

An Interview with Richard Henriquez

Richard Henriquez, architecte de Vancouver, a parlé au FIFTH COLUMN (Ricardo L. Castro, professeur d'architecture, et Eric Majer, étudiant) de son travail: ses bâtiments et ses objets. L'installation, Le Théâtre de la Mémoire reste à ce moment au Centre Canadien d'Architecture à Montréal. L'événement s'est passé au téléphone lundi le 24 octobre.

Eric Majer If architecture is all about dealing with history, and a building marks an event in history, do you worry about how, down the road, your mark is appreciated?

Richard Henriquez *Yes and no. I think of buildings as being part of a series of layers. I would hope some of the buildings we do, people would just not tear them down, but they would leave some fragment that perhaps would represent the fact that they were there. This is what I try to do, either as real fragments or representations of what was there. I suppose the answer to this is yes, in the sense that we like to think of ourselves as part of a historical continuum, and that all evidence of our existence is not wiped out, which is what we tend to be doing to the past generations.*

Ricardo Castro I have three questions. They are directly related to the idea of memory since the issue we are dealing with is the construction of memory. Departing from the idea of evocation/invocation, the objects you make, and the buildings as well, are buildings and objects à réaction évocatrice, like the objects à réaction poétique, a quality which I find in your works labeled sculptures, installations... tripods. Mr. Schubert, in the catalogue of the exhibition, made a comment about the tripods as viewing devices, displaced to become viewed devices. However, I think that this is not quite so. I believe they are still viewing devices, viewing devices in a conceptual way, because they allow us to go beyond the device itself. It is like the surrealists using mirrors which become elements that allow penetration a dimension beyond that of the mirror itself. Am I correct in assuming that this may be one of the strategies used in the making of those objects?

RH *I do not think I would argue with that. I think Howard [Schubert]'s point could be elaborated somewhat in the sense that the tripods are used to hold up instruments that record, in the case of a camera; or measure, in the case of surveying instrument; or observe, in the case of a telescope. These are instruments that mark the scientific discoveries that we have made. They are rational measurable devices. I replace them with objects that contrast this measurement and recording with the idea that opposite to reason is intuition and these objects have to do with the recognition of intuition as part of the flip side of life, I guess. This is what*

oak posts supporting a slippery beam. The light wood steps creak satisfyingly with the wear of all ages. One third up the dark papered wall, the stairs turn to the right to complete the ascent. Banister posts disappear into the ceiling, the

they are all about. Memory, intuition, and imagination are phenomena that we cannot measure or record particularly well; yet, there is some urge to do this because the world is so formidably committed to the scientific and technological thrust of life.

RC Coming back to the tripods. They are the antithesis of things that are fixed. They are movable. The fact is that they have been moved here. They are displayed at the CCA. In this moving they create a history of their own. Since you are also interested in fiction (fiction of architecture, fiction of these objects), do you take into account this fiction? Does it become part of a new narrative, a sort of accretion of stories, that may develop later on?

RH *I don't think so. I don't really even conceive the fact that they would be moved any more than someone who made a violin, which is also movable, would worry about exactly where it would move or of which concerts it was part. A violin is an instrument for making music; this is another kind of instrument. They are both movable, but I guess that is it. I have not really considered where they would be moved to particularly.*

RC I was interested in the history of them, because they are like the boat that was taken to Alberta, right?

RH *Right.*

RC And then there is a whole fiction that is created with this displacement; the defamiliarization of the boat that used to be in the sea coming into another place...

RH *I think the movement occurred when the instruments got taken off [the tripods] and the change took place as the new objects were added to them, that is the historical event of importance — not really when they moved from Vancouver to the CCA.*

EM Well then, how will your perception of the objects, or your feeling for the objects be altered by the fact that they were exhibited?

RH *Not at all.*

EM Not at all?

RH *No. I don't think so.*

EM No? Then within the home, do the objects lose anything when they are displayed so intensely within this Memory Theatre?

RH *Are you talking about the tripods or are you talking about the stuff in the Memory Theatre?*

EM I'm talking about the stuff in the Memory Theatre.

RH *Well that's a different thing. I was responding to the tripods. Okay, what's the question about the objects in the Memory Theatre? The Memory Theatre is a totally different thing from the tripods.*



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triangular space between steps and the inverted surface encloses a comfort and a wish for the space below.

