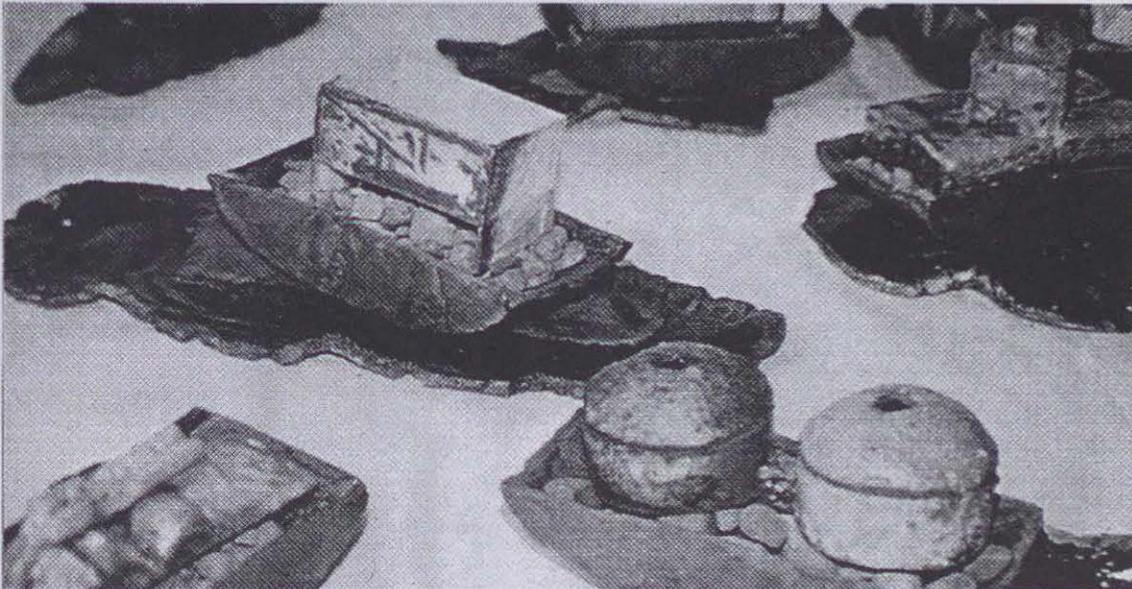


JAKE ALLDERDICE

ON THE ESSENTIAL PLACELESSNESS OF THE MACHINE



"The house is a
machine for living in."

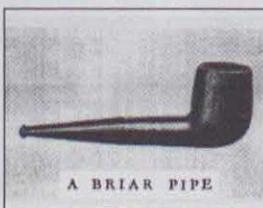
le Corbusier.

Specificity of program has always been a part of architecture. But "the building as machine" is a specifically Modern coinage. Today, machine-buildings bearing no relationship to place (picture the Quonset hut or the Holiday Inn) dot the globe. Most of us experience daily this placelessness of the machine. In the meantime our world, which once viewed progress and obsolescence as inevitable, is slowly seeing limits, and realizing that disuse does not "refuse" make. Today we question plans to bulldoze abandoned churches, power plants, schools, and other miscellaneous "old buildings." Today we see an art gallery in a power plant, condos in a grain elevator, a laundromat in a church. Everywhere, new programs fit with interesting quirks into old structures. Taking a functionalist view for a moment, that the nature and form of the original structure is directly brought about by its purpose or program, one has to grapple with a contradiction when one sees how well a given place can adapt itself to new uses, especially uses far from the originating idea. Still more paradoxically, the old form reads clearly under the new layer of function: "power plant;" "church;" "train station" etcetera.¹ This essay proposes that the old structures are able to perform so well under new requirements because of the strictures of the original requirements. These strictures led, over time, to the development of recognizable types. As a test of this hypothesis, one could come up with extremely specific programs, new and unexpected programs, and see if the "machines" which result have that wonderful flexibility that seems to accompany our most "functionalist" edifices. Can this approach, which utterly denies the importance of

1. The church as "condominium" corresponds to the church as "type" precisely in the same way Magritte's painting, "The Betrayal of Images" corresponds to Le Corbusier's famous *objet type*, the briarwood pipe. To say "This is not a pipe" evokes several kinds of response, a primary one being "Yes it is."



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.



