-small bladder.

.....TONY MOLDY (REFERRED TO AS TONY OR "CRITIC")—A professor at the Technical University of Nouvel Architecture, his main physical feature is a large red moustache and beard which hide his reactions but through which he is capable of baring his teeth when necessary. FIELDING LLOYD MELLISH 's thesis advisor.

.....DR. GARISH BALLSASIDE, PHD (GARY OR "CRITIC")—Chairman of the Technical University of Nouvel Architecture, a man held in reverence and awe by students and faculty alike for his tremendous intellect, charm and spirit. Has a habit of slowly and deliberately cracking knuckle joints of his large expressive hands while

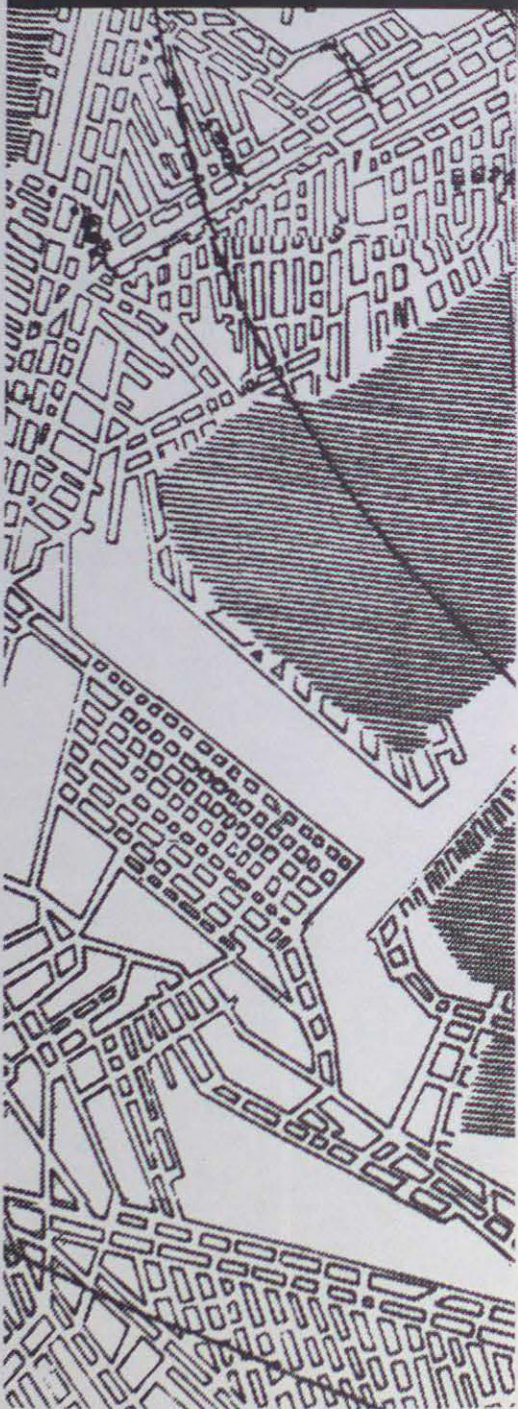
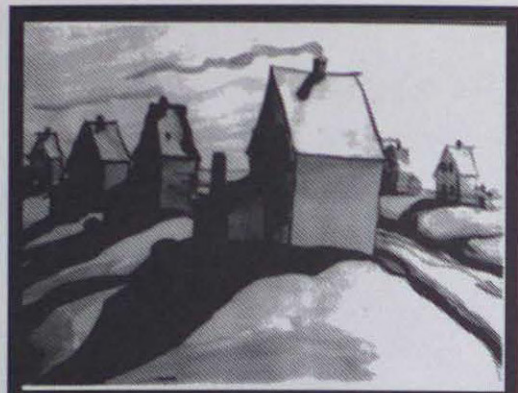
The physical context can be used as a point of departure just as a literary text can be used to animate the imagination<sup>3</sup>. We can read context as one reads a book: between the lines; in its fissures; within the connotations the (con)text carries with it. The (con)text, rather than serving as a descriptive tool, becomes an instrument to evoke invention.

