

Exhibition Review: Topographies of Anomaly and Indeterminacy

David Theodore

Hal Ingberg, Prix de Rome Canada, 1993/1994
Centre de Design de l'Université du Québec à
Montréal

17 January to 4 February 1996

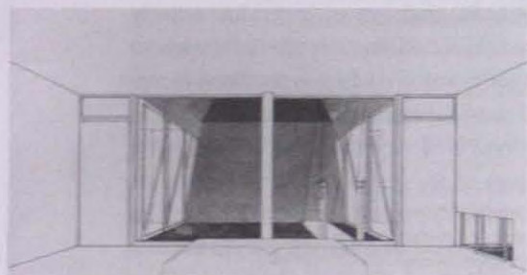
"People may say what they like about the decay of Christianity; the religious system that produced green Chartreuse can never really die." Saki.

The Canada Council are trying to establish more architectural culture. They do it in a well-established fashion, namely, by sending young talents off for a sojourn in Rome. The lucky winners of the Prix de Rome (and Quebec has had its share since 1987 when the prize was constituted—Jacques Rousseau, Philippe Lupien, Sophie Charlebois, and in 1993-94, Hal Ingberg) get to spend a year in an atelier on the Piazza Sant'Apollonia. On their return, they must present evidence that they have done something other than drink wine and argue with waiters—some tokens of their increased architectural culture. Presumably all Canadians benefit from this augmentation.

The 1993/1994 Prix de Rome winner, Hal Ingberg, McGill and SCIARC graduate, an "individual actively engaged in the field of contemporary architecture whose career is well under way and whose work shows exceptional talent," chose to present the results of his Romish lessons in the form of an exhibition. Installed first in the exhibition room of the new Pavillon de Design de l'UQAM, the show, "Topographies of Anomaly and Indeterminacy," was at the time of writing set to travel to a half dozen architectural schools in Ontario and Quebec.

The Prix de Rome program is about the problems of architectural culture more than the problems of architecture. Whereas architecture depends on built form, architectural culture depends on images and texts, representations of architectural ideas not always based on built form. Thus architecture exhibitions have their own little Pullman car on the gallery circuit. Galleries get not the experience of the building itself, but the Art of the art of building. Derided as paper architecture, theoretical projects go in and out of galleries with little direct effect on the built environment (where the construction industry, based on building, drinking, and swindling, holds sway). At their worst, these graphic forays rebound in graphic architecture, decon appliqué and precast Scarpa "details." But at their best, theoretical paper projects are able to situate architecture in culture





(if only through photomontage), producing the beginnings of architectural culture. It is in the galleries, then, and not in the buildings, that we begin to understand architectural culture as an exciting set of ideas, ambitions, speculations and possibilities focused on but never limited to the building itself.

Two of this gallery show's three parts are documented in a toothsome catalogue prepared in part by TFC alumni Tom Balaban and David Morin, with essays by Ingberg, David Bass and Georges Adamczyk. The catalogue includes drawings and photographs of the model of "La Villa Indeterminata," a theoretical project based in the tradition of the Italian humanist villa, and photographs of the Italian landscape glossed by an essay entitled "Plastic Surgery, Biological Operations and Natural Healing." The writing, although concise, can be self-conscious. Ingberg tries too hard in his essays to reconcile all contraries by subsuming them under metaphors drawn from gardening, biology and medicine. The powerful clarity of the photographs and drawings is undermined and not elucidated by this compressed telegraphic prose. Sometimes the fault is editorial—"La Villa Indeterminata" begins with a dangling participle and proceeds through an inconsistent parallelism to paragraphs muddled by misplaced and missing commas. But more often the images are simply more beautiful, more pointed and more evocative, than the attempts to articulate the intentions behind their making.

The third part of the exhibition, a slide show, documents an interesting project not illustrated in the catalogue. Determined to leave his mark on the place that marked him, Ingberg stripped the walls of his temporary atelier, exposing the history of the place, and then re-covered parts of them in green-Chartreuse green encaustic. Apparently some Waterloo students on their work term in Italy helped Ingberg in this task of dubious colour. The intervention, despite its Latin source—Ingberg saw the technique on some frescoes at Pompeii—seems altogether wholesome and, well, Canadian. Somehow the phrase "Prix de Rome" evokes that notorious Mediterranean tableau of sex and antiquity so attractive to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century minds, a picture of the sensuous Italian sun shining both on marble and brown skin. But the atelier remodeling sodatic debauchery and corruption, that necessary completion to the education of any sophisticated European, but rather a portrait of *un jeune homme, venant de sortir du bois*, wandering through the landscape of a culture that can be studied and observed, but never assimilated.

The best part of the exhibition is Ingberg's photographs of "anomalies and indeterminacies," fourteen of which are published in the catalogue. The power of the photographs lies in Ingberg's willingness to let the camera include, to frame pictures in a way that shows their subjects in context, a context which thus becomes a part of the subject in a mobius strip of subject and context. [Let's talk for a minute about self-conscious prose. -ed.] He has a keen eye for the point where nature and architecture combine, and then where the resulting combinations re-combine, capturing in his photographs a "precise rendering of the ambiguous." These combinations include ruined arches sprouting trees, Etruscan tombs and overgrown trashed cars. In these photographs architecture itself becomes a natural force, the ruins of which intrude upon and persist in nature; decay and ruin become a process of growth and change; the unfinished the permanent; wild nature more purposeful than the remains of art and architecture. (Still, the fascination of this condition *qua* condition escapes me. Trees growing out of the walls of your house—haven't they heard of building maintenance?)

Ingberg's attempt to use these images as a design tool is less successful. In *La Villa Indeterminata*, Ingberg transforms and extends a medieval storage depot into an intriguing underground villa. A number of inversions (the Miesian glass box placed underground, the "roof" garden appearing as three sunken courtyards) result in a complex environment (much like the spaces of OMA's Dutch House) that David Bass rightly compares to a Klein bottle. The Villa spaces are simultaneously open and closed, inside and outside, *en bref*, indeterminate. Still the project is less resonant, less productive than Ingberg's crisp black and white photographs of the original structure. There is no power in his graft of a modern villa and a medieval tower, for the indeterminacies of the addition are formal and spatial, not the result of time and change, but of prochronistic architectural intentions. The graft is successfully seamless, but sterile.

Perhaps the problem with the Villa is that in this theoretical project, Ingberg is able to ignore what in built form would probably annoy the hell out of him: the prescription of a vulgar domestic life. The ways of living set out by the program and planning are not indeterminate, but rather all too overdetermined, as if the culture of global suburbia had reached back into history and consumed even medieval lives. A series of sharp Resor House-like perspective drawings is symptomatic here. The prescribed details, including, centrally,

a large television set, present a thoroughly modern suburban way of life, devoid of the temporal ambiguity so valued in the photographs.

But one exhibition at a time. Ingberg knows that his project has no client but himself, and has bracketed the problem of personal culture in order to address ideas about architectural culture. Ingberg can single-handedly undo the evil effects of global capitalism in his next project. Here he has clearly, frankly and elegantly exhibited the results of a stay in Rome. And, after all, he has successfully meshed some aspects of his person with his projects. For apparently the inspiration for the green Chartreuse encaustic both on the walls of the atelier and on the model of *la Villa Indeterminata* came from an awe-full green Chartreuse jacket brought along from Canada. Would you rather he had left it behind?

David Michael Theodore enjoys listening to terribly bad musicals on Sunday afternoons.