A cooler wash of air flows along a narrow hallway atop the stairs. The wood of the floor is darker here, laid across with a long dark red carpet. It slides from side to side along the floor, evoking at once joy and unrespected urbanity. The walls are dark and punctured by many doorways and the dark oak framing.

The first door on the left brings an abrupt transformation of cool and dark to cool and very bright. The inner door frame is coated with layer upon layer of white enamel. The floor is a sheet of light linoleum, the tiled walls white with the air of cleanliness and clammy damp. A small window casts indirect

EM Well, the first question could apply to the tripods, though. Does the fact that...

RH —*That they have been displayed in Montréal and Vancouver become the history of the Memory Theatre, is that the question?*

EM No. Because the tripods started off as being in your house, how does your perception of them change now that they have been exhibited publicly?

RH *Not particularly much. They haven't changed.*

EM They don't become less personal?

RH *No... no, they aren't. I wouldn't say that. The Memory Theatre is a different matter, and we can talk about that a bit, but I wouldn't lump the tripods in with the Memory Theatre.*

RC Well, I am very curious about that because I thought that maybe I was lumping them together too.

RH *They're not... they're not at all the same. The Memory Theatre is a much more personal thing than the tripods. And the tripods, conversely, are much less personal than the Memory Theatre. If I had my choice, the Memory Theatre would not be displayed at all, but it would not have existed, or have been put together, had it not been for the show.*

RC That's very interesting because this refers to one of the questions we had about this notion of memories: this notion of intimacy, of something that is very intimate...

RH *Yeah, well there are two things about the Memory Theatre. It is an object. It is a very intimate thing, and you can see that when you look at it. But the making of a Memory Theatre as a public proposition, for other people to do for themselves, is really the justification for displaying it, not the actual specifics of the piece. Do you follow me?*

RC Yes. That for me is a very important clarification. Maybe that's why these tripods are called sculptures. They're speaking to the general public. They're speaking more of their art in a way...

RH *You have to understand though, that none of these things were made for any other reason than that I wanted to stick them in my house. I don't sell them. I don't normally display them. Howard [Schubert] and Nicholas Oldsburg came to my house and said, "well, ...why don't we display some of these things..."— I said, "really? Why would you want to do that? It's not architecture," and they said, "no, no..."*

EM In which case, what kind of sorting out process did you have to go through to prepare the exhibition?

RH *Essentially to fasten together a lot of the things. I have, still in my house, twenty of these things, that have loose objects on top of them, that I move around, and they're balanced there rather precariously. The ones*

that were taken to Montréal were fixed together permanently so they wouldn't fall apart... but they're constantly changing in my house. I find stuff that I put on top of them.

EM I would like to follow up my first question about building in the city, and the idea of endurance. What does endurance mean to you? I mean that in Vancouver, it seems that the most enduring buildings...

RH *Do you mean endurance or permanence?*

EM Buildings in recent years that seem to be enduring stylistically perhaps, seem to be buildings like those at Granville Island, Lonsdale Quay, and even Canada Place: buildings ephemeral or industrial in nature. Do you think that this is the problem with architecture today? Do you think that architects are afraid to make a mark that really speaks of permanence?

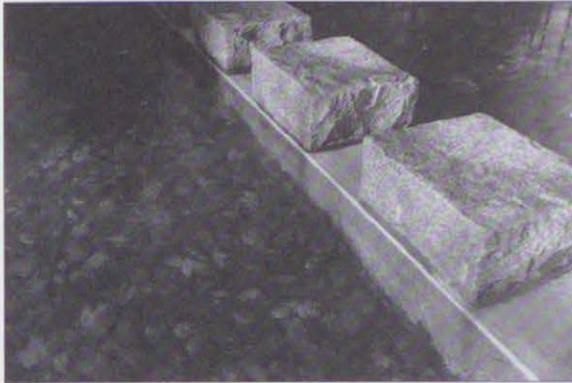
RH *I don't think that - well, permanence IS an issue, sure, and I think that all architects if given a chance would want to build permanent buildings. We have cost constraints that frustrate that urge on most architects' part. I don't think that is really the question. The question is one of authenticity rather than permanence. People like Graves, and Venturi, who started to talk about history, introduced into architecture stylistic elements which were called "history" - and you know the way of organizing buildings had to do with history. What they did was amateur in a way, because they picked the same way that the neoclassicists picked arbitrarily things from Greek and Roman history. You are left with a sense of arbitrariness —what style are you going to make this building into and why would you want to make it Neo-gothic versus Classical. Whole theories of architecture had to do with what style you made prisons, and what style you made courthouses, and so on, where people tried to take a little bit of the arbitrariness out of the choice of which style they dealt with. At the end of the day, I don't think they succeeded in taking the arbitrariness out of it. When you, on the other hand, try to evoke a sense of history of that specific spot in the world, you are not faced with that problem of arbitrariness because there was something there. Whether you liked what was there, or did not like what was there, that was what was there. If you evoke its presence, it is because you want to deal with this question of a historical continuum and you don't get involved in this arbitrariness that you get into in the other scenario. Right! Are you getting what I'm saying?*

EM Yes.

