ALSOP’S ART

A notable feature of Toronto’s current architectural scene is the critical and popular success of Will Alsop’s Sharp Centre for Design at the Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD) (Fig. 1). Once greeted with puzzlement or put-down the design is widely admired. A straw-poll of passersby on a recent spring day described the building as “whimsical”, “surprising”, “unusual”, “weird”, and “fun”.

KELLY CROSSMAN
and more unusually, the average architect, architectural enthusiast or architectural student now walking by OCAD immediately thinks of a famous image from the mid-1960s called Walking City by Ron Havron, a leading member of the experimental architectural group Archigram. This unbuilt project, famously illustrated against the backdrop of New York City or in the middle of the ocean, projected a city-sized urban structure which could move slowly across the globe. Like OCAD, Walking City was to be supported by long projecting, insect-like angled legs. Although the resemblance between the two is more conceptual than literal, it is an obvious link, and it is startling, and perhaps a little exciting, to see something like that imaginary form appear on a narrow, rather humdrum street in downtown Toronto. One can’t help think Aalop, an amusing and witty man, smiled at the thought of Walking City, or at least part of it, finding a permanent home here among the students of an art college. But now that the OCAD addition is complete, it has become easier to see how Aalop has taken many of the ideas of mid-century – Archigram et al. – and moved them to a place which forty years ago it would have been impossible to foresee.

Past

When Will Alsop, in London in the autumn of 1968, enrolled at the Architectural Association School (AA) as a first-year student, the influence of Archigram was at its height. The nexus of science, technology, pop and pleasure inspired architectural investigation, while the notion of aesthetics was suspect. Bernard Tschumi, who along with Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid, was a student with Alsop at the AA in the late 1960s, has described this approach succinctly: “to achieve architecture without according to design is an ambition inherent in the minds of those who go through the incredible effort of putting together buildings. Behind this objective is the desire to achieve the obvious clarity of the inevitable, a structure in which the concept becomes architecture itself.” Alsop has put the same idea another way. During those student years at the AA, in the late sixties and early seventies, he has said, “It was a matter of putting the art out of architecture, of making it about problem-solving above all else.” For the young architects of Archigram, a reimagined, anti-high art, functionalist architecture which fused pop culture and technology seemed the most exciting and ethical way forward. Warren Chalk, a key member of Archigram, was Alsop’s tutor at the AA, and this proved a key influence.

Equally influential to Alsop’s development was the work of Cedric Price (1944–2009). Price, the gifted son of a Quakerish architect, was of the same generation and had the same general interests as the Archigram group (all of whom he knew well): functionalism, pop, technology and pleasure. But Price combined this with a passionate commitment to the notion of collective action, to the idea that the primary goal of architectural thought was improvement in the lives of ordinary people even if it meant that architecture of a conventional kind faded from view. At the age of 92 Cedric
Price had attempted to put these ideas into practice, collaborating with the avant-garde playwright Joan Littlewood on one of the most imaginative projects of the era, Fun Palace: a prototypical leisure centre which would offer working-class Londoners an entertainment/educational free zone (fig. 10).\(^9\)

Fun Palace fostered the entertainment culture of the early 21st century but without the stiff entrance fees, overzealous marketing, surveillance and controlled circulation routes of today’s theme park, mall or business improvement district. It remains a remarkable example of an attempt to give indeterminancy – potentially the most egalitarian of all architectural intentions; that moment when democracy and freedom are no longer represented but actualised in spatial form – a shape. Fun Palace was never built, but if it had been, most people then, as now, would consider the “shape” Price had come up with not really a building at all but more an infrastructure, a work of engineering, than architecture. This was not an oversight. As Alcock, who worked in Cedric Price’s office from 1973 to 1978 has recalled, Price, in the spirit of his time, eschewed the exploration of form in favour of an Avignon-like functionalism: the rigorous analysis of program and its subsequent articulation through an applied technology.\(^10\) This approach would lead to charges of anti-humanism and even anti-architecture: Tom Koolhaas has remarked that Price, by the early seventies “had architecture pinned down, wrestled to the ground”, but that in the eighties, architecture was “rescued by the laughing gas of the market economy” and “Price’s voice suddenly registered as that of an ogre, a spoilsport.”\(^11\) He may well be right, but forty years later, the influence of Price lives on in the imaginative but straightforward use of building technology at the Sharp Centre, and in the directness of the building form, consisting of steel pipes and a box of steel girders, it is essentially a modified industrial-vernacular form (figs. 11–14). The influence of Price is also seen in the work of Koolhaas himself.\(^12\)

Still, if the Sharp Centre re-erects a kind of mid-20th century functionalism, why then the “shaping” and “surprise” people feel in their encounter with this strange building, high on its coloured legs? Is the strangeness of a table top which floats above the trees of Orange Park not a little surreal? Is there not a question here also of the imagination as well of function explicity addressed? Can we say that these qualities also emanate from the culture of Price?