The act of reading (con)text is a personal and frequently a silent act. However, unlike reading text, which is primarily a visual activity, the reading of context has the possibility of involving all the senses. One can feel context. As the existentialists attest, feeling is a way of registering our participation in the world.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger speaks of *Gestimmtheit*—that is to say, being 'attuned' to the world. Ricoeur uses a similar metaphor when he talks of 'tonalité', as if one had to adjust to the pitch of the world.<sup>4</sup>

This attitude suppresses vision to heighten the other senses of smell, taste, touch and hearing. In his article, "Towards a Critical Regionalism" Kenneth Frampton, puts forth "The Visual versus the Tactile", as his sixth point for an architecture of 'resistance'.

"The tactile resilience of the place-form and the capacity of the body to read the environment in terms other than those of sight alone suggest a potential strategy for resisting the domination of universal technology."<sup>5</sup>

We must read the context like an instrument that has been sensitively tuned because the context is in a state of flux. The definition of the physical context is indeterminate. There is no solution to what is the 'proper' architectural response within the physical context, because it does not exist as a problem to be solved. A work of architecture can only be placed within a discussion with the physical context. In order to participate, we must adopt an attitude toward a region, a city, a neighbourhood, a specific site. From this vantage point, architecture moves beyond just a stylistic



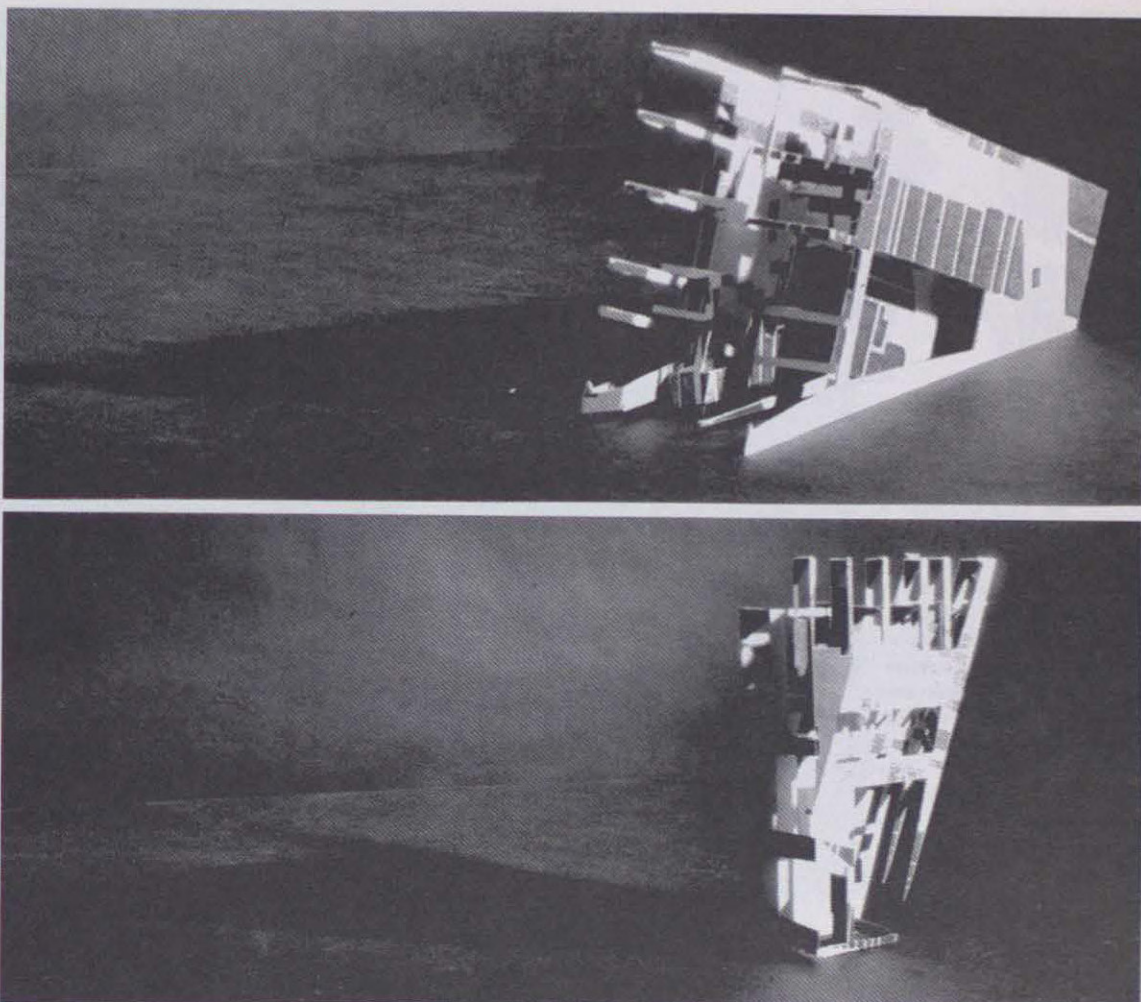


3. Dave Thomas, (3rd year, 1987), excerpted from *Invisible Cities*, by Italo Calvino:

Cities and the Dead # 4 :

What makes Argia different from other cities is that it has earth instead of air. The streets are completely filled with dirt, clay packs the room to the ceiling, on every stair another stairway is set in negative, over the roofs of other houses hang layers of rocky terrain like skies with clouds. We do not know if the inhabitants can move about in the city, widening the worm tunnels and the crevices where roots twist.

From up here, nothing of Argia can be seen; some say, "It's down below there", and we can only believe them. The place is deserted. At night, putting your ear to the ground, you can hear a door slam."



4. John Macquarrie, "Existentialism", (New York: World Publishing Company, 1972), p.157.

5. Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster, London: Pluto Press Limited, 1985, p. 28.

exercise; it demands that we take a 'position' toward a place. One must "confront the noise."

The fact that the context is continually shifting means in the reading of it we get only partial glimpses of it, there is really no present, only instants of present. We rely on memory to connect the instants, to continue the stream of consciousness.

