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Toronto Park and fly: Public Art in Toronto

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TORONTO

Park and fly: Public Art in Toronto

The only certainty in the art world, every five years (more or less), is Documenta. That it has flourished, in spite of numerous competing biennales worldwide is, perhaps, an indicator that to “take five” for culture can still have some meaning.

Five years in the cultural life of Toronto is much more difficult to summarize, let alone to crystallize through some “landmark” event. This September, for example, marks the 10th anniversary of Monumenta, a four gallery-75 artist extravaganza, organized by artists David Clarkson, Stan Dennison, Brain Groombridge and Bernie Miller, through YYZ Gallery. As a “snapshot” survey of the “new”, nothing like it has appeared since. The possible exceptions, Chromazone collective’s Chromaliving exhibition (1983) – more of an holistic event – and the Art Gallery of Ontario’s *European Iceberg* (1985) – were a different breed of survey. In hindsight, Monumenta have been the last fling for Toronto’s “star-making” system, or more accurately, the last time that emerging from the pack was seen as an event. Toronto art was sustained out of Monumenta with the “ascendence” of artists such as Shelagh Alexander, Stephen Andrews, Brian Boigon, Rae Johnson, Kim Kozzi (pre-FastWurms), Andy Patton, Jana Sterbak (when she spelled her name with a “Y”), Joanne Tod, and Doug Walker, among others.

The Power Plant opened five years, three directors and three curators ago. (I was the first of the three curators, at the end of a nine-year stint at Harbourfront). Two of the mainstays of the Toronto art world closed during this time – The Issaacs Gallery and Carmen Lamanna Gallery. The Ydessa Gallery also closed but re-emerged as the eye-popping Ydessa Foundation (full marks for style and content). The Art Gallery of Ontario has yet to complete its “eye-popping” makeover (interim marks for style).

What has been a continuing topic is public art, and it is here that a measure of Toronto’s cultural enterprise can be taken. Toronto’s relationship with art *en plein air* started with the controversial purchase of Henry Moore’s *Three Way Piece No.2 (The Archer)* for the new City Hall in 1964. The mayor who had championed the purchase, Phil Givens, turned to private sources to pay for the work, but the furore it caused may have been one of the factors in his loss at

the polls in the next municipal election. An ironic item appeared in *Canadian Art* in 1962: “It is to be hoped that the same degree of courage which characterized the acceptance of this radical design (the new City Hall) will be shown in the selection of the works of art and that we shall not be witnesses ... to undignified wrangling”. The pattern of public art, thereafter, followed the “purchase and placement” scenario – to adorn the front of new buildings or, in the case of Walter Redinger’s fiberglass sculpture at the PineTree Building on University Avenue (sited in 1974), to be moved from the front to the side of the building. There were exceptions – the beginnings of “integrated site-work” in the 1970s with the Spadina Subway line and the Federal Government Building at Sheppard & Yonge Street, in North York – but these were also fraught with problems of money, interference and finally, indifference. Since the establishment of the Public Art Commission (attached to the Planning and Development Department of City Hall) in the 1980’s, criteria were set up for a coherent process in determining how art would appear in public places. But more of that later.

The centrepiece of a “five year-view”, because it dominates the skyline, is the SkyDome, and its centre, Michael Snow’s commissioned work *The Audience*. By the first week of the Dome’s grand opening in 1989, it must have been the most photographed artwork in the country. Virtually every television news report used Snow’s massive figures, hunkered over the front, as an establishing shot and panned to a wide view. The work itself was rarely mentioned, but it was enough to locate the building and the visual sign of the work. I recall watching a television report with an Indian film-maker, visiting Canada for the first time. She asked me what all the (stadium) commotion was about. I replied that it was “on time and over budget” – the double news whammy.

Snow’s work was initially maligned by a few members of the arts community, but this aside, it may very well be the most powerful piece of public art in this city or anywhere else. For all the talk of site-response, site-specificity and integration into the “urban fabric”, artists dealing with large-scale public commissions and their terms of reference have

been turned into pattern designers for paving, bench designers, and landscapers – as if making objects no longer had value. Snow’s work is an object (with a vengeance) – a caricature mounted within the folds of a building that is an engineering, and not an architectural, feat. Without it the stadium would have no facade or character. But Snow’s work on its own, say in a gallery, would hardly make sense. I suppose that makes it site-dependent.

There are other notable and worthy art works at SkyDome. Susan Schelle’s fountain, *Salmon Run*, on the east side, is equal to the task of embellishing the site. In its compact, foreshortened space, there is a sense of drama and humour as a school of five-foot long, bronze plate salmon cut-outs “swim upstream” into a wall. At the front of the Dome, there is a more modestly-scaled fountain by Judith Schwarz. In a high traffic area – the hotel entrance and the comings and goings of the crowds crossing on their way to skyboxes (or the cheap seats) – it is a resolute sentry, characteristic of Schwarz’s recent modernist and humanist work. And a unique artist-designed banner project which graces the sides of the stadium for a few months at a time. But Toronto does not have a tradition of banners (too demonstrative), and this may be another “paving-pattern bone” for artists to chew on.

