

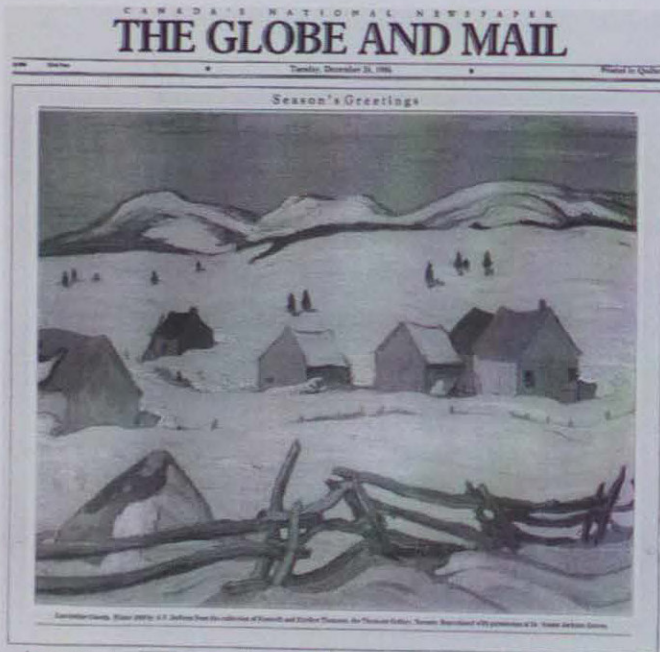
Why Joseph Mallord William Turner Should Be Better Known to Architects

Gavin Affleck

On the day before Christmas last year, the front page of Canada's national newspaper the *Globe and Mail* featured a reproduction of a painting of a modest group of farm buildings set among snow-covered hills (fig.1). The idea was to transform a newspaper into a greeting card for the holiday season; it was easy to avoid considering why this particular image was selected. But how is it that some old barns behind a broken fence were used to convey such a complex idea as the altruism of the holiday season? And how is it that popular understanding of the symbolism of such scenes is so firmly entrenched that the message came across as directly as if it were a scene of the Virgin and Child?

Even the most banal of landscape subjects, when set in pleasant surroundings and agreeably rendered, can elicit sentiments of a type usually reserved for fluffy kittens. In a process verging on alchemy, the rude materiality of the land is transformed into something cuddly: puffy pillows of snow on the rooves of barns are expressed at the expense of the eaves, topography becomes as gentle and curved as maternal physiognomy, and the very absence of any trace of the construction of fences and buildings completes their transformation into rounded, unobtrusive objects. The overall effect is striking in its homogeneity. There is little difference between the roof of a barn, the rise of a hill or the rail of a fence: all are rendered in a sympathetic arabesque. And there is something else as well, something greater than the palatable rendering of the common-place: the spatial orientation generated by the sky, the horizon and the lay of the land.

The full colour and large format of the *Globe's* front page was a provocative reminder of the ubiquity of symbolic scenery: the landscape image is among the most widely understood and accepted of our symbols. And if it is easy to dismiss the painting in the *Globe* as *quétaine*,¹ still landscape crosses boundaries between popular culture and high art with surprising ease. From the most commercial sugar shack art, through glossy travel brochures and adventure magazines, to the most oblique contemporary art, landscape embraces a wide spectrum of meanings. Two groups located like bookends at the extremes of this spectrum have devoted the most serious thought to the idea of landscape: geographers and environmentalists on the one hand and art historians on the other. This essay proposes that architects recuperate the middle ground: the creative applica-



Agreement on Hebron likely today

By David Sanger
JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel and the Palestinian Authority are expected to reach a peace agreement on Hebron today, Israeli officials said. The agreement would allow Israeli troops to remain in the city, but Israel would not control the city's police. The agreement would also allow the Palestinians to control the city's police. The agreement would also allow the Palestinians to control the city's police.

Western cold to push east

By David Sanger
WASHINGTON (AP) — A cold front is expected to push eastward from the Gulf of Mexico into the United States today, bringing a mix of rain and snow to the Northeast. The cold front is expected to bring a mix of rain and snow to the Northeast. The cold front is expected to bring a mix of rain and snow to the Northeast.