A BRIAR PIPE



above navel, leaving about 30 cm between cuffs and floor): Fielding Lloyd Mellish, Fielding Lloyd Mellish, use my whole name!

TONY (explaining to critics):
Fielding Lloyd Mellish--

F.L.L.M.: With two LLs!

TONY: --Has exactly 90 seconds (TONY looks at watch) starting. NOW--

(Loud sound of clock ticking.
F.L.L.M. grows agitated and gamely struggles to interject and start his presentation as TONY's intro bites into his allotted time)

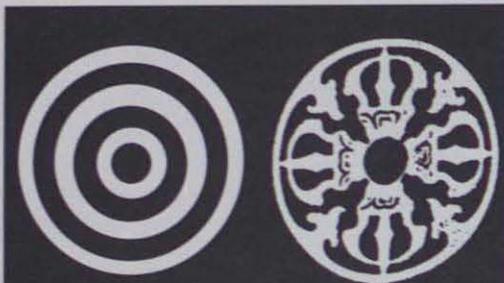
TONY: --to present his life's work. Following that, our critics' panel have as much time as they need to probe deeper and test the limits of the thesis. When they are done, if anything remains to be said, faculty has agreed to allow an additional 15 seconds for student questions.

(TONY pans audience, waggles moustache, sits).

F.L.L.M. (practically foaming at the mouth, half-blind, and obviously in some sort of agitation bladder-wise): I... I... I have a prepared text. (reads diatribe, notes falling, mangling words and sentence order; CRITICS react according to character: GARY cracks knuckles; JULIA grunts and rumbles; TONY watches time). The starting point was a phrase of Foucault, the French epidemiologist and semi-idiotic philosopher, "Architecture is the epidermic play of perversity."... My project is a multi-use playground, church, slaughterhouse, donut store, carwash... I try to subvert the opposition between the sacred and profane... Whereby the profanation of the sacred and the sacralization of the profane disclose that no-thing is truly sacred and thus nothing is simply profane--

"place," lead paradoxically to a heightened awareness of place?

Encircling the twin cities of Halifax and Dartmouth, forming a sort of modern analog to the medieval city wall, a railway cut and a divided highway sharply define a line of "inside" and "outside." The center of the circle, however, is no bull's-eye; it is missing. In its stead a gash spreads north and south, a long harbour, bleeding away from the center, denying the center's existence. Two bridges and some ferry lines



CONSIDER THE SYMMETRY OF HALIFAX/ DARTMOUTH IN RELATIONSHIP TO ITS ATTRACTION TO BOTH THE MILITARY AND TO NEW AGE AND EASTERN RELIGIOUS GROUPS: BULLSEYE OR MANDALA?

baste the two halves together. It is a tenuous connection, at best.

Not insignificantly, the modern wall of road and rail is conceived not as a barrier but as an avenue, a line not to impede flight but to allow it. And like the wall, the harbour, a line of symmetry, is also a line of flight. But to the city dweller the harbour is foremost a line of discontinuity. Reaching the water's edge, we change modes and zones, we shed one skin to don another, whether sailing through the air on a bridge, or crossing the water by boat.

Recognizing its nature, I walked the wall: the railroad that cuts around Halifax, and the highway that rings Dartmouth. On foot, these are worlds outside the day-to-day lives of most city dwellers. We usually experience them in a train or automobile, our feet off the ground. On my treks, I made some sketches and gathered artifacts--litter--picking up objects that aroused interest or curiosity, evidence toward unanticipated

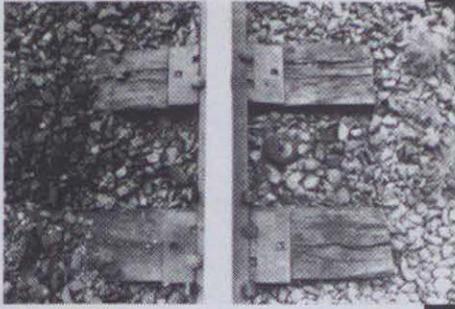


conclusions.

From the railway cut I gathered a brakehose, a bi-axial sign, and a playing card (among other generally heavy, earth-bound things); from the highway I brought back a leaf from the Yellow Pages, a wisp of cloth with some printed words, and a surveyor's stake (among other mostly light, windblown stuff).