RC I'm very curious about that myself, because I think there is a very familiar and appropriate way of proceeding in a certain way when making architecture, by reading the traces that are in a place. And then, from there, starting out on the quest and the making, right?

RH *Right.*

RC In a way, it is a little bit too like some artists. I'm thinking of people, such as, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, and all those people who have been doing artwork in the last 20 or 30 years. They start by



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light, almost a shadow within the bright illumination from overhead. This functional space, cast aside in all buildings and dwellings, is a space within which essential activities of life occur. The shining cabinet of glass and silvery chrome holds the chemical accoutrements of daily life. Mixed together in a transparent glass of crystalline water, a murky white appears: the gritty chalk of pain relievers, the creamy greenish toothpaste, sliding out of its mysterious tube in voluptuous flows, the cold peculiar flow of isopropyl, the murky colours of snake-oil cold remedies; stirring the mess down the void of lead piping, inverting the glass with a ringing clink. A long basin tub stretches to the right of the door, the smooth white enamel scene of many a

dealing with the landscape; for example, walking through the landscape and finding things. It is through their walk, through their contact, through their immediacy with the place that they start creating their work of art, that in this case, might be a path or a journey which becomes recorded.

RH *Yes, Antoine Predock has got a bit of this approach when he talks about the "road cut." He is dealing with more of a rural countryside and the road cut to him was the cut landscape where the layers of geological history are displayed rather than cultural history, which is what I deal with when I am dealing with the city. But I think the urge is the same.*

EM Well, to deal with the actual building of a building as opposed to the building of a model, is it more frustrating to do a building because of the difference in scale. Do you know what I mean?

RH *It is always frustrating to build a building. The building industry is a very stressful thing. I mean, you got all these people that you have to get pointing in the same direction or at least in compatible directions. Furthermore, there is a cost of thousands of dollars. It is very frustrating. I think that if you are going to achieve anything in architecture you must have goals that are above and beyond what the client wants. You have to be limited to areas which are not in direct conflict with the general program. And in the same way that I was able to build tree stumps that to the client were planters and a landscape he really had no knowledge or interest in the shape of, you have to be fairly skillful in picking your fights, the ones that you can win. But to go back to the question, it is tremendously difficult to get a building done.*

EM Well, I was wondering that —

RH *Given the choice I would rather make models or sculptures, which is why I putter around on the weekend on these things.*

EM I was just wondering how much control you feel you have.

RH *I have as much as there is, I guess. Except for those unusual cases, where someone comes to you and hires you because they think you are a great architect. For that we just about never get hired. They hire us because they have a problem getting things for city hall, or they want a high-rise in a low-rise zone, or...*

RC You are too modest, Richard. I have a question. This interests me because out of these issues comes another. There are two practices: there is the practice of making objects and making buildings. And you have been teaching in the past. My question is, and I know it is a loaded question in a way because I am trying to relate it to the making of architecture, the making of objects, and the empathy of the transmission of these ideas into teaching. How do you see your teaching?

RH *I have not done a lot of teaching. I taught for a couple of years at UBC as a part-time design teacher and I have had intermittently graduate students that, you know... I am their mentor. A few years ago, I did a course, a project actually with the students at the University of Calgary. But, how do I relate what I am doing to teaching?*

RC Well, how do you approach your teaching?