Holiday Edition

The Arts
Recently, the arts community has been celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of the artist. The arts community has been celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of the artist. The arts community has been celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of the artist.

Woman cleared in shooting of unborn with pellet gun

Judge's ruling no stated legal rights of a person to fetus based on case law
A woman who shot her unborn child with a pellet gun was cleared of charges today by a judge. The judge's ruling was based on the fact that the woman did not know she was pregnant. The judge's ruling was based on the fact that the woman did not know she was pregnant.

Political jousting begins for mantle of famed nun

Big shoes to fill / Who will be next?
Political jousting has begun for the mantle of the late nun. The political jousting has begun for the mantle of the late nun. The political jousting has begun for the mantle of the late nun.

Money denied to man treated in womb

Man who was treated in womb denied money
A man who was treated in the womb was denied money. The man who was treated in the womb was denied money. The man who was treated in the womb was denied money.

figure 1.

tion of landscape as a conceptual model is an opportunity to reaffirm the primacy of space as the essential medium of the art of architecture.

Landscape's two bookends have set up a pendulum between a scientific and an aesthetic approach to their subject. Geographers and environmentalists see landscape as habitat, with ecology as an organizing principle; they have a weakness for moralizing: "We are destroying the environment!" Art historians bring to bear a cultural bias that values the perception of nature and are wont to stray from reality in their pursuit of ideal models of beauty. Taking little initiative, architects content themselves with a mirroring of the environmentalist-aesthete pendulum: it is assumed that practitioners interested in the environment are preoccupied by technical details and are not interested in design; conversely, those attracted by the art of architecture display a lack of respect for concerns that are not glamorous in an artistic sense.

As a discussion of landscape as a repository of multiple meanings, an essay by geographer D.W. Meinig entitled "The Beholding Eye: Ten Visions of the Same Scene" puts the environmentalist-aesthete pendulum in perspective. Meinig shows how landscape, as both a pleasant word in common speech and a technical term in special professions, may be considered variously as nature, as habitat, as artifact, as system, as problem, as wealth, as ideology, as history, as place, or as aesthetic.² A powerful and irrevocable fact, landscape obliges all points of view to locate themselves within its frame of reference, generating a broad and largely unexplored conceptual territory. Understanding the bookends remains, however, the most effective means of gaining access to these unexplored territories. Since much has already been written about the effects of science on the shaping of our built environment,³ this essay will concern itself instead with the aestheticization of the physical world and the bias of architects for a particular reading of the landscape that it has fostered. An examination of the work of two English landscape painters, J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, will show how a parallel thread of pragmatism, quite distinct from the dominant aesthetic attitude, runs through the history of landscape. The presentation of three case studies will show how this pragmatic approach to landscape may be used to structure the creation of architectural space.

The idea of landscape as a conceptual model is a surprisingly late development in Western culture.⁴ The new idea first appeared in two distinct guises:

both romantic and pragmatic visions of human interaction with nature were to be found among the early manifestations of landscape as cultural expression. The romantic sensibility ultimately prevailed at the expense of the pragmatic: the nineteenth century paradigm of landscape as aesthetic experience has remained the status quo for the twentieth century. While we can trace the origins of landscape myths such as the fertility rites of the Nile or the legends of Arcadia to ancient or antique times, the crystallization of landscape as an independent concept and the consequent appearance of a word to describe it date to much later. The word landscape entered the English language as a Dutch import only at the end of the sixteenth century. Its original meaning was anything but romantic: in Holland, the word *landschap* was used to describe areas of the great coastal flood-plain reclaimed from the sea. A *landschap* was as much a work of human engineering as a scene of beauty to be depicted.⁵ In the paintings of Brueghel, constructions on a territorial scale such as dikes, roads and canals combine with buildings and the traces of agriculture to create inhabited environments that are totally integrated with nature. Human activity of a common, every-day variety pervades these images, penetrating space to appear as a far-away ship or advancing into the foreground as a solitary figure absorbed in manual labour. Human work and its connection to the land is the story of these pictures; work is not an isolated event but rather a way of life and a method of occupying space. The timeless quality we sense in a Brueghel painting is tied to the expression of an ongoing relationship: we shape the land and the land shapes us.