To the west of SkyDome is Eldon Garnet’s Monument to the Chinese Railway Workers, (installed in 1989). It suffers (suffering is very Toronto) from its proximity to the stadium, but the major flaw is that it overlooks the sub-grade railway line, rather than addressing it. No one in Toronto relates to railways, with the exception of for Union Station itself, which is a great background for fashion shoots. But this work is too literal – a full-scale section of bridge trestling with two (only two ?) life-size bronze figures in the act of hauling a timber. It desperately needs pedestrian contact, but has had to compete, until recently, with a backdrop of a downtown undergoing a construction boom, and a skyline of cranes. More successful is Garnet’s commission for the Metropolitan Police Headquarters at College and University Avenue. Three life-size bronze figures engaged in symbolic activities are sited at street level, at different locations. A policewoman is laying a block of a ziggurat – a child hauls an impossibly large obelisk in a small wagon, and a workman (?) carries two huge tomes in

the manner of bricklayer, or maybe a baker. It may not have the propaganda impact of (former) Soviet monuments, which Garnet had hoped for, but the wit and critique is still well-aimed.

The most recent showplace is BCE Place, opened officially in June this year, at the bottom of Yonge Street – set off by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava’s eye-popping (very Toronto) atrium. Whether it is art or architecture hardly matters. As architecture, it is so expressive, compared with the dried out and misguided modernism nearby, that it may as well be art. Scott Burton’s plaza-garden, at the south end, seems unresolved, perhaps because Burton died before he could oversee its completion. One of Burton’s characteristic elements is evident in the solid granite benches, but there is an unexpected element – an “intimate swamp” at the centre of all this paving.

Also on Yonge Street, beside the harbour, is the World Trade Centre, and British sculptor Richard Deacon’s monumental work. (It also suffers from the site – looking south through the piece, our only view is of Captain John’s floating seafood restaurant. Deacon’s work needs a setting as spectacular as its post-modernist-mechanistic ambitions. A mountain top would be nice.

But the last examples are foreign, and while such generosity indicates Toronto’s “world class status” and aspirations, the search continues for some other local efforts. This can be found north, off Yonge Street, at One Financial Place – Stacey Spiegel’s fountain plaza-site, Synthetic Eden.

Three sculptural fountain elements, a bronze tree resolved in a helix, a stainless steel profile of a face inspired by CAD renderings, and an abstracted flower-basin, create the conditions for public theatre. Water spirals upward, out of the tree. The face spits water into the air, and the flower-basin is filled with churning water. The spill-over soaks into the ground, as there is no conventional pool. The entrance to the fountain site is set off by a series of free-standing glass windscreens, each with an enlarged cross-section of tree cells cut into the surface. The effect, as the title states, is a mediation between a spiritual understanding of nature (and a sense of loss) and recognition of the debilitating impact of urban claustrophobia.

I will refrain from listing other completed projects, mostly characterized by a streetscaping *raison*

d'être (there must be miles of benches that no one sits on) and misplaced lip service to specialized community interests. Commissions on the drawing board and in progress will tip the scales for the next five-year look. The new Metro Hall (Metropolitan Government headquarters) is the first, with pieces by Micah Lexier, John McKinnon, Bernie Miller, Jaan Poldas, Cynthia Short and French artists Anne and Patrick Poirier being installed. The Bay Adelaide Centre has committed projects to John McKinnon, Americans, Siah Armejani and a Jackie Ferrara/Mary Miss collaboration, and to New York-based Canadian architects, Liseanne Couture and Hani Rashid (winners of the may-never-be-built Los Angeles gateway project, *Steel Cloud*). At the time of writing, construction has been capped at the underground parking lot stage. Currently underway is a Margaret Priest/Tony Scherman collaboration with architect George Baird for a City-owned parkette (Toronto has fallen in love with parking lot parkettes), next door to the Bay Adelaide Centre.

And it would be remiss not to mention the "black hole" of public art in Toronto – for a harbourfront site at the foot of York Street. This particular project has gone through two full-scale competitions with no resolution and a shift in orientation from the originally proposed site. The third competition will be run by the Public Art Commission. How is such an impasse possible? Some answers (problems) appear in an article by Paul Arthur, *Art and architecture – a confused situation ?* (Canadian Art, July 1966): "The holding of a competition (for artwork) guarantees nothing at all – not fresh and challenging ideas, because most artists today probably work better on their own than under competition conditions."

The real question is, what does Toronto (meaning those who control policy) want from public art, not how and where do "they" want it. Allowing architects, for example, to determine policy is as dangerous as handing it back to politicians. The difference is that too often, architects claim to be artists. One factor at play is the "mandatory" 1 percent for art for public spaces. In looser economic times, many developers regarded this as an irritating concession, but in a slow economy there are fewer projects being planned and a less generous mood towards the arts.

There are few large, open public spaces in Toronto. Only Nathan Phillips Square at City Hall

come to mind. What has been created by new development quickly gets jumbled up, as if open space were antithetical to our sense of composition (and I am not speaking of the utopic, windy, high-level plazas proposed in the 1960s – following Le Corbusier's model for the *Radiant City* – as a means to separate pedestrians from vehicular traffic). Architects Macy Dubois and Erland Gustavs wrote in 1972, "As late as 1875, Toronto was rich in treed squares lined with ... well-designed, detached or row houses. The scale was low and well related to people and the streets and provided a sense of comfort and security. Unfortunately little of this remains, the milieu was destroyed by the Toronto building boom of the second half of the 19th century."

Meagre pickings for a city that makes vociferous claims for a cultural vitality. What would Arnold Schwarzenegger (circa Predator) say?