Each of these objects was particularly suited to a function, without much possibility of generalized use, yet each could probably have been found along any railway cut or highway anywhere in the modern world. Like most modern machines, they were specific to purpose, but not to place. Modern times make inevitable this placelessness, but they also suggest a way to reconcile the universal with the particular. In the walled city of Halifax/Dartmouth with its empty center, they offer one source of a new "sense of place."

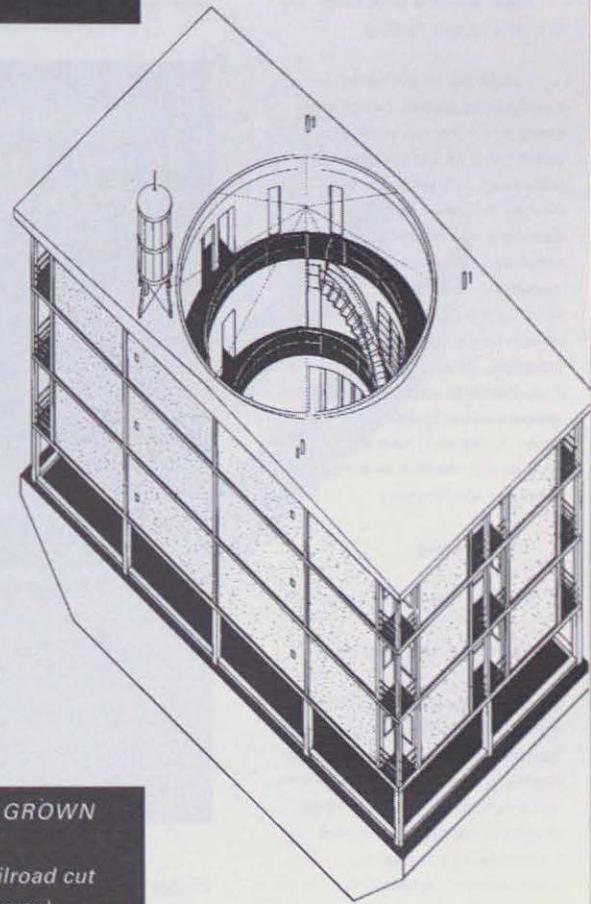
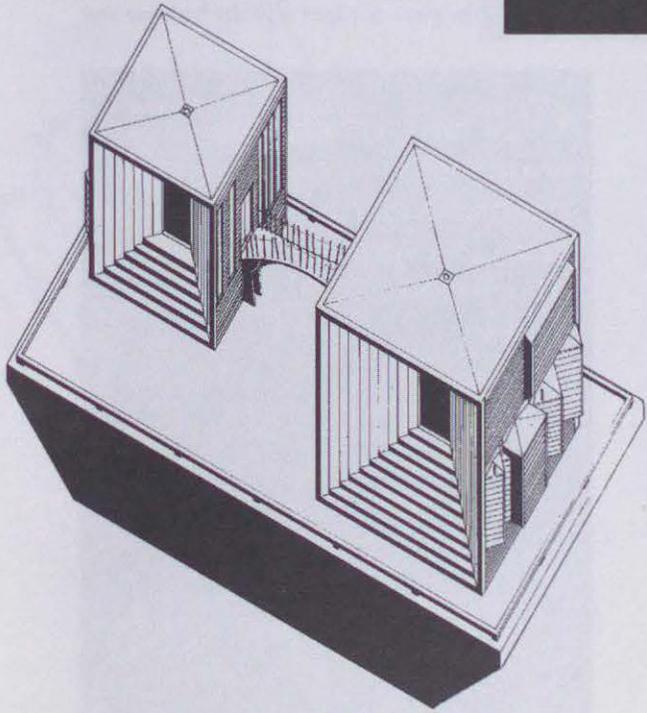
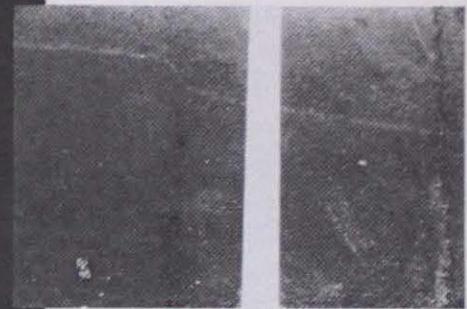
VISUALIZE TWO CIRCLES DISTANT FROM EACH OTHER ON A PLANE, THAT TURN OUT TO BE IN FACT SECTIONS OF ONE DONUT FORM THAT PASSES THROUGH BOTH.