The sixteenth century Dutch idea of a landscape as a natural territory restructured for practical purposes is representative of a type of realism left behind in the wake of Romanticism. There is in fact more in common between the Classical vision of Arcadia and the nineteenth century Romantic landscape than either idea shares with the lost tradition of pragmatism. While the pragmatic landscape seeks a symbiosis between human life and nature, what the Classical and Romantic landscapes have in common is a mechanism for their separation. In the pastoral tableaux of Poussin, Arcadia situates itself in the bucolic idyll of the Mediterranean *parerga*, with its leafy shadows and golden fields. The *parerga* is a manicured and controlled environment, clearly shaped by human hands, but as opposed to the scenes of Brueghel, the evidence of work in progress is notably absent. Nature is ideal,

pristine, and unchanging. Whatever modifications it may have undergone are limited to the benign and nurturing function of agriculture. Common folk are replaced by gods and Arcadia serves as a backdrop for the enactment of the Classical myths. The space in these pictures is the space of theatre, the classical narrative the script and the actors collected at stage centre. The formal arrangement foreground figures predominates, leaving the landscape neither inhabited nor engaged.

Seeking a clean break from the generalizing tendencies of Arcadia, the Romantic landscapes of the nineteenth century emphasized personal experience and emotion. The appearance of artistic depictions of natural settings as sublime retreats coincided with the rapid expansion of Europe's industrial cities and their problems of crowding and poor sanitation. It is under these conditions that landscape painting as a distinct artistic genre flourished for the first time. Ironically, the new approach never quite eclipsed the reductionism it set out to criticize. The sanctification of nature focused greater attention on the qualities of the outdoors, but it also pushed the natural world out of reach. By framing the landscape as a sacred object the Romantics created a new distance between city and country, civilisation and nature.

There is no better example of the contrast between romantic and pragmatic visions of the landscape than the parallel careers of two Englishmen, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) and John Constable (1776-1837). As the most important figures in the development of modern English landscape painting, the artistic approaches of the two men were nonetheless radically different. A gifted artist, Turner was also an extremely successful professional. He began selling paintings at an early age and remained a commercial success throughout his life. He was a member of all the important academies of his time, more often than not the president. He travelled widely, maintaining an urbane and cosmopolitan life style. Energetically embracing the idea of the sublime, Turner's work was celebrated as the most daring and innovative of his time, yet he took pains to respect the boundaries of popular taste. Constable, somewhat of a misfit, sold only fifteen pictures during his life and remained largely unknown.⁶ Perceived by his contemporaries as a conservative, Constable's project was, in its own quiet way, far more radical than Turner's. While the spirit of the times obliged landscape painters to celebrate the dramatic and the spectacular, Con-

stable sought instead to clarify and dignify the common. Going against the grain meant that public acceptance did not come easily, nor was it particularly important to Constable: he stayed close to home in his native Dedham County, making a habit of painting and repainting the same scenes. If few artists were more firmly rooted in their historic context than Turner, few were more suspicious of the spirit of their times than Constable. His work bridges history in fascinating ways, representing simultaneously a link back in time to the realism of Dutch marine landscapes and a link forward to an emerging post-romantic landscape.

Conceiving of nature as a retreat from harsh realities or a sublimely powerful force are forms of escapism, and few artists took this escapism to more dizzying heights than Turner. Preoccupied with the picturesque, Turner was a master of landscape composition, doing more to aestheticize the landscape than any artist since. His early pictures were composed to be "beautiful," but he soon learned to organize his imagery to elicit a wide variety of emotions (fig. 2). His fascination with natural disasters led to the creation of pictures of "sublime catastrophes," including such scenes as an avalanche, a typhoon and a fire at sea. In these pictures, Turner uses artistic devices to project a predetermined emotional agenda on the landscape.

John Constable had little patience with what he perceived as the posturing and straining after effects of Turner and other popular artists of his time. He was not convinced that the grandiose necessarily made for quality in art.⁷ What he proposed instead was an almost seamless union of the human and the natural: in his pictures sky, land and vegetation are bound together and the horizon, rather than dividing, creates a hierarchy between two components of a greater whole (fig. 3). Constable's unique genius was the ability to communicate a direct human experience of natural phenomena without imposing an emotional point of view. A Constable painting is shaped by the structure of land and cloud: form and mass described in tone, shade and shadow are the foundations of his art. In the highly materialistic context of early industrial society, Constable succeeded in making something out of nothing: invoking a completely integrated experience of outdoor space, he proposes landscape as gestalt.

