

An Interview with John Patkau

Marlene Druker

John and Patricia Patkau founded Patkau Architects in Edmonton in 1978, and moved the practice to Vancouver in 1984. Their projects include the Canadian Clay and Glass Museum in Waterloo, Ontario, the Strawberryvale School (fig. 1) and the Newton Library in Surrey, British Columbia. The firm has won numerous awards, including four Governor General medals.

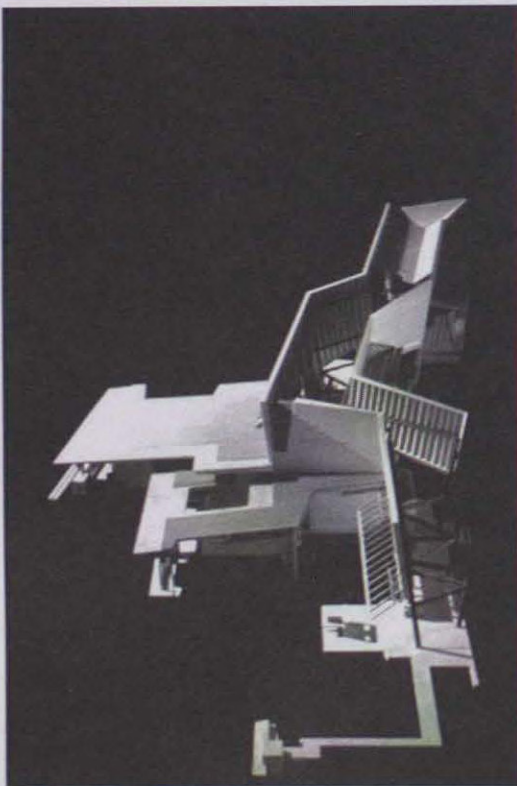
This interview was conducted by Marlene Druker in February of 1995 in Toronto at the time of the exhibit, "Patkau Architects: Selected Projects 1983-1994." We would like to thank Jennifer Flemming of the Design Exchange and Gobi Kim and Scott Francisco of Venue Magazine for their help.

The Fifth Column: What were the most valuable lessons you took away with you from your studies at the University of Manitoba?

John Patkau: Going to the University of Manitoba, I think, had some very important advantages. It was a relatively good school in a very isolated place. Living in an isolated place is a huge advantage because you are looking outside to what's going on in other places, you're looking everywhere. What I find in larger communities, when I come to Toronto or when I go to New York, is a greater level of self-satisfaction, a sense that what's going on here is important and we don't need to look outside. I think that's a tremendously provincial characteristic of big centres; and so I think that to become really sensitive, you need to be an outsider. Growing up in Winnipeg is a perfect way to learn to be an outsider.

The press often describes your firm as "Canadian." What does that description mean to you?

From the inside, it's hard to know if you are or if you are not a Canadian architect. Who says this anyway? Is it other Canadians, and do they have enough perspective to really know? I am a Canadian national, that's all I can say. Perhaps somebody from outside of Canada might be able to distinguish qualities which are uniquely Canadian; I don't know what they would be. I do think that we are very concerned with making buildings that are appropriate for their place, whether Canada or Tibet. I don't feel that I am limited to strictly Canadian architecture. If I were to work outside of Canada, presumably I would be doing work that would be appropriate to the place.



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The press that I've read qualifies "Canadian" as "a Canadian understanding of Landscape," something that relates to attitudes towards landscape prevalent in Canadian writing or painting or art.

I would like very much for the work to contribute, not to some fixed idea of what Canadian culture or landscape is, but to what it is becoming.

In an interview I read, you quoted Michael Benidikt from For An Architecture of Reality who said, "Architecture shouldn't try to compete with other media—it has another role." How do you view architecture's role within global culture?

Electronic media, movies, television, and even print, unlike architecture, are not tied to location. These media can be very successful at developing universal themes, on a global basis, even if they deal with local subjects. A cops and robbers show that takes place in Los Angeles can have a mythological dimension. I think that there are many very powerful media; these media generalize, they tie together a global culture. Architecture certainly has an interest in this. Most of what we see is a manifestation of this global culture—perhaps that is architecture's problem. In my opinion, any culture needs to define itself both globally and locally. Without both aspects, it is an incompletely defined culture. We are part of both a world-wide cultural development and a local cultural development, and if we don't take care to develop our local culture as much as we invest in the global culture, then we will continue to be colonials; we will continue to be the outposts of a dominant culture located elsewhere. The only way we can become authentically mature is by counterbalancing the global culture with the local one.

Architecture has a huge role, a huge opportunity here, because it is necessarily grounded in place. It is necessarily tied to the dirt and to the climate and to the sunshine of the place in which it is located and as a result, it has a natural ability to deal with the local. I'm not denying that it has a role in the development of global culture, but I see it having a particularly important role as a counterbalance to other media, which are very good at dealing with global issues but not necessarily good at dealing with local issues.

It seems that your work benefits from good architect-client relationships. I would expect that to be important.

Yes, that's true. It is impossible to build a good building without a good client. There is a definite role for the client to play in the building process. I don't want the client to be an architect, I want the client to be a client. It is never a question of the architect or the client imposing his will upon the other, but of the two working together towards the building.

Which projects are you most pleased with?

That's a good question. I don't want to offend any of my clients by saying I like one building more than another...

...especially since we've already established that good clients make for good buildings.