DORMITORY FOR A MONASTIC ORDER

(pairing of the grinder from the railroad cut and the numberplate from the highway)

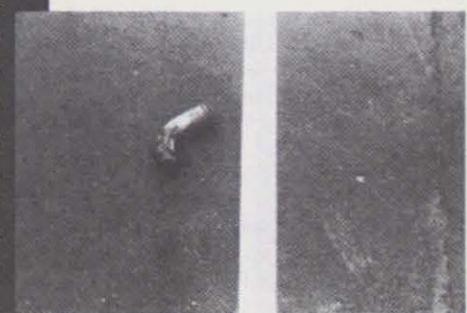
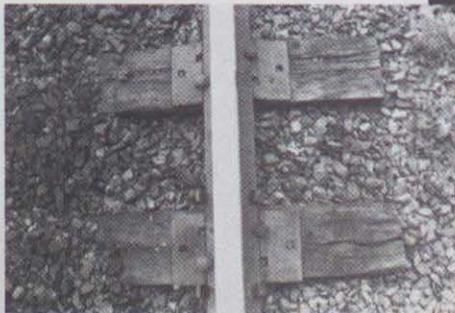
The program for this building called for a number of bedrooms grouped introspectively around an open central chamber, within and around which all public activity takes place: arrival and departure, administration; cooking, cleaning and eating; lectures and browsing in the library. Worship is private and takes place in each initiate's own room. Initiates work on fishing boats which are moored to the barge at night. The bottom level is open to the air and serves as a place for the gutting and resale of the day's catch.



HOUSE FOR PARENTS AND FULL GROWN CHILD

(pairing of a plastic "Bob" from the railroad cut and the automobile part from the highway).

This program called for living quarters for a middle-aged couple and their adult child, whom they still support. The forms are Platonic solids which have been deformed to allow inhabitation. The windows in each dwelling face the other dwelling, making it impossible not to spy when looking out. One may sit on the front steps, but any view of the other place is denied. Another view is possible by stepping out on the bridge that connects the dwellings, but one runs the risk of meeting up with one's counterpart, with the ensuing complications. The bridge, while appearing to be stretched to breaking, is of cast iron and is very strong.





(Loud buzzer sounds).

TONY (ever the fair-minded): Try to wind it up now, Fielding.

F.L.L.M. (faster and faster): Fielding Lloyd Mellish, (reads) and, based on the theories of Peter Eisenhower, who, in his House Q proposition. . . . A kind of random, ordered, redundant, ephemeral, discordant, neo-chaotic atonal sympathy. . . synchrony. . . symmetry. . . symphony. . . Whatever! (F.L.L.M. whips back curtain, revealing wobbly, pathetic model, and faint, unreadable drawings). Which I have reinterpreted in my thesis—no longer "House Q," but "skewed house!" (flattens model). Oops. To this end I have utilitated a designer-like metafort, of Beingness in Placeness and Timeness

TONY: Fielding—

F.L.L.M.: Fielding Lloyd Mellish—

TONY: We really must move on.

F.L.L.M. (Lapses into half-muttered buzzwords, picking up props from table as appropriate): Quiet yet deafening, hard yet soft, shredded yet whole (wheat), simple yet complex, animal yet mineral. . . existential. . . exponential. . . ornamental. . . phenomenon. . . pheromone. . . barley. . . oats. . . cow. . . horse. . . pig. . . Woof! Woof! Ba-a-a-a. . . (lapses into incoherent farm animal calls and grunts).

TONY: Fielding, SHUT UPI (pause) I would now like to open the floor to our critics. Do you have any questions?

(Silence. Long pause).

TONY: Yes, well, let me put this back to you Fielding—

Ranging the evidence from the Halifax side in a speculative spectrum of "the general to the specific" and that from the Dartmouth side as "the anonymous to the personal," I arbitrarily paired each of the artifacts in a relationship that spanned the gap: a) a circular grinder plate from the railroad with an aluminum tag numbered "J-7" found along the highway; b) a name, "Bob," in shiny chromed plastic from the railroad, and a plastic automobile part shaped like a funnel (with one wide mouth and one small mouth) from the highway; c) a brakehose from the railroad and a Polaroid photograph of two lawn tractors from the highway; d) a bi-axial reflective sign from the railroad and a glossy stockholder's report from the edge of the highway.