But what does a comparison of two nineteenth century English landscape painters have to do with



figure 2.



figure 3.

the challenges of making architecture today? Absorbing the contributions of both artists is essential to an understanding of the present situation, particularly since each established such distinct positions of lasting influence. Turner should be better known to architects because he played an important role in shaping the attitudes to outdoor space that dominated the twentieth century. The aesthetic bias of the picturesque left landscape to be treated as a figure apart from the practical problems of construction. If buildings did not always have to be beautiful, the landscape did. The two were rarely considered together: while the building as object and its interior space were the subject of great experiment during the various Modernisms of the twentieth century, outdoor space remained constrained by sentimentality and nostalgia. As the first great manipulator of the emotional content of nature, Turner opened the door to a type of artistic strip-mining that has inhibited the capacity of the landscape to set its own emotional tenor. The resulting alienation of people from their surroundings has found architectural expression in the separation of the building as artifact from its natural or spatial context, the pursuit of formal effects, and an abdication of the responsibility of studying place. Even during periods of reflection when contextual urbanism has been reconsidered (such as during the Post-Modern critique of the 1970s), architects have remained primarily interested in buildings as objects. Moving from an interest in one's own built creation to include those surrounding it is progress, but context still means other buildings. Where are the sky and the ground, the space in which the object exists, the horizon? Somewhere along the way an amnesia developed regarding the basic spatial orientations specific to inhabiting the surface of a small planet. While nineteenth century artists threw themselves with great energy into this debate, their tradition, lacking rejuvenation, has degenerated into a type of mysticism that devalues the very things it holds sacred.⁸

Constable should be better known to architects because his gestalt vision of landscape was prescient of many currently emerging concerns. As we spend more and more time interacting with fields of information, a new awareness of the greater spatial field in which we live is gradually replacing the romantic approach to landscape. Perspective and its fixed point of view are being superceded by electronic simultaneity, and few ideas will be better served by this

change than the concept of landscape. Conceiving of a field in this way allows us to understand landscape space as continuous from inside buildings to outside. Architectural space is but a subset of landscape space and as such is part of a larger field that embraces geographic, social and historic space. This new view is close to Augustin Berque's vision of landscape as a sensual and symbolic medium that negotiates the relationship between the social and the natural.⁹ Berque's reading locates landscape in McLuhanesque territory: scenery is no longer only a physical or an aesthetic fact, but also a medium of communication, a language with the capacity to link isolated realities. Considered in this way, landscape is at once locally complex and generally diffuse: a medium wholly appropriate to the twenty-first century.

For architects, then, landscape is a spatial model that unifies the natural and the constructed, the social and the physical, the small scale and the large scale, outdoors and indoors. As an architectural discourse it prefers space-transition to object-position, and re-establishes the city and urban design as the focus of debate. Vittorio Gregotti, in his book *The Territory of Architecture*, suggests how an architect might learn to work with the land:

If geography is therefore the way in which the signs of history solidify and are superimposed in a form, the architectural project has the task of drawing attention to the essence of the environmental context through the transformation of form.... I have attempted, for instance, to understand what one could conclude from reflecting on the idea of landscape and nature as the sum total of all things and of their past configurations. Nature, in this sense, is not seen as an indifferent, inscrutable force or a divine cycle of creation, but rather as a collection of material things whose reasons and relations architecture has the task of revealing. We must therefore modify, redouble, measure, situate and utilise the landscape in order to know and meet the environment as a geographic totality of concrete things which are inseparable from their historical organisation.¹⁰