In all seriousness, it is critical to the success of the project that the clients be good. The vast majority of our projects have had good clients. I think, typically, I'm happier with the more recent projects, not because the more recent clients are better, but because our skill is getting better. The more recent projects, such as the Barnes House and the Strawberryvale School, are, in my mind, the ones that are most successful because they have used knowledge gained from preceding projects.

Do you think the amount of time you have to work on a project affects its relative success? I was thinking about the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo and whether you thought the project turned out better because it was put on hold and then revised.

Definitely. I think that the building that we finally constructed is a much better building than the original competition entry. It has the benefits of editing and also the benefits of some maturity. We waited a couple of years before we designed the building and we were better architects by that time. I also think that the edited version is a more lean and minimal response and that it is stronger for that.

Could you elaborate on the process of editing a project down to its bare essentials?

It's a long process. Inevitably we have great difficulties with schedules on our projects. We are always struggling and we find that the projects where we have been given extra time by the client are the ones that have turned out best, by far. They are also the ones on which

we tend to lose the most money. I think we need a long time to distil projects. It's difficult, because in our present context, time is the most important element; time is what we don't have. I don't mind not having good budgets but I am frustrated by not having enough time.

How important is site supervision to achieving craft in the finished building?

Craft is extremely important to us but I differentiate craft from workmanship. Good workmanship is something the architect strives for, but the architect is not building the building, someone else is building the building. The workmanship that you get is somewhat limited by the abilities of the builders. To my mind the level of workmanship is not as interesting as the level of craft, because there is no conceptual order to workmanship; there is just good skill versus bad skill. What is interesting to me about the notion of craft is the idea of making and how that idea is manifested in the design so that the way things are put together within the design represents an idea of craft. How that is actually done by the workman is a separate issue which doesn't have the same intellectual content, and is, therefore, not as interesting to me.

Have you ever been disappointed by a building where the craft did not come through as a result of poor workmanship?

Workmanship is often disappointing. The building process is inevitably one of getting a less than perfect result, but then that's true of everything. More important is the idea of making and yes, there are projects which have disappointed me as a result of my own failure to deal with issues of craft as well as I would have liked. I think that those projects are typically earlier in my development—I shouldn't say mine, I should say in the development of the firm because the work is really a product of many people's efforts.

What were the biggest surprises in your buildings? Did the final appearance of the buildings differ from the way you had imagined them during the design process?

I'm not so surprised anymore. With experience you tend to understand what the buildings will become. The surprises are at the beginning when you move away from always working as a student or as a young architect in drawings and models to translating them into

reality. As more of those representations start to take full size, you are astounded by the impact that size has. I vividly remember one of our first houses, the Appleton house, which has a giant column in the centre about which the entire house is organized. The house is in Victoria, and I remember we visited from Vancouver. We got there late in the day; I walked in and there was this column and I was just overwhelmed by it. That was, in many ways, the most startling experience that I have had about the transformation from drawings and models to reality. That was the first big, powerful gesture that we had attempted. Subsequently, we are becoming jaded and expect things to turn out as we have planned.

How do you test your design ideas during the design process?

We do everything we can. We begin in drawing form but we quickly move to models; we work with both drawings and models. We are a small office with a big model shop. We really use models to understand the projects in a fully three-dimensional way and I think that it's reflected in the final buildings. The buildings tend to be three-dimensionally more ambitious, I think, than the norm.

Some people are very talented at perceiving the building from drawings, but the model is a more powerful representation than drawing, at least for us. It has proved to be critical in understanding what's going on. Our buildings are becoming increasingly irregular and geometrically ambitious, which is not possible to understand in drawing form.

Have you thought about switching to computer modelling?

We think about it all the time, but we haven't. I think that real models are still as quick and easy to manipulate as computer models. I don't think that computer models are better than real models so we see no need to start using computers. At some point in the future, when computers become more powerful, that may be different.

How do you feel about the fact that people tend to experience architecture second-hand, less by visiting the building itself and more and more through representation—drawings, photographs, models?

I think that the world of second-hand is actually not bad. We have first-hand experience of drawings, models, photographs, et cetera. They have a life that is parallel to the life of buildings, but they don't represent them. They are something other than buildings, which retain the qualities of those buildings.

I've seen representations of the Clay and Glass Gallery post-design study model. Did you use it as a tool to understand what had been done in order to take those lessons on to future projects? Did it lead to any regrets about decisions that were made in the design of that particular building?

There are no regrets about the building because that's the past. The post-design model is about the future so I don't focus on representing what the building might have been. There are several issues which I'm concerned with in these models: one is understanding more clearly the ideas that were driving that building and expressing those ideas in a more conceptual way. Another is trying to understand what those ideas become when you transfigure them. This is an incomplete model with fragmentary qualities, and the ideas are manifested in a way that is different from the building. That is what sparks the ideas that are involved in subsequent projects. In this case, the Newton Library was very self-consciously derived, in part, from the Clay and Glass Gallery post-design model. If you look at the structure of the Newton Library and look at one edge of the fragmentary model of the Clay and Glass gallery, you'll find some striking similarities, because the formal ideas in the model were developed in that subsequent building.

Are the post-design models removed from site and from context?

Yes, it's more of an exploration into architectural concepts, as opposed to the projects which are obviously preoccupied with context, with the environment. This is our complimentary activity where we have the freedom to focus exclusively on architectural language and architectural structures.

Marlene Druker, B.Arch. '94 McGill, is a former editor of The Fifth Column and is currently studying nautical architecture in Alaska.