
Angela Carr

In a recent edition of her 1961 urban planning critique, Jane Jacobs wrote,

> A city ecosystem is composed of physical-economic-ethical processes active at a given time within a city and its close dependencies . . . [To investigate] city ecosystems demands [that we] focus [not] on “things” and expect them to explain much in themselves. Processes are always of the essence; things have significances [only] as participants in processes.


Douglas Ord’s 500-page history of the National Gallery of Canada, more than anything else, is an exposition of process. His provocative juxtapositions reveal rather than describe the multiplicity of issues enfolded within the seeming literalness of built form. Without Ord’s ironic bricolage of subtexts, one could scarcely appreciate how the confrontation between then Prime Minister Jean Chretien and protester Bill Clennett, on Flag Day 1996, might form a significant prelude to the prime minister’s arrival at the National Gallery of Canada to witness a session of citizenship court, orchestrated for the occasion on the grandiose stage provided by the gallery’s Great Hall.

Such anecdotes underline Ord’s fascination with the colourability of public space and the vagaries of institutional bureaucracy. He returns again and again to Moshe Safdie’s resplendent ramp and Great Hall in the gallery, conceived, it seems, as a sacral prelude to the auratic contemplation of the art collections concealed within. But the site is all too easily subverted for more worldly events, such as court sessions, state dinners, and most recently Hyundai commercials. The narrative is as complex as a Gordian knot, demonstrating by its very character how human rituals, urban fabrics, and larger political landscapes enmesh. It makes for riveting reading.

In his preface Ord describes Moshe Safdie’s building as a “physical crucible for ongoing exploration of the relationship between art and the project of the Canadian nation-state, as this has been, is, and will be filtered through the crucial symbolic hinge of a National Gallery” (ix). Collection, institution, structure, and site are bound together as a representation of national cultural heritage. National galleries also partake of a multiplicity of issues enfolded within the seeming literalness of built form. Without Ord’s ironic bricolage of subtexts, one could scarcely appreciate how the confrontation between then Prime Minister Jean Chretien and protester Bill Clennett, on Flag Day 1996, might form a significant prelude to the prime minister’s arrival at the National Gallery of Canada to witness a session of citizenship court, orchestrated for the occasion on the grandiose stage provided by the gallery’s Great Hall.

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“museum aura,” as if to counter the installation N. E. Thing Co. had placed in the ground floor of the gallery’s Lorne building, to transform the space back into an office building, precisely what the site was before the gallery came to occupy it.

Through this preamble we are made to understand that there is a dialogue between building and collection, between collection and director, between director and policy maker, and so on. The gallery’s campaign for “proper housing,” which began with Eric Brown and wended its way through three buildings and many subsequent administrators, has been realized in the current structure. The entrance ramp and Great Hall, with its sacral references and liminal transition, impart an air of solemnity that prepares the visitor for insular communion within the precinct of the temple. By contrast, Douglas Cardinal’s Museum of Civilization, across the river in Hull, bonds with the natural topography and expresses a tradition that finds sanctity in the land, not in standing apart from it.

This is a provocative book that does not reason in straight lines. Ord’s complex thinking is also demonstrated by the intricacies of his personal website, which not only promotes his publications and muses about his critics, but comments on news events such as the massacre at Columbine High School. This Toronto-based author and critic has brought the same intellectual pixilation to bear upon his account of the National Gallery. Robert Fulford has described the result as “a book that’s opinionated, pretentious, richly informative and highly readable [from an] industrious, thoughtful [historian who is] just crazy enough to be interesting.”

To his credit Ord also has a book of essays on contemporary art and art museums, entitled Navigating without a Compass, published in 2000, and has edited a war diary with Les Chater entitled Behind the Fence: Life as a POW in Japan, 1942–45: The Diaries of Les Chater. Ord also joins Susan Feathers and Carol Sherman for Yoga in a Muskoka Chair: A Guide for Everyone, and has two novels on his own account, Tommy’s Farm (1998) and Oscar and Jeannie (2002). This ability to rove easily from one frame of reference to another is the loom upon which the account of the National Gallery is woven. It is rare to find a writer so entirely at home in such a diverse collection of genres.

Ord’s pièce de résistance in the matter of the National Gallery goes beyond the book, however. Having spent September 1996 to May 1998 ensconced as a National Gallery fellow, and a total of eight years bringing this book to completion, it is not surprising that he takes a proprietary interest in the welfare of his foster offspring. His horror at the use of the sacred precinct as a backdrop in an automobile commercial is palpable. As he observes with fastidious exactitude, this offensive event aired first on CBC Newsword, on 16 October 2003. Ord recalls that the only car in the gallery during his tenure was John Scott’s Apocalypse #2, engraved with the entire text of the Book of Revelation. It occupied the rotunda at the rear, near the gallery library, because the Great Hall had to be available to rent for charity functions, parties, and affairs of state, at $5000 a day. But commodifica-

tion had reached its apogee. For Ord the ultimate admission of shame lay in the fact that such a patently recognizable venue was not even identified.

In 1982 the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee, under Louis Applebaum and Jacques Hebert, had declared “the cultural sphere, embracing as it does artistic and intellectual activity, has as one of its central functions the critical scrutiny of all other spheres including the political.” Ord’s objection is that this critical scrutiny has been co-opted.

Notes
3. Ord, National Gallery, ix.

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Though dubbed “rural cemeteries” both for their original siting beyond city limits and for their massaged landscapes in the English romantic tradition, cemeteries such as Montreal’s Mount Royal, opened in 1852, were, as Brian Young notes, very much “a product of urban society.” This handsome commissioned history reveals how the evolving social tensions of a growing metropolis have been reflected in its residents’ engagement with death and commemoration.