In order to catch the knife-edge of the present, in architecture we draw in order to reread reality. In executing a drawing, we measure the immediate environment and accumulate maps which describe it. These maps may give a quantitative account of a place, but they tell us very little about the actual qualities of a place. The qualities may not be measurable, but they are perceivable. In order to catch a glimpse of the complete picture, we must overlay each individual frame, each instant in time so that a whole image is revealed and an underlying structure emerges.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, through the drawing we attempt to capture the essence of the place and record its subtleties. The physical context is like a picture in motion made up of many frames, it has temporal depth which goes beyond the surface of its present reality.

By viewing context through time we observe not only what is variable but also the skeleton of a place. The layers of time, once opaque, become translucent; in the act of

6. excerpted from: Moira Edmonds, *Screaming Trees and Babbling Brooks*, (3rd year, 1987)

The construction was based on a series of maps. Viewed in its development through time, the map is a sensitive indicator of the changing thought of man. It is a mirror of culture and civilization. It has come to serve many functions, a tool in the comprehension of the spatial phenomena an efficient device for the storage of three-dimensional data, a tool for understanding distributions and relationship not otherwise understood. Cartography is the scientific and artistic pursuit of codifying — in the form of a map — objects and events as we become aware of them. The process of the construction of these maps was concerned with the presence of existing structures and the absence of others. A study of this construction is a means of generating ideas about future development for the block.

Moving beyond the digging tool the construction becomes a reflecting tool that reflects light, obscures light, filters light and creates pattern with absence of light. Thus, in the act of making, one is also writing. The text becomes both a new *topos* of invention and a means of representing that invention.





others are speaking.

..... DR. JULIA MINDFART, PHD (JULIA OR "CRITIC")—internationally respected architect and historian, upon whose hoped-for recommendation rides the Technical University of Nouvel Architecture's main bid for accreditation as a Master's degree-granting institution. A regular visiting critic at the school, her characteristic features include bushy eyebrows that connect across the bridge of her nose, thick glasses which she habitually removes and polishes on her blouse, and a briarwood pipe which she periodically relights.