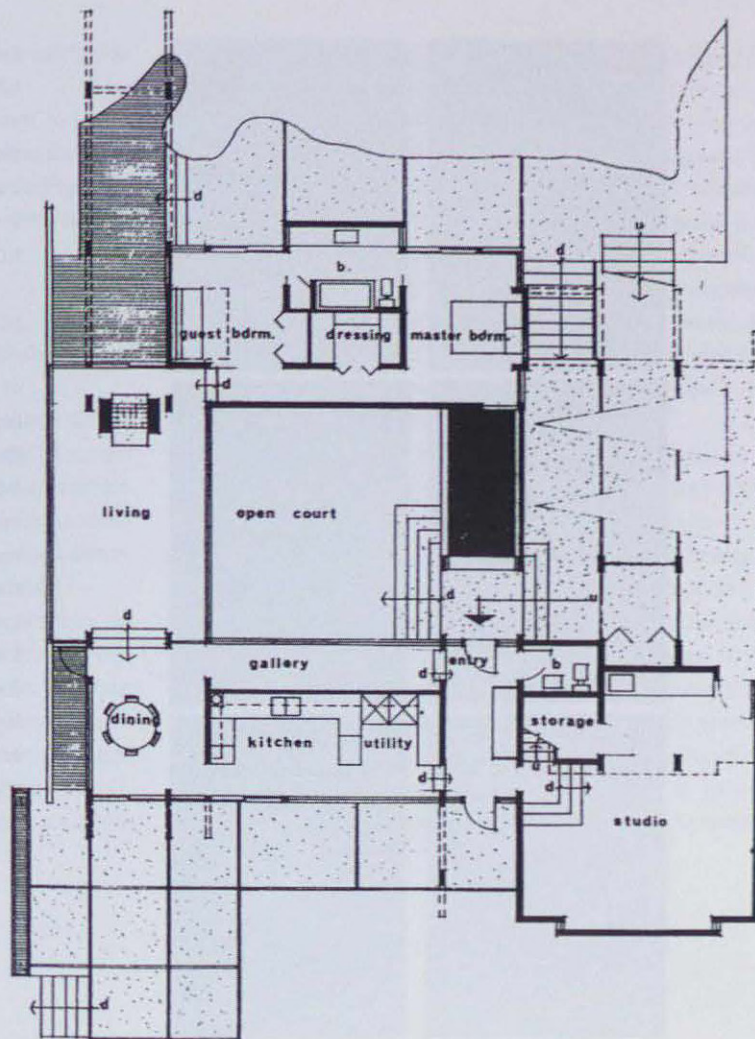


figure 4.

Case-studies:

Smith House, Arthur Erickson, Architect, West Vancouver, British Columbia (1974)

Built on a rocky and wooded ocean-front site, the Smith House is a remarkable synthesis of place and structure, interior space and landscape. Organized as an ascending spiral around an interior courtyard, the house's insistent horizontality creates a striking contrast with the verticality of the surrounding rain forest (fig. 4). Describing his design intentions, Erickson has written: "I wanted the Smith House to reveal the site in the same way that I found it revealed to me when I first walked onto it. Through the forest clearing I discovered the fern-covered rift between the rocks; then, at the end, the distant sea view through the vertical stems of the young firs."¹¹

The Smith House is an excellent illustration of the potential of even the smallest of architectural in-

terventions to project and control surrounding space on a much larger scale. Conceived as a glass bridge, the living room allows the courtyard to spill out towards the view of the sea, creating an ambiguity between the stasis of containment and the dynamics of movement. The condensation of landscape space into the building and the projection of interior space onto the landscape are rendered virtually transparent by the extensive use of glass.

One of the most striking features of the Smith House is the dissolution of its formal aspects through the sensual medium of landscape. While the style of the house is emphatically Modern, the strength of its design is not directly related to its formal expression. The dramatic horizontals of the post and beam structure are ultimately but a support for the revelation of a landscape.