To the extent that the Sharp Centre displays an interest in formal as well as functional issues the obvious answer would seem to be no; there is much of Alcock’s work in Toronto which come from an imaginative place to which Price was unable or not interested in going. But, as Robin Middleton suggests, the relationship of Price’s ideas to the architecture of the contemporary world is a little more complicated than it might seem.

Middleton, now a Professor at Columbia, was in the 1960s on the staff at Architectural Design magazine in London, and so a careful observer and, to some degree, participant in the events of that era. In the view of Middleton, Price was, by the time of Fun Palace, an architect famous for his anti-territorialism, but his career harboured an ambivalence and imaginations complexly often overlooked. Middleton points out that an early diploma project (1958) for the redevelopment of a Civic Centre at Oldham in England “shows that he [Price] was as much skilled as anyone else at the time by Le Corbusier’s formal interventions at Maison Jau”. But after that, he “wanted nothing more of that sort and the architecture he was to explore was to have an altogether different end. The forms of architecture and their pleasing relation to him became irrelevant. Instead, an architecture was to be devised that would allow individuals to discover themselves.”\(^13\)

The move in Price’s work in the late 1950s, the move from form to function, was accompanied by a more fundamental shift in the conceptualisation of architecture as a practice primarily visual in nature, based on “pleasing relationships” to one whose aim it is above all to create conditions which allow for and encourage the expansion of the human psyche. This idea in the context of a re-energized functionalism was the context of Fun Palace. Today it can be seen as immensely prophetic. One could reasonably argue it makes of Price an architect not of the 20th but of the 21st century. In his texts and his writings Alcock speaks often of the importance of pleasure, of joy and delight as experiences which certain qualities in architecture and urban design can help bring about in our daily life. “Fun”, or pleasure broadly understood was an idea at the heart.
of British architectural experimentaion during the post-war period. It was an idea as much of its time as the exploration of technology or pop culture — a theme to which it was related. It is possible to say that "fun" was the English equivalent of its French contemporary, dédétournement, the psycho analytical strategy proposed by Guy Debord and his fellow Situationists to open up, by means of a kind of displacement, the psychic possibilities of the city — a displacement whose imaginative source lies in the discoveries of art and particularly Surrealism. For Picasso, as for Asplund, it is architecture, the human discipline which thinka and ultimately creates space, which can bring that premise of psychic and social liberation into being.

Toronto

I am off to work for a month with Dadosis on a Ford grant, subject: "The city of the future". My pet problem at the moment is a physical solution for planning an adventure which is essentially flat to be getting and yet does not drain the urban community unitly. This is a field where your interaction between the series comes strongly into play. How to create the surrogates for an unclimbable mountain in every "urban region", accepting the fact that a "city" is no longer a tangible entity that one can get outside of, but is a total environment extending across the continent, with a few more desert paws here and there.14

To draw links between the Sharp Centre and the architectural world of mid-century London is not to call into question Asplund’s achievement in Toronto but rather to amplify it. Despite its very contemporary enigmatic, even esoteric quality, the Sharp Centre is a building that responds to and develops many of the most important architectural themes of the last half-century. The culture of the AA in the 1960s directly impacted on Asplund’s development and keeping that world in mind helps us understand what has been built in Toronto forty years later.

But what of Toronto itself? What insights does the past there have to offer the present in its self-understanding? Standard accounts of Canadian modernism with their emphasis on the influence of Mies-Gropius-Wright by means of the architecture schools and specific practices such as those of John O’Connor and Patrick B. Parnell suggest a world far removed from that of artists like London.15 However, closer examination reveals an architectural culture much more complex than often thought or remembered. During the thirties and forties Wells Coates, Irving Grossman, Peter Oberlander and Sandby and Blainville van Glabek among others linked Canada with European groups such as MK22, CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne) and Team 10.16 Projects of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the Montreal International Exhibition of 1967 (EXPO) and Ontario Place, recall the ideas of Archigram or of related groups such as the Japanese Metabolists. Other examples from that period such as the McMaster Medical School reveal us of the powerful and deep-rooted technological strand in Canadian architecture during the 20th century. The Sharp Centre is a welcome and timely contribution to this current in Canadian modernism.