NOTE: Any resemblance to characters or institutions living, dead, or dying is purely coincidental.

#### SETTING OF THE PLAY:

An empty classroom at the Technical University of Nouvel Architecture. A year-end review of a Master's thesis project is about to take place. As the action begins, the murmur of voices from another review can be heard off-stage.

STAGE MANAGER (enters): The Place: TUNA—the Technical University of Nouvel Architecture: Canada's finest English language school of architecture (East of Montreal). The Occasion: a year-end review of a MONA—Master of Nouvel Architecture—student's thesis. The Time: 1989. 1984 was five years ago, and 2001's just 12 short years away. These are heady days, folks, and here at TUNA we're right in the thick of them. This particular thesis review comes just as TUNA is gearing up its desperate bid for respect and accreditation as a Master's degree-granting institution. Many of you seeing this performance, whether you be potential students, potential faculty, up-and-coming custodial staff, or even the grand viziers and potentates of the

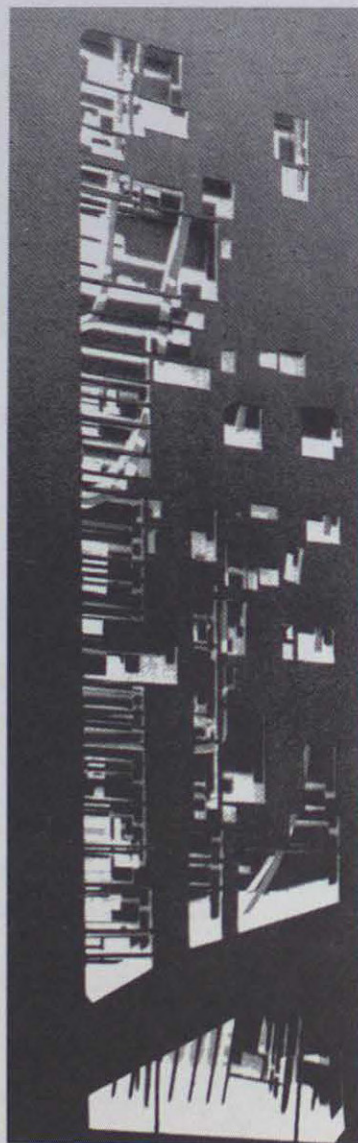
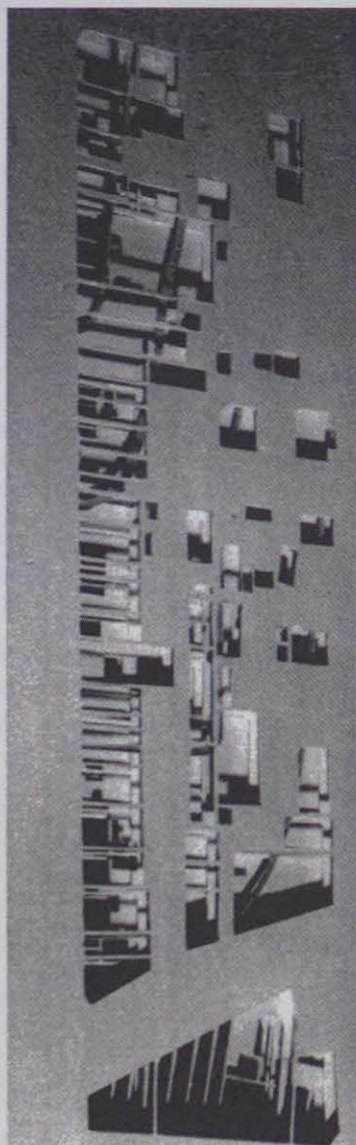
creating a palimpsest the present day map loses its immediate significance and the past erasures begin to rupture the surface. Through drawing, we are able to make an abstraction of place and by-

pass the actual context and project an idealized version of it. The abstract drawing becomes the 'site,' the new *topos* of invention. The representation becomes the metaphoric or utopian version of the actual context. Therefore drawing is an integral part of the design process. 'Drawing' is no longer used as a noun but as a verb, it becomes an act in which we draw the world out.