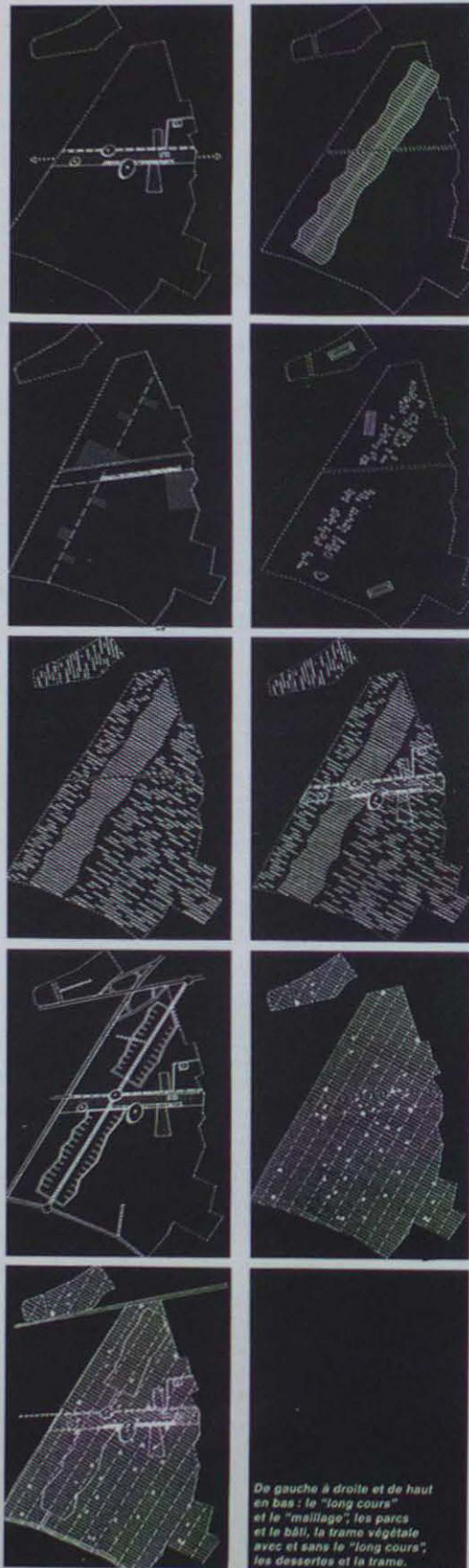
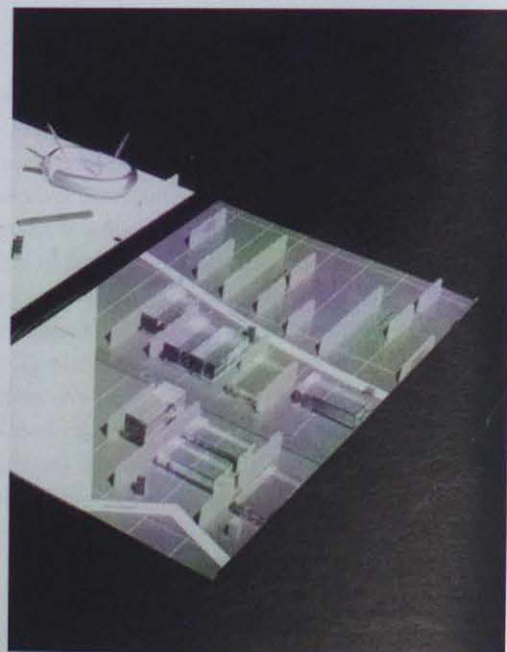


figure 5a.

Le Jardin d'Entreprises, Bernard Tschumi, Architect, Chartres, France (1991)

This prize-winning competition entry located on the fringe of the historic town of Chartres uses landscape in a novel manner to structure a master plan for a 220 hectare site previously devoted to agriculture (fig. 5a, 5b).

The Jardin d'Entreprises is a sophisticated example of the use of a landscape field to generate architectural relationships. Tschumi creates a dense grid of vegetation to provide identity and coherence to a high technology industrial park. This strategy links the site simultaneously to its agricultural past and to the post-industrial future. Identifying the band of buildings and vegetation that traverse the site as a *maillage* or weave, he provides contrast with the *long cours* (long yard), an oblique axis tied to the historic town that contains public and recreational facilities. Defined by rows of trees, parcels in the *maillage* are dimensioned to suit the requirements of light industry; buildings are free to develop their own forms within the grid. The rows of trees provide texture and climatic control on the micro scale and territorial identity on the macro scale. Service and public movement



5b.

systems are carefully controlled to further emphasize the experience of the vegetation weave.