Also helpful to understanding the present moment are events subsequent to the arrival at the University of Toronto in 1961 of the British landscape architect and urban planner Jacqueline Tynan, Tynan, who had studied at the Architectural Association and was Director of Studies at the School of Planning and Research for Regional Development at London University between 1941 and 1948, was at the centre of architectural life during the 1960s. Besides teaching at Toronto and Harvard (1955–1969) she was acting secretary of CIAM (1951–194) and from 1956 worked with Constantino Dadosis and the Ekistics movement.17 At Toronto Tynan developed a close friendship with Marshall McLuhan, leading to the fall of 1960 to her participation in the Ford Foundation-funded Culture and Communications Seminar. Under her influence the members of this famous seminar, widely seen as one of the a-movements of modern communications theory, spent the months from September to November analysing the work of Tynan’s friend, the Swiss art historian Sigfried Giedion, and especially his reading of the encounter of modern high culture — represented by architecture — with the ubiquitous technology of ordinary American life.18 The turn of the seminar towards architecture, and more generally the analysis of space and the city, had its roots in the work of H.A. Innis, the intellectual godfather of the seminar, as well as McLuhan’s own interest in Giedion and writers such as James Joyce. In the seminar these interests coincided with the spatial analysis of anthropologist Edmund Carpenter and psychologist Carl Williams whose paper on automotive space delivered in October of 1963 had a galvanising impact on the group. By 1965 Williams’s paper, as well as several by Tynan, including one in collaboration with Carpenter — the results of the Ryerson study — had been published in Expositions, the seminar’s journal.

Although Tynan left for Harvard in 1955, she and McLuhan remained in close touch. Their correspondance reveals that out of the dialogue engendered by the seminar at least three themes emerged which influenced the subsequent work of all this principals (as well as Giedion) to some degree.19 The first was the notion of the city as a perceptual field which could be mapped by means of the human subject. The second was the idea that all high art in the contemporary world existed as a figure against the ground of popular culture, a popular culture defined by the forms and devices of advertising. The third, and arguably most striking notion of all, was the view that electronic media had begun to dismantle the idea of a large dominant in western culture — that space was essentially a question of visual perception. "Structurally, most visual experience is iconic or tactile-tactile and kinetic, and the visual component is small,..." wrote McLuhan. "The idea that there is only one kind of space, namely visual space, but this space being subjected to various impurities persisted, even though we are now a full century into the dominant acoustic space created by instant or simultaneous information... No need to say, the fictions about visual space will crumble very quickly when their time comes. Personally I am not eager to see that time through it is long overdue."

McLuhan’s reading of Williams’s and Carpenter’s insights led him to focus on the decentralisation of space in contemporary, particularly high tech, electronic culture as post-Dionysian, multi-sensory and experiential. Today this view is increasingly widespread, and as Tynan noticed the implications for architecture are profound. However she was not convinced architecture as a form and practice would be able to accommodate the new worldview.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s McLuhan continued to raise this idea, seeking a responses. Finally in 1974 Tynan wrote McLuhan: "I have never commented on your strutures or Visual Space [sic] versus other aspects of space. Of course you are right, but the only space architect [sic] can handle is physical space, which is basically visual space, though this does not mean static one-directional space but dynamic space — remembered and anticipated before and behind — but still physical."

Three days later McLuhan responded:

This reply by way that you call "physical space", so far as hardware is concerned, is almost entirely kinetic i.e., the posture and threat of architectural forms is primarily kinetic and incidentally visual. The fact that you refer to "physical space", as if the had some clear and solid sense, is very significant.20

Can we see in that correspondence a limitation in the mid-century architectural imagination even as the spatial world of the civilization came was already taking shape? Sharp Centre for Design

In the fall of 2001, several months after the team of Asplund Architectural Robbico+Youn+ Wright had been given the nod, and at a point when the basic idea of the project had been established, Asplund gave a talk at the Michigan Institute in Toronto to faculty and students of OCAD. The occasion was a presentation of plans to date, but while Asplund did show some sketches most of the evening was given over to a presentation of previous projects by Asplund — the Regional Government Headquaters at Marseille, the North Greenwich Tube Station in London and a town plan for Barnsley, a mid-sized town in the English Midlands suffering the familiar problems of de-industrialisation, a shrinking population and declining tax base. It has been said that it is a goal of Asplund to remove architecture from its unapproachable status as the role preserve of the professional architect. In his presentation Asplund showed what this means in practice. At Barnsley the novel solution of re-imagining the city as a Toursan Hill town with an embedding halo of light to demarcate and identify a core area which would then undergo strategic densification emerged from an intensive process of citizen consultation. The design solution, as well as its logic, was articulated through production of a video including views of the town, town life and interviews, cross-cut with voice-over.

