

Reviews

Events

showroom X, an installation by Atelier Big City

reviewed by Sarah Katherine Roszler



showroom X, an installation by Atelier Big City, in the Sottsass Room, Shaughnessy House, Canadian Centre For Architecture, Montréal, 15 April to 25 October 1998, is the fifth in a series of installations by local architectural firms. The series reflects the CCA's mandate to address contemporary architectural concerns, currents and practices.

ENTRY TO THE Canadian Centre for Architecture entails that bags must be checked in the vestibule. Admittees willingly give up their quotidian luggage in order to go unburdened into the museumological microcosm. The write-up outside Shaughnessy House states that the **showroom X** installation should feel "embracing," "welcoming," and be "about having one's breath taken away." I eluded this deposit, managing to retain full respirative capacity in the of-this-earth exhibit by and about the work of Montreal-based design firm Atelier Big City.

The experience beyond the threshold is possibly welcoming and embracing, but it is not breathtaking. All of which is surprising, considering that the installation consists of an hermetic steel stud shed erected through three rooms and stamped with huge day-glow computer perspectives of the group's work. The components of displacing melodrama are there, but the breath remains intact. Not every room-sized installation, however, has to be a Panton-ish planet unto its own. **showroom X** is a space that makes perfect sense in a practical, trade-valuing city with not much breath to spare.

It's fine, then, that the steel structure is less of a hi-fi silver wonderland beset with hypercolor windows to surreality and more of a showroom: a slick version of the temporary tradeshow. Although the design was conceived

to be an equal balance between steel frame and canvas image—the two "main spatial elements"—in reality the bent steel formwork works more as a fixed backdrop on which the group's work is mounted. But as such, it does its job well. The lines of metal, streaked by an insta-tailored lighting system, bring visual focus to the oversize canvases.

The perspective images, the presentation image of choice, are 3-D pitstops on the flat trajectory guided by the stud assembly. The scale, depth and hues of the interior and exterior views are good graphic analogies to the firm's experienceable (built) work: open spaces designed to be "embracing" and "welcoming" with rich colors and generously sized elements—building blocks for the whole family by day and, possibly, a swinging set by night. The renderings convey ABC's playful architectural commitment to appealing masses with mass appeal. The renderings present the gamut of ABC's work, including their unbuilt work. The images of proposals for international competitions highlight the group's interests in thinking beyond a provincial scope and on a much larger scale. Although it could be said that the rather homogenous presentation technique circumscribes a limited approach, the sense is more that Big City has gelled a general vision of urbane design to which they're committed.

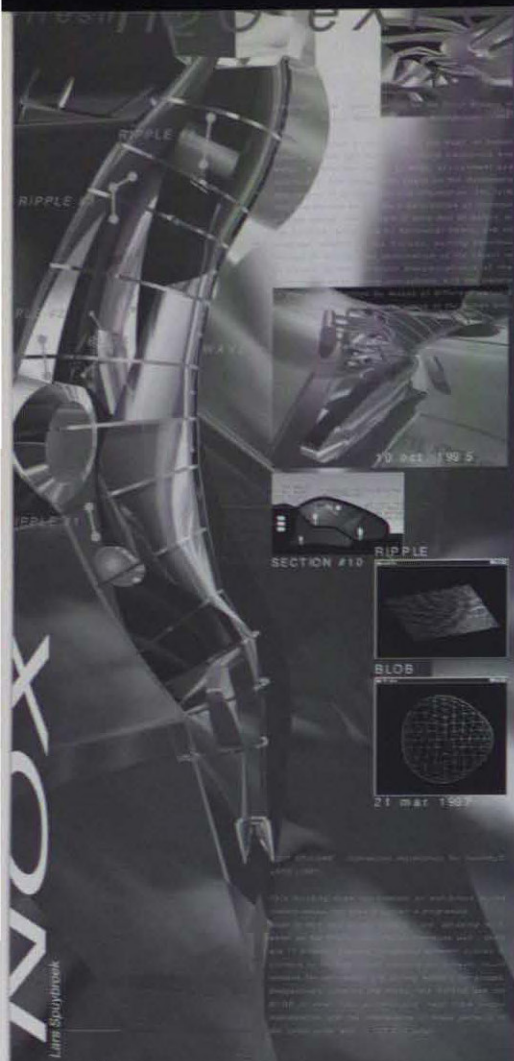
It's this general concept of city life which is the main virtue of ABC's design—it's what makes their work seem simultaneously familiar and compelling. But it's also a generality that makes the installation more tepid than the imagination says it could be. Notes on the exhibit accurately refer to the "ubiquity" of the steel stud. The piecing together of such ubiquitous material conveys the assem-

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PARC DE L'AVENTURE BASQUE



Two projects from Transarchitectures
02+03: Nox/Lars Spuybroek (above)
and Decoi (below)

bly's impermanence and also identifies it with temporary tradeshows. As such, it lives up to the urban-romantic intention of recalling consumer spaces (not as epically as it was hoped, perhaps). However, it doesn't operate as an alteration (no matter how transient) of the historical Shaughnassey House. It is too conventional and ordinary. The very normal use of the framing system is at odds with the ambition to convert "architectural limitations into celebratory work": a fundamental Big City statement.