The pairing across the gap embodied the concept that two objects, separated in place and time, may be seen to be linked at a higher dimension: visualize two

made the leap to the architectural program, "Dormitory for a Monastic Order."

Similar leaps lead from the plastic "Bob" and the funnel shape to the "House for Parents and a Full-grown Child," from the brakehose and the Polaroid of the two tractors to a program for "Bachelor Pads," and from the bi-axial reflective sign and the quarterly report to a program for a "Barge for Wind-induced Noises Emanating from the Harbour."

Why a barge? It seemed appropriate that the random displacement of the litter along the highway or the railroad cut should be echoed in a floating world of "bargebuildings." The barge is to the harbour as the piece of paper is to the highway and

POETS SPEAK OF A FLASH OF INSPIRATION, LONG-AWAITED:

I ONLY KNOW THAT A ROOK
ORDERING ITS BLACK FEATHERS CAN SO
SHINE
AS TO SEIZE MY SENSES, HAUL
MY EYELIDS UP, AND GRANT
A BRIEF RESPITE FROM FEAR
OF TOTAL NEUTRALITY. . . .

MIRACLES OCCUR,
IF YOU CARE TO CALL THOSE SPASMODIC
TRICKS OF RADIANCE MIRACLES. THE
WAIT'S BEGUN AGAIN,
THE LONG WAIT FOR THE ANGEL,
FOR THAT RARE, RANDOM DESCENT.

SYLVIA PLATH, "THE COLOSSUS"

circles distant from each other on a plane, that turn out to be in fact sections of one donut form that passes through both. The problem became to design the "donut" that could unite each pair.

In uniting the two objects I relied on a kind of intuitive flash that can't be easily explained or rationalized, but in general what I tried to do was to devolve each artifact to a verbalization of its program or purpose, and to then connect the two verbalizations in a single program. An example would be the grinder, which presented an unparticularized unified whole greater than the sum of its parts, like an anthill, and the numberplate, which seemed to be about specifying one particular thing amidst many. Connecting these two, I

CAN THIS APPROACH, WHICH UTTERLY DENIES THE IMPORTANCE OF "PLACE," LEAD PARADOXICALLY TO A HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF PLACE?

"IN THE HUGE PIT OF FORMS
THERE LIES RUBBLE TO WHICH ONE
STILL CLINGS IN PART. IT FURNISHES
THE STUFF FOR ABSTRACTION.

"A RUBBLE FIELD OF SPURIOUS
ELEMENTS, FOR THE FORMATION OF
IMPURE CRYSTALS."

PAUL KLEE (DIARY ENTRIES)

as the chunk of rusted iron is to the railway. Like them, it is essentially placeless, of indeterminate, random location, moved there by powers not of itself.