By using landscape as a mediator, le Jardin d'Entreprises successfully connects itself to the existing fabric on the edge of Chartres. It proposes a complex, multi-functional landscape that operates on both practical and symbolic levels.

The Three Garden House, Affleck + de la Riva Architects (1997)

This semi-detached house occupies an infill site in Notre-Dame de Grace, an inner-city Montreal neighbourhood. At 170 feet, the lots on the street are among the deepest in the city, but maintain standard widths at 25 feet (fig. 6). The resulting urban distortion offers a unique architectural opportunity.

The house occupies its long, narrow site by organizing itself around three successive gardens created by the fragmentation of its built form. Invoking images of territory and geography, exploration and discovery on a miniature scale allows the architects to reveal the unique characteristics of the site (fig. 7). This strategy of miniaturization borrows conceptually

from the Japanese Bonzai tradition. Entering the house one passes from the front yard or first garden up a series of shallow steps to the interior courtyard or second garden. This entry promenade suggests the process of discovery of "going up river": domestic space as a territory is gradually revealed as one penetrates the site. A collector of roof water and a source for the "river": the second garden, while an outdoor space, is the most important room in the house. Access to the third garden or back yard is provided by a circulation spine that traverses the length of the building along the mitoyen wall.

The Three Garden House seeks to dissolve its formal expression through the revelation of a particular urban landscape. Where the house faces its immediate neighbours, planar brick walls recall the importance of the mitoyen wall as a basic component of high-density housing. In contrast, lateral walls opening directly on gardens are generously glazed. An exposed wooden structure marks the two parallel circulation spines, expressing itself alternately as an exterior pergola and an interior ceiling. Roof slopes and building masses are conceived in order to provide maximum contrast between the intimate character of

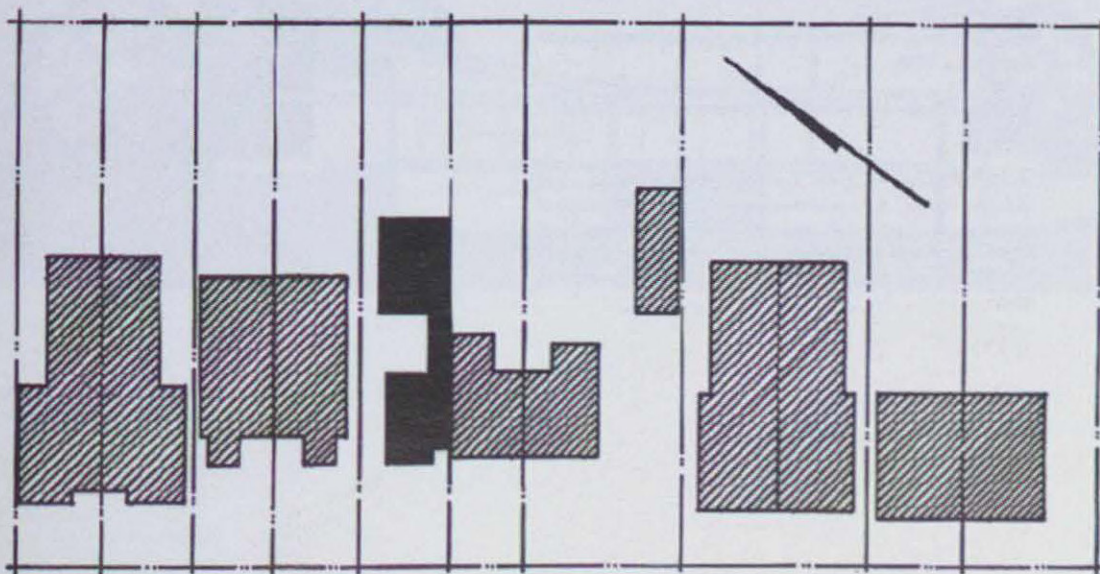


figure 6.

the interior courtyard and the more open spaces of the front and back yards.

By reinventing domestic space as a garden, the Three Garden House structures a series of transitions between public, semi-private and private domains. Playing with perceptions of scale, the house reveals itself in layers that stratify space across the depth of the site. The courtyard typology condenses the landscape of a high density urban neighbourhood into the central organizing space of a small house.

