

Transcending Style an architecture of urbanism

Guest Editorial by Randy Cohen

For a relatively young student publication, the notion of designating an issue to the popular topic of urbanism may be considered 'fashionably late'. However, perhaps the delay will have allowed for some mulling over the situation, to begin thinking conscientiously of whether or not Rome is the answer to our urban problems. Too much has been written about modern architecture's failures in the urban centres without considering, first, the attitude taken with regards to space and its conception and, second, the approach used to create setting. Today, far too many brilliant urban schemes from Europe have been presented, dripping from their preoccupation with style, but they too should be considered for their conception of space and setting. An architecture of urbanism must be capable of transcending style; it must be able to understand and use its knowledge, to look beyond internal complexities and simply respond to urban needs.

If one would accept the notion of space as a common denominator in all architecture, then the conception of space may be considered the component part, which is the true variable that discerns one vision of architecture from another. It is then this conception which varies from generation to generation, with the result of many expressions of utopian societies. The traditional notion of space is that of the forming, moulding

or creating of a volume by providing the negative counterpart, the built form. Space, then, is the result of this building process. It is not, however, fabricated from thin air; it is merely bottled - given some definition. On the other hand, modern space is boundless and free-flowing; deriving ideally from the concept of 'objects in space', where each building becomes the monument. Space then helps to set the stage for the object, which is often rendered helpless by the ultimate lack of appreciable space.

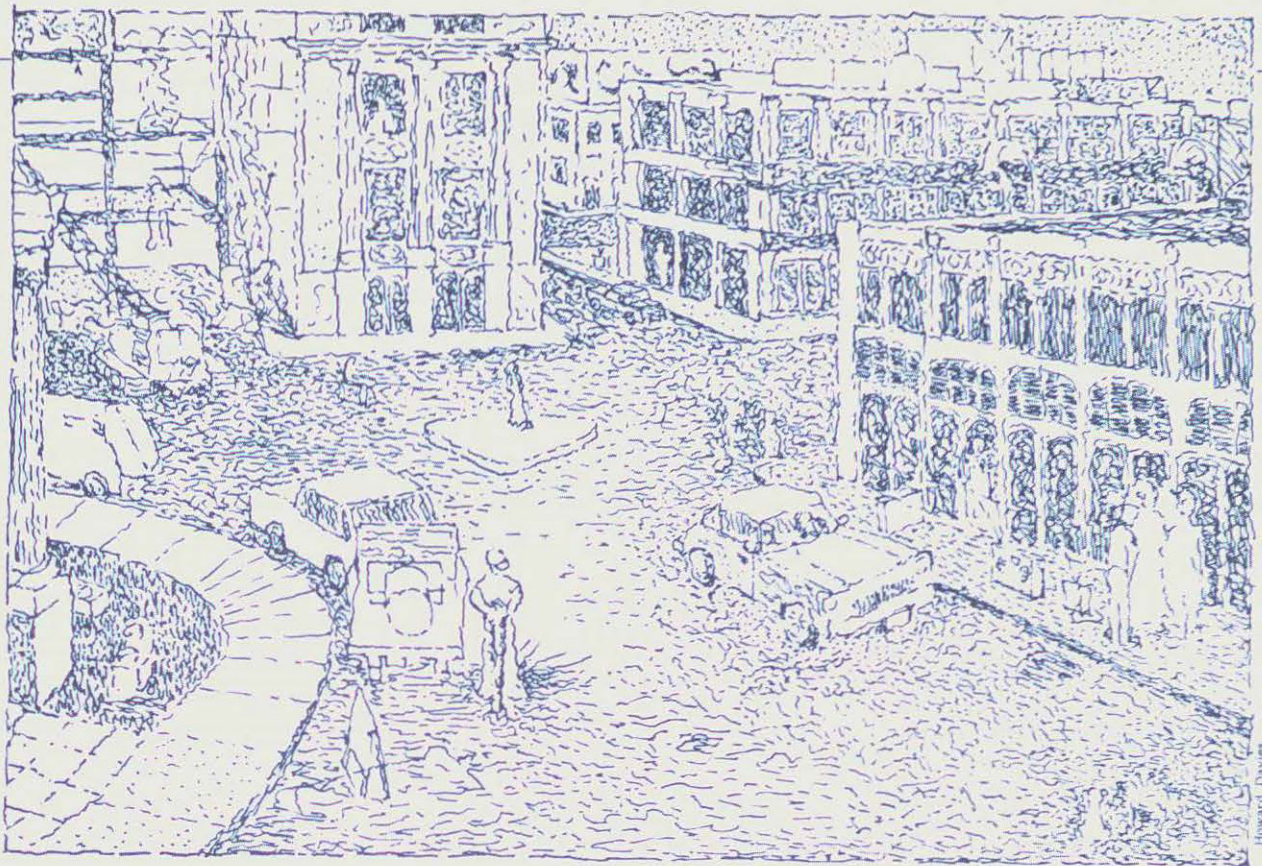
Understanding the medium, and thinking in terms of its malleability, one becomes aware of how little consequence certain acts have on the general situation. The incessant harping, back and forth, meaningless, over scholasticized bantering, does little for the betterment of urbanism. Only through the additive creation of spaces, or, as the opportunity presents itself, the object within space, will we mould the kind of urbanity one might deem successful.