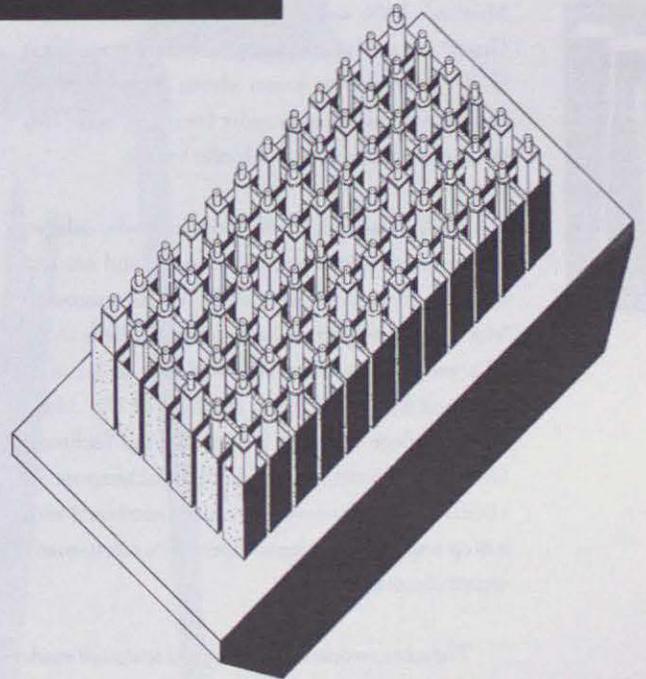
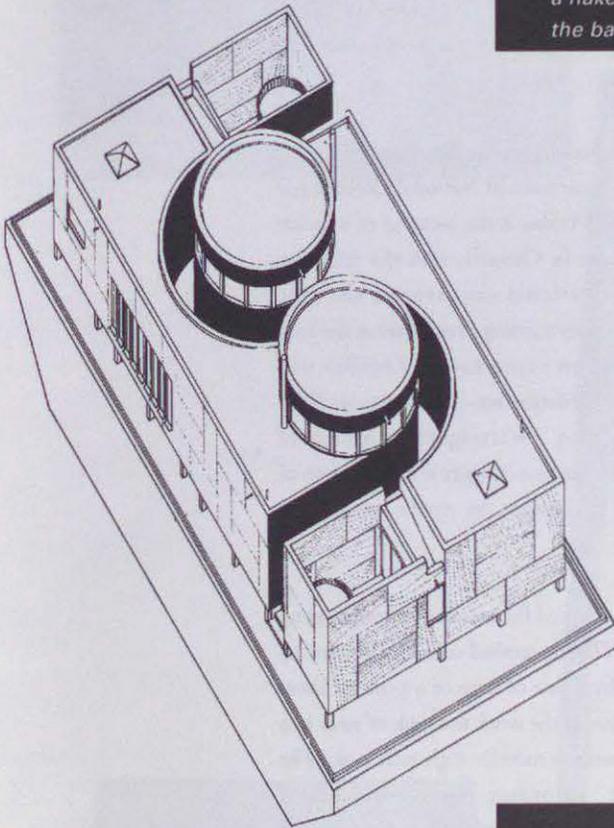
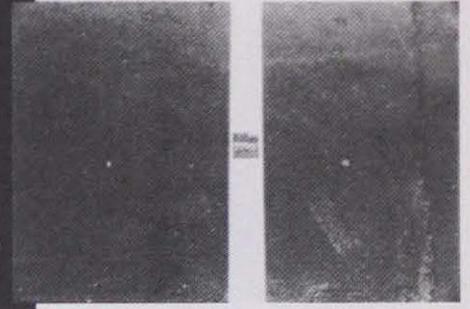
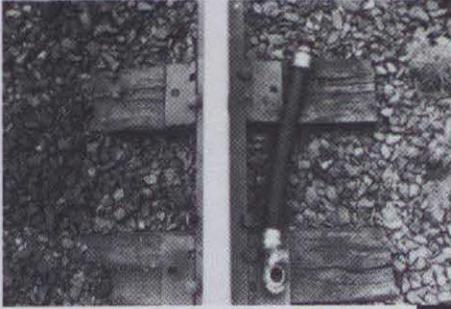
Though essentially placeless by nature, the modern machine holds the possibility to "make place" despite itself; it frames a view into another world of infinite possibility and infinite variation. It creates a place characterized by a line of flight extending in either direction, where "that which is absolutely necessary but does not exist," can exist.

"When a problem is properly stated in our epoch, it inevitably finds its solution." le Corbusier.

"BACHELOR PADS"

(pairing of the brakehose from the railroad cut and the photo of two lawn tractors from the highway).

Here the program called for two apartments, each a reverse image of the other. Each apartment focuses on a large circular bed at one end and a hot tub at the other. The route from apartment to apartment is circuitous and deliberately intended, with opposing walls of green and red, to cause disorientation and visual dissonance en route. Arriving in an apartment, a curving gallery wall hung with etchings leads inexorably past a raised kitchen to the bed chamber, with its open fireplace. From the bed one sees through the rising flames an apparition: a naked body writhes under a cooling shower in the bathtub.



BARGE FOR WIND-INDUCED NOISES EMANATING FROM THE HARBOUR

(pairing of the bi-axial reflective sign from the railroad cut and the glossy stockholder's report from the highway).

This program was for a low-maintenance "art gallery" which displayed and took advantage of the harbour's natural resources. The resulting exhibition is of noise, caused by the ever-present breeze and wind blowing across the mouths of pipes, which have been filled to varying levels by rainwater and salt spray. The entire barge acts as a resonating chamber, allowing the ghostly and beautiful tones to be heard all the way out at the city wall.