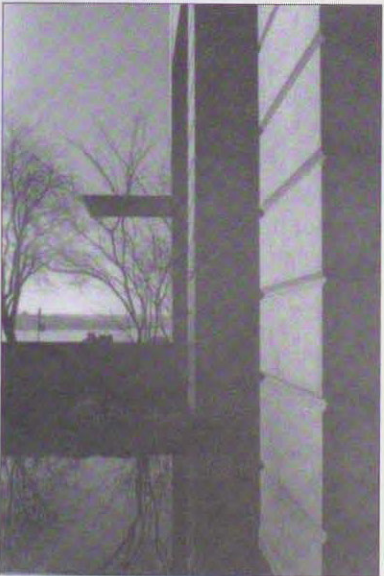
RH I will give you an example. The last project I did with the students up at Calgary was a 4th year group and they were, before I came, given a site in downtown Calgary. It was the old Greyhound bus terminal. It was probably nine city blocks in size. They started off in groups and they were doing huge urban design exercises. Like mega-project thinking, you know, some developer would come in and redevelop this thing. I don't believe in large projects at all. In fact, I see a large project done as a [single] project as an opposition to a series of buildings on a street. The increments are tremendously important. It seems to me, and when you look at the cities you like the best, like Amsterdam or whatever, the increments are almost invariably the smallest. You get this cohesiveness on the one hand, and on the other hand, you get the variety. When you have a large project, you almost always lose this. So I was interested in this whole notion of narrative and history, with this divergence from large developments.

I suggested that the whole site be basically resurveyed back into the original city blocks that were there and that each of the students would have one block. They could each do their own project and no one should talk to each other, or attempt to coordinate it. And so I said: "imagine that this piece of property..." The first week of the project, they had to research their own family history and they presented it. The waves of immigration (there were 16 students) were surprising to everybody, because instead of thinking that they all came out to Calgary from Toronto or across the West, it turned out that most came through the States from the Eastern States to the Central States then up vertically, up into Calgary. Almost, I would say, more than half, which I found a bit surprising, but nevertheless...

So they had to research their own family history and they had to imagine that this particular piece of property belonged to the first person of their family tree, that it had been used by the person, and was handed down through the generations, and now belonged to the students themselves. They could design and build something on it that they could use for themselves: they could live there, work there, do whatever they wanted there. They could not sell it. It could not be used for making money, and it had to be handed down to their next generation. That was the term of reference. And to make it a little more interesting I said the piece of the farm that is on your section of the site has to be kept and utilized in the project. If you wanted to get rid of it you would then have to find another student who would use the material in their project. Okay? That was the basic outline. It was a little difficult - only the brightest got it in terms of the narrative. Some of the students took it literally and said, "okay, there is a piece of a farm here, and there is a piece of shop here, and da da tee da." They really did not use the narrative as a means of informing the project, rather they sort of did it somewhat slavishly. But there were some really interesting projects that came out of it: they dealt with recycling and some ecological things. They dealt with the memory, and the use of fragments and so on. When we put all the projects together in one big model, as you would expect, it had a wonderful, wonderful feel to it. It was very intricate, very fine grained, and would have made a wonderful area of the city.



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sea battle between filmy white soap and diving hand of raisin-shriveled fingertips.

Leaf-green darkness fills the space at the end of the hallway. Two windows occupy the far corner of the room. Painted a sky-blue, appearing black from within, they admit precious slivers of yellow light. Here, the walls have been peeled of flaking history, painted with a green absorbed into the smooth plaster as water into a desert floor. The darkness enfolds complex equipment for the reproduction of images from life. Long low tables line the walls with shining mystifying metallic stands supporting arrays of knobs, lenses, and buttons. A low shelf of pine planks and cinder blocks lines the far wall. Above, a generational icon, with one finger pointed defiantly at the sky, rides a motorcycle into legend in a slightly frayed poster, secured loosely to the wall with small metal tacks piercing the green aridity of the plaster.

The image can be seen from the entire length of the hallway as from here, near the light entrance of a vast room. Deep red walls wrap a wide space illuminated by three bright bay windows. To the left, a long closet helps to enclose the doorway entrance. A broad bed stretches across the somnolent quiet of the room. Wide white cloth of ancestral origin gives a bright history, exuding warmth and the smell of richly worn cotton. Above the bed, one wall is coated with a thick layer of white paint. The intricate silhouette of a leafless tree, dead or dormant for the New England winter spreads its arms protectingly over the head of the bed. Bright light from the windows loops around the end of the room. Beneath this, a long low chest rests heavily

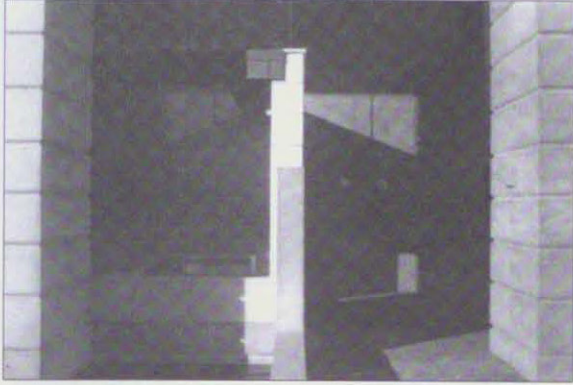
EM Do you think that your imaginative approach to site and history has developed because you have spent most of your life in Western Canada, where history, in a more narrow sense, is not evident to most — whose idea of place has to do only with topography or ecology?