1. Quétaine is a Quebec French word meaning popular, vulgar or corny. It is in wide use verbally in English in Quebec and is richer and more descriptive than those synonyms.

2. D.W. Meinig, "The Beholding Eye: Ten Visions of the Same Scene," *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 33.

3. There is no better discussion of the effect of science on architecture than Alberto Perez-Gomez's *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Boston: MIT Press, 1984).

4. Meinig, 46.

5. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto: Random House, 1995): 10. For a further discussion of the etymology of the word landscape see J.B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

6. Michel Le Bris, *Romantics and Romanticism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1981): 115.

7. Le Bris, 115.

8. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991).

9. Augustin Berque, *Médiance de milieux en paysages* (Montpellier: Editions Reclus, 1990).

10. Vittorio Gregotti, *Le Territoire de l'Architecture* (Paris: L'Equerre, 1982).

11. *The Architecture of Arthur Erickson* Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988): 51. For an excellent appraisal of the Smith House in the format of an exhibition catalogue, see Graham Livesey (with Michael McMordie and Geoffrey Simmins), *Twelve Modern Houses 1945-1985* (Calgary: Aris Press and University of Calgary Press, 1995): 40-43.

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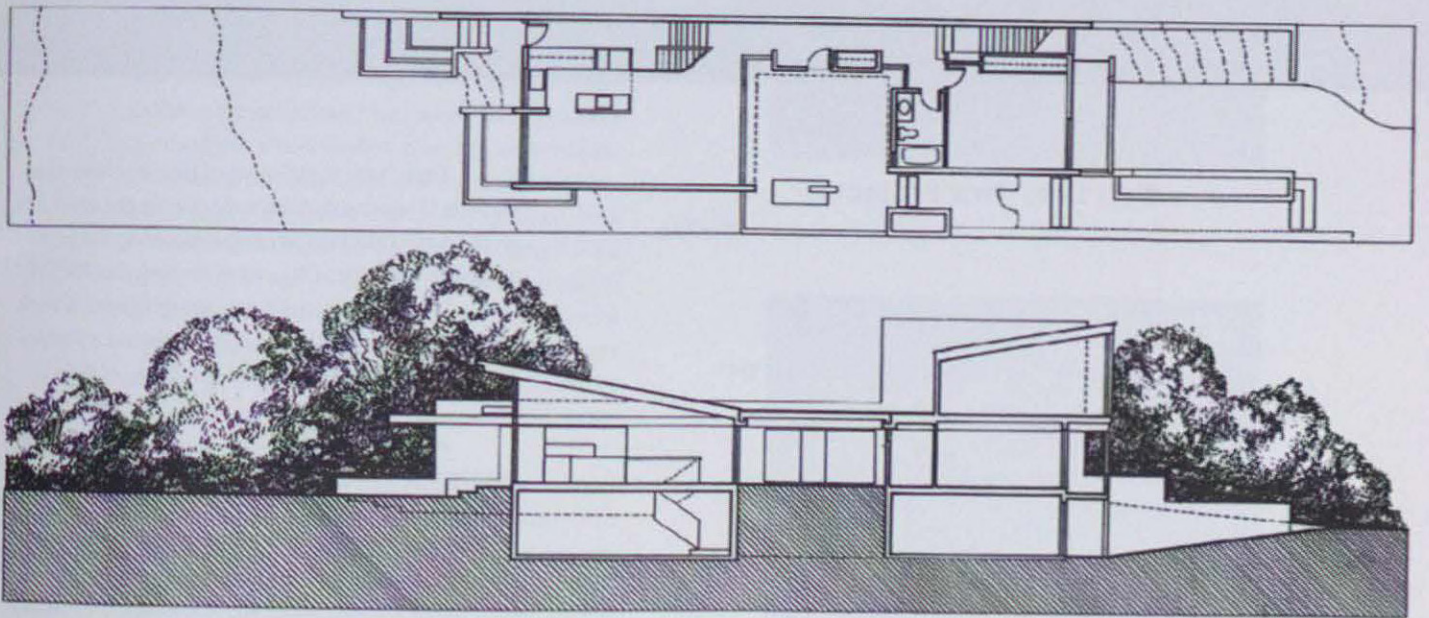


figure 7.