The discrepancy between the drawing and the actuality is not within the detail of a drawing but within its basic structure. The reading becomes increasingly successful as the discrepancy is checked with the reality of the site. In order to keep both within one's frame of vision, one must oscillate between the idealized scenarios and actual ones until there is a virtual one to one

correspondence. Although our initial relationship with the site may be from a distance, as we approach the place we become immersed in it. The physicality of the site becomes all-encompassing. The invisible aspects of a place become perceivable. As the painter, Paul Cezanne stated, "Nature is on the inside. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope. I live in it from the middle. I am immersed in it. After all the world is all around me, not in front of me." Instead of drawing the site, one can now actually handle it, collecting its fragments to fabricate a history<sup>7</sup>. Suddenly the extension of drawing the site is to construct it, face to face with reality. The 'work' site has replaced the drawing as the place of intervention.

Within the tight margins of the 'work' site lies the possibility of architecture to be an act of improvisation in which the discrepancy between the idealized and the actual plans begins to diminish. The architect begins to act and find meaning within the interstitial space of the







existing condition. This is not a new concept, apparently Gaudi lived on the site of Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. Ralph Erskine set up his office on site for the Byker Redevelopment in Newcastle-on-Tyne in England. Recently, architectural firms have experimented with 'installations', or full size mock-ups for actual pieces within existing infrastructures. The physical context becomes a place where we can intervene on a more immediate basis. The lucidity of our reading of the context increases.

Reading becomes a cyclical process. It involves observation, interpretation and the reconstruction (construction) of a context. In order for readings to become operative, the readings must not be descriptive of a place but attempt to unify its various aspects in a new way. Therefore reflection is not a passive activity; instead, it forms the basis of action. Reading leads to invention and finally intervention within the physical context. The cycle begins to complete itself as the new piece becomes a working part of that context which informs, in turn, subsequent built form.

7. excerpted from: Steven Robertson, *The Registry*, (3rd year, 1987.)

This project evolved in response to the changing nature of the North End community in Halifax. Up until the 1970's the community was inhabited primarily by blue collar workers. Recently, however, the make-up of the community has been changing and there is now a great diversity of inhabitants.

My concern over the issue of a changing neighbourhood led me to feel the need for the establishment of continuity between the past, the present, and the future. In order to illustrate my attitude, I created two characters: Jim and Emily. They are descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the community and represent continuity between generations. I felt they were best represented by the articles with which they worked and lived with in their daily lives. The articles/fragments seem to be the quintessential examples of the process of continuity which I am interested in. In the neighbourhood, there are many second-hand shops and junk stores where artifacts change hands and are being reused by different people. The fragments are scraps of the past and different ways of life. As the artifacts continue to change hands a cycle is set up linking people alive today with people long dead and people not yet born.





accreditation board, will be asking yourselves, "What is this Place?" and "What of TUNA, and why is it bothering me?" The short dramatization you are about to see will answer these burning questions.

(As S.M. speaks, CHORUS members enter and begin setting up the stage: arranging chairs for the three critics, bulletin board, ashtray, other props as required).

Our aim here is to hoist the standard of TUNA high enough to be seen all across this great, sprawling, multicultural mosaic of a patchwork quilt we call Canada, this vast region of messy vitality, this ambiguous but not ambivalent country of granite and quartzite, wheat and salt cod.

So "What is this Place," you ask? Well, perhaps most essential to understanding TUNA, the Place, is understanding the special bond between student and faculty found here. This bond can best be compared to that between newborn babe and its mum, or perhaps to that between lion and lion tamer: a relationship of mutual trust and admiration—and yes, a little fear—built up over hours and hours, years in some cases, of close collaboration at the drawing board between master and pupil.

In no place can that tight bond be better seen than in the student's final review, the public crit, (short for critique, from the Latin *cretonus cretinus*) where the months of hard work are brought from behind their veil of privacy into the public realm, to be presented before a panel of disinterested critics.

This particular crit features the design stylings of Fielding Lloyd Mellish—

F.L.L.M. (calls from offstage): With two LLs!