RH *No, I think it is growing up in Jamaica. The family had been there for 300 years and I spent a lot of time with my grandfather. He told me about the various episodes in the family — it is all there on the same island. This whole business about material and labour is important in the sense that when the value of material and labour changes the whole issue of building changes. For instance, in a country where material is expensive and labour is cheap, as it is say in Jamaica, people would recycle bits of board, they would take nails out, straighten them and re-use them, and they would reutilise the foundations of older buildings. They would have an opposite attitude to that in Canada, where labour is expensive and material is cheap. When you look at an old building and think about what value it has economically, it has probably none. So we are constantly wiping out stuff that has no economic value, but has tremendous social and cultural value.*

You know, there are all these controversies about this business, and we are now beginning to deal with them: with heritage bonusing and some of the new laws that you find in Vancouver. I am sure in Montréal they are too. Where you can remove the value from a site by selling the development rights to someone else and consequently be left with the old building of little economic value without a penalty for keeping it; in that way we are able to keep a lot more of the older buildings that we would not otherwise be able to. I have been involved in the heritage movement in Vancouver for many many years and pushed for these zoning changes that we now have.

RC I am going to switch to another question. In your architectural work, and also the very intimate creation of the Memory Theatre, there is the aspect of narrative and, of course, these things are all tied up. This question is just a curiosity I have. It is about the writing of these things. I guess there is another stage, another point that would be the development of these ideas as a text, but as a written text. Is there any part of your work materializing into a text?

RH *I don't think that it works like that. I don't know how a writer works, but it seems to me a lot of writers have something to say, and then they find a story which is a metaphorical way of saying it. In my case, the use of narrative is not so much having something to say as it is having something to build. So you want to build an apartment building that is 20 stories high, with 17 suites — that is a functional thing. It is related to a site, that had on it some historical artifacts; it might involve people that have a history, and so on. There are patterns of imagination and development, there is the natural world, and in order to weave this into some sort of a cohesiveness, how the hell do you relate the need for a 1400 sq. ft. apartment suite to the history of development in the city? The only way to do it is by a story. Consequently, these stories are invented as a way of giving some cohesiveness to what needs to be built, and must be dealt with in the same way that a writer would find a story to deal with some of the things he wants to say.*



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RC I find that the stories are a strategy to build — to make — but what is interesting is that the stories after that become real stories too.

RH *Well, sure, it now becomes a cultural artifact, which is what architecture ought to be in the first place anyway. Architecture has got to deal with culture, and the architects that understand that are probably the ones that are dealing with the real issue here.*

EM I just have two questions about the drawings that were exhibited [at the CCA]. Some of the drawings have with them images of the human body, and of course the figure is important in giving a sense of scale, but why, for instance, do we find a woman's body as part of the Vertical City concept?

RH *Well... I guess I am going to defer to intuition here, but if you look at the plan of that part of the city, on one side there is a bridge that goes off at an angle, and on the other parallel with it are two freeway...*

EM ...cloverleaves?

RH *Cloverleaves. And it suggests a sexual connection which I just sort of brought out in the building. There is no more to it than that.*

EM Okay. Finally, I wanted to ask you about "whiteout," because I think many of us have come to think of it as something to avoid. Is whiteout a last resort?

RH *I love the stuff. I use gallons of it.*

EM Well, it was just interesting to see at the exhibition under the list of media for some of your drawings: "whiteout."

RH *It has this quality, which... what is the word... Well, it is lurid under there. You can see what is there, but you have covered it up. It is just a faint record of what the first thing was. So you don't want to get rid of it totally, but sometimes you do.... There are two types of whiteout, I mean there is a whole science to whiteout if you want... there are some that are more transparent than others. I have two types on my desk; depending on how much I want to get rid of the line, determines which one I use.*

Thank you.

- 1, 2 Eugenia Place
- 3, 4 The Presidio
- 5, 6 Eugenia Place
- 7, 8 Eugenia Place, The Sylvia