

Lords of the Ring

Architecture is a little known-about field, one that rarely becomes a matter of public discussion or awareness. In North America it is a tradition that large buildings or complexes elicit this awareness, through their unquestionable influence on our cities' pattern language. As this very precious language is upset by these projects (resulting in urban deterioration, whether one is aware of it or not), the public reactions of interest, awareness, and/or controversy are aroused.

A socially-minded businessman recently expressed to us (with regard to the disasters of North American urban design, particularly in Montreal) his opinion that all architects and all developers are guilty: guilty of insensitivity (an ignorance of time-proven basics of architecture and urbanism); of egotism (ignorance borne of confidence in being right); of placing money before the well-being of the public they are supposed to serve (simple human greed); and of incompetence (evident in the quality, or lack thereof, in their buildings).

When one looks around this city or Toronto, Calgary, Ottawa or Hull it becomes frighteningly apparent that these characterizations of guilt accurately form the motives and 'qualities' of our architecture today. On an urban scale, they become particularly poignant.

And looking at 'all' architects, those who commit these atrocities, one sees that there are not 1/100th as many firms guilty as there are in the telephone book. One only has to walk a downtown Montreal street (try de Maisonneuve, Stanley or Sherbrooke) to read the names of the guilty parties

and to ultimately arrive at the following conclusion - that our city is being led to its grave, in very large steps, by a closed ring of architectural firms.

HOW DID THIS CLOSED RING COME TO BE?

It should be stated right out that conscientious architects get about as far as honest politicians, and are as rare. Selling one's soul in a boardroom - wiping out blocks of a city en route to one's next meal is common, **respected** practice. North American Architecture is **not** the manifestation of social need or responsibility; rather, it is a **business**, and decisions made within this context carry the same implications of back-stabbing ('society-stabbing') and dirty-dealing as those made by profiteering private corporations.

There are, indeed, several architectural firms in Canada which operate very efficiently within this scheme. They consist of businessmen, unscrupulous if need be (almost always a necessity when dealing with other businessmen - their clients); and their partners and developers - those who rope in the big clients wishing to establish the new corporate image, and who tell us that we **need** another 150-boutique underground shopping concourse which we don't want. The developers are just as concerned about their next 3000 meals, and are accordingly just as unscrupulous.

Clients, quite naturally allowing themselves to be duped by the megalomaniacal "...this will make this city or your company exciting...." proposals of these developers and the 'proven' abilities of the partner

architects, permit this pitiful situation to perpetuate itself, 'ad infinitum'. The 'proof' of the architect lies in the fact that they managed to inflict a monstrosity upon the public in a previous collaboration with this developer, making lots of money for everyone concerned.

The Government (Canada, Quebec), as a second-rate corporation, also blissfully funds the outrageous but quick investment return projects; and using the 'sensible' strategy of following the star-struck private sector's lead, continues to edify the closed ring by hiring one of those very few firms (they seem to know of no others). If the governments' selection processes could be attributed to nepotism or some other form of dirty-dealing, it would at least be a excuse (albeit lamentable) for this foolishness. As it seems at present, Democracy, too, can only crumble under the weight of 'good business sense'. Remember Hull?

IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?

With disaster after disaster being perpetuated on our cities - so much damage incurred by so few, characterized by an ignorance of urbanity and simply low quality buildings - one has to wonder why there have not been more vocal demonstrations of reaction from citizens, from students of architecture and finally from other architects. The reactions from the latter two groups have largely been reserved for restrained hearing in journals such as this, unfortunately out of earshot of both our Architectural 'Ring' and the public itself.

'Radicals', such as Leon Krier and

Maurice Culot, who work out of London and Brussels, respectively, have teamed themselves with other concerned architects and citizens, in a pact which rejects the bacchanalian tendencies of capitalist expansion and forwards, instead, alternatives encouraging the reconstruction of the city. The citizens pay the Architects what they can - the business of architecture as defined by North Americans does not exist. Regrettably, we hear of few local counterparts of Messrs. Krier and Culot.

IF THERE IS ANYBODY OUT THERE, WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

If such counterparts exist (and we know that they do), their dissatisfaction must be made public, moving beyond the scope of literature (which only their immediate colleagues read), and into the streets, so to speak.

The architectural competition achieves this to a certain extent. Judged by an impartial (although not about the state of architecture) jury, an **open** competition, where all suggestions are offered equal status and hearing, would serve at once as a forum of architectural and urban thought, and as the presentation of a rare **opportunity** to express those alternatives to the catastrophes promulgated in our cities. The alternatives are heard in an environment in which the heart rules the mind, rather than the expedience of the investment return. As a result, the architecture offered by those Ringleaders will undoubtedly appear very bad.

The most valuable resource that

those who oppose our cities' presently have is the media - radio, newspaper and television; their forum is one with a truly public nature.

Our anger with regard to the disintegration of our cities, until now reserved to our own internalized forums of debate, must be channeled into activities which take advantage of that resource.

The **protest** against the construction of each bad building (their numbers increase each month) with all of its sign-carrying implications is such an activity. The public exposure of the reasons and the firms behind our urban disasters is a crucial component in an effort to arrest this condition. Public exposure will lead to public disfavour of guilty firms and developers, and corporate clientele, ever-aware of displeasure among the masses, will be pressured into rejecting the monstrous schemes that are proposed in their boardrooms.

Finally, our credibility in acts of protest is contingent upon our presentation of alternatives - **public** presentations, generated by **open** competitions (a corporation with humanist concerns is required), or by Krier's or Culot's model: proposals by architects (or students) which 'reconstruct' the city for public groups and **with** these groups.

It is only with a substantial measure of media exposure that opponents of the current destruction of the city can ever be heard. At this time, we have the opportunity. Our neglect of that opportunity would render us as irresponsible as those who we oppose.

William Mark Pimlott