If the medium must be manipulated under the guidelines which a 'style' sets forth, then the preconception poses a threat to the continuum which urbanism really is. The nature of style dictates a response, a way of seeing, a methodology which can be applied universally to the architectural problem. The modern architect will create a plaza level from which his building will rise alone, leaving space

neither defined, nor quite open. The European rationalist draws extravagant perspectives of repetitive facades enclosing tree-lined piazzas that one most certainly would love being in. However, one must wonder what exactly is going on. The desire to create urbanism from scratch is nothing new, but can this thing really be hitched to the rear end of a bulldozer?

As a result of the necessary propaganda which style desires, urbanism becomes the expression of a utopian society, orchestrated by each successive generation's thoughts. It is here that the breakdown occurs - in the weak, watercolour wash that style really is. True urbanism transcends style, occurring rather as a quilted patchwork of individual efforts based on response.

An architecture of urbanism thrives on the additive accumulation of form. It requires an understanding of the relevance of each and every gesture an architect can make, and it desires the abundance and variety borne from subjective response. An architecture of urbanism can transcend style by remaining aloof, by accepting a role in the continuum of urbanism and by ignoring the vision of a 'new world' attitude which has made many grown men look silly. If one were to look at Rome, certainly the lesson to be learned is that it wasn't built in a day. □



Howard Davies

A Psalm of Montreal

Stowed away in a Montreal lumber room
The Discobolus standeth and turneth his face to the wall;
Dusty, cobweb-covered, maimed and set at naught,
Beauty crieth in an attic and no man regardeth:

○ God. ○ Montreal.

Beautiful by day and night, beautiful in summer and winter,
Whole or maimed, always and alike beautiful -
He preacheth gospel of grace to the skin of owls
And to one seasoneth the skins of Canadian owls:

○ God. ○ Montreal.

When I saw him I was wroth and I said, "O Discobolus,
Beautiful Discobolus, a Prince both among gods and men.
What doest thou here, how camest thou hither, Discobolus,
Preaching gospel in vain to skins of owls?"

○ God. ○ Montreal.

And I turned to the man of the skins and said unto him,
"O thou man of skins,
Wherefore hast thou done thus to shame the beauty of the
Discobolus?"
But the Lord had hardened the heart of the man of skins
And he answered, "My brother-in-law is haberdasher to
Mr. Spurgeon."

○ God. ○ Montreal.

"The Discobolus is put here because he is vulgar -
He has neither vest nor pants with which to cover his limbs;
I, Sir, am a person of most respectable connections -
My brother-in-law is haberdasher to Mr. Spurgeon."

○ God. ○ Montreal.

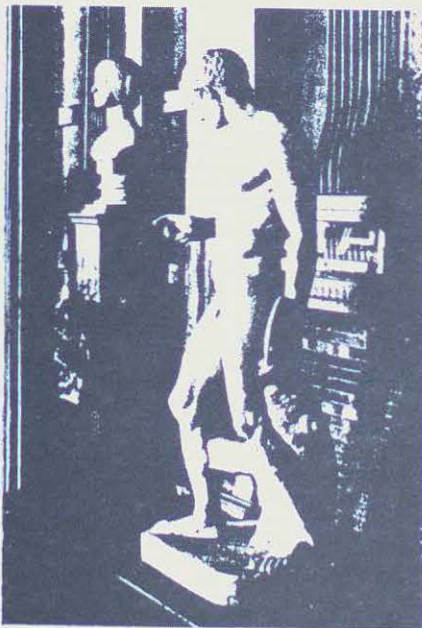
Then I said, "O brother-in-law to Mr. Spurgeon's haberdasher,
Who seasonest also the skins of Canadian owls,
Thou callest trousers 'pants', whereas I call them 'trousers',
Therefore thou art in hell-fire and may the Lord pity thee."

○ God. ○ Montreal.

"Preferrest thou the gospel of Montreal to the gospel of Hellas,
The gospel of thy connection with Mr. Spurgeon's haberdashers
to the gospel of the discobolus?"

Yet none the less blasphemed he beauty saying, "The
Discobolus hath no gospel,
But my brother-in-law is haberdasher to Mr. Spurgeon."

○ God. ○ Montreal.



Sirs:

Could the McGill Discobolus be the one Samuel Butler saw in the Montreal Museum of Natural History that inspired his poem *A Psalm of Montreal*?

It is believed that McGill inherited all the effects of the Natural History Museum.

John Bland
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