The "overall and consistent formal logic of the semi-transparent, cut and folded plane," is too rigid to allow the form to "play" with the Shaughnassey House as was intended. Instead, the installation is aloof to its very particular location and even a little inconsiderate of it—studs pass awkwardly from one room to the next, and doors are trapped behind the frame. The viewable space between the infrastructure and the interior surfaces of the rooms is disconcerting, especially between the low canopy and the lofty ceiling. It comes across as a space which is in neglected hiatus for the duration of the exhibit. The regular stud interval results in a form which is not boiled down enough to be an abstraction and not over-the-top enough to be fantastic.

An end success, though, is that the ambiguity of the interior interior (between installation and House) does merit its "X," a rare and happy thing now that the lone letter is such a liberally applied epithet. The title suits the exhibit better than the texts on ABC's canvases describe the renderings—the few words are harmless, but not nearly as evocative as the visuals they attempt to explain.

Even though the installation as a whole is a more neutral exhibition than one familiar with Atelier Big City's bright and positive architecture might expect, the images on their own are as attractive and powerful as intended. They speak volumes about ABC's work and attitude in fittingly groovy tones: breathless city living under green perforated megashields where only the acid orange sky is the limit.

Cyberspace and Emerging Theories: Transarchitectures 02+03

Andrea Merrett

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website: www.archi.org

WHERE DOES ARCHITECTURE stand in the age of computers? There is a great deal of talk about how computers will revolutionize the way we design and think about architecture, but are they really having an affect? True, we have buildings such as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim making headlines (which incidentally was built, not designed, using computers), but is it really more complex than anything Gaudí was doing a century earlier? TransArchitecture 02 + 03, an exhibit hosted by the UQAM Design Centre as part of the Biennale de Montréal, is trying to address these and other questions.

TransArchitecture 02 + 03 are the second and third part of a series which was assembled to inform the public of an international movement which is exploring virtual architecture and the affects data-technology is having on contemporary architecture. The projects presented have been collected from all over the globe, and represent mostly theoretical work with a few competition entries and one or two built projects. Consisting of two components, the exhibit addresses the possibility of virtual architecture on the web to expand an audience, as well as providing a more traditional gallery show.

Both the exhibit and the website are carefully put together, even if not all the projects presented seem to be. Admittedly, after my first visit to the exhibit I was disappointed by the lack of information on so many of the panels. After perusing the website I felt better equipped to go back and review the work. The web site and printed panels complement each other very well. My only complaints are that the lighting in the gallery could have been better directed since it glared off many panels making already obscured text hard to read, and that there should have been computer terminals available at least outside the gallery so visitors could experience both within a shorter time frame.

One effect computers are having is that they change the way we consider the experience of architecture. Just as the movie camera and automobile changed the perception of built form during the modernist period, computers are changing our perceptions. Bernard Tschumi, who is featured with a separate exhibit of Le Fresnoy, speaks of architecture as event. His contribution to the exhibit consists of a series of still frames from computer modeling of his work, showing the procession through space. Without computers this type of presentation would be very time intensive and expensive to do, well beyond the reach of most architects.

Touring through the exhibit, I was struck by how much of the work speaks to the senses. The first project presented is in fact entitled "Architectural Body" and ad-

dresses how the body might affect the built form it inhabits. Much of the theoretical work falls under the category of what is most aptly described as "blob forms": "liquidizing" architecture as Lars Spuybroek of Nox puts it. In his work, as well as many others in the exhibit, I find myself transported to the floor of many a rave, where the senses are stimulated to the point of overload.

Computers, ironically, have reminded us how important all our senses are, and that as social beings we have a need for contact that is personal, and not mediated by a piece of machinery. This is the motivation behind a library design presented by Reiser and Umemoto of the United States: "The general phenomena of decentralization and dispersion of institutions made possible by new technologies overshadow a correspondingly specific trend toward centrality and agglomeration both within and appended to major urban centers in global economies." Finding ourselves isolated in front of our computers for hours and hours makes us reach out all the more for real community.

Not to say that virtual communities have not opened up great possibilities for architects, especially in the chance to create virtual architecture. Theoretical architecture has existed as long as humans have been able to dream about space. What the new technologies allow us to do is to share and inhabit these virtual spaces with people all over the globe. Instead of being drawings pinned up on the wall of a design studio or occasionally published in a book, virtual architecture becomes instantly, if intangibly, accessible.

One of the most notable inclusions in the exhibit is the work of Ben Nicholson. He turns things around by exploring how website design might affect how we consider historical buildings: "After hitting the web, experiencing architecture is never quite the same. A visit to a gothic cathedral takes on the guise of logging onto a brilliantly organized website" with lots of input to grab our attention and transport us to other realms. He writes: "A clicker's worst nightmare is Modernism, buildings devoid of compound clues about the intricacies of human endeavor."

We can certainly conclude that computers offer a world of possibilities; it is up to us as designers to see where they can take us.

Andrea Merrett, a student in the McGill School of Architecture, will be on exchange soaking up the culture of France in 1999.