In Toronto a similar process had been followed. Early in this design process all potential users — students, faculty, neighbourhoo groups — had been invited to take part in meetings in which they were asked to express their concerns about and ideas for the new building. Generating Strange Park, a "key centre", was one of the results of this meeting and the resulting decision to raise the new building 25 metres above grade and extend the park met with the approval of the College, City planners and, most surprisingly perhaps, community activists.21

Asplund’s attentiveness to public life, the creation of new public space, the lifting of the building mass high above the street, all of this, is to some degree, reminiscent of Cedric Price’s concept of "enabling" — and of late projects such as Magen which proposed the construction of high-level belying structures to create views and animate declining brownfield sites. However, there are important differences between contemporary conditions faced by Asplund and those present at mid-century when Price and the Archigram group developed their ideas.

In the early 1950s, in rooms easily seen from the windows of the Sharp Centre, Carpenter, McLuhan, Tynan, McLuhan and the others began their exploration of patterns and forms of cultural life that are now in play. Their research and thought led to the realisation that the increasing impact of the radio and the photograph and related electronic modes such as film and television was certain to intensely
transformations of cultural life already in evidence. These included shifting perceptions of "space", the integration of high and low cultural forms and the increasingly sophisticated manipulation of the urban perceptual field. Equally significant was the insight that in a culture dominated by the forms of advertising allied with the increasingly ubiquitous and multi-sensory power of the electronic media our lived experience would be increasingly formalised and aestheticised, even as our perception and expectations of the various experiential modes open to us were transformed and to that extent expanded: that of the body, the mind and the imagination. As philosophers (such as Doleuze) have observed, advertisers and political strategists have learned and artists have long understood, the power of form is the power to penetrate deeply into the conscious and subconscious mind.\(^{11}\) If the power of science, technology and engineering dominated western thought at the end of the 19th century, by the end of the 20th, issues of aesthetics and form had returned to the centre of social, economic, political, cultural and intellectual life.

In Toronto this shift in context is expressed clearly, though not self-evidently, in the contrast between Aalto's impossible-to-miss table top and the humdrum OCAD buildings of the 1950s and 1960s which preceded it. Even when architecture is not called upon to function as an act, ours is an era in which architecture is increasingly expected to play a promotional role able to accommodate and be accessible to the requirements of an ad-culture. Aalto's inventive design at OCAD was an exercise in raising the profile of the College and helping solicit support and funds for the institution which is chronically underfunded, not to mention an activity – art education – which is more esteemed than encouraged in an intensely competitive economic age. That the Sharp Centre has done so in part of its success in the context of the original brief and by no means incidental. "We wanted to hire an architect who we believed would deliver something bold and completely unusual," explained Peter Cardwell, the Executive Vice-President of OCAD.\(^{12}\)

Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim is often cited as the harbinger and epitome of this trend in the world of architecture, yet this is an approach infrequently seen in the case of publicly-funded educational projects. It is also a trend which predates the 1990s. In his discussion of Cedric Price, Rem Koolhaas places the "return to form" in the context of the economic and cultural changes which signalled the advent of post-modernism in the late 1970s.\(^{13}\)

While Koolhaas is, no doubt, correct in his assessment, it was already evident by the end of the 19th century that unrestricted, advertising could dominate urban life and overwhelm other values and Price himself was well aware of the complex forces shaping contemporary life and of the powerful role that advertising as a cultural practice could play in the contemporary city.\(^{14}\) McLuhan's early study of ad-culture, The Mechanical Bride was widely read by young architects at the time of its publication in the early 1950s.\(^{15}\) In this context it is possible to see the work of Price as an attempt (conscious or not) to outflank the restrictive narratives of a profit-oriented, class-based or politically-controlled culture and expand, through projects like Fun Palace, the conceptual (and instrumental) reach of architectural form/thought. In this way the experience of architecture and thus its practice could lead behind the restrictions of regulated professionalism, which Price had come to view as limiting and destructive, and inhabit an alternate realm of dynamic edge to contemporary culture. Contained within this proposition is the idea of a culturally sensible architectural infrastructure made, not so that architecture itself would vanish from the earth, but precisely that its practices, rooted in the long traditions of humanism and art, could find a place in and help form the emerging world of new aesthetics, emotional and psychic experiences, the world foreseen by Derringer and McLuhan. In this way architecture could parallel the achievement of technology; once defined by the power of its created forms, technology had now begun to disappear from view, replaced by the quiet hum and glowing screen of the increasingly ubiquitous computer.
Fifty years later, the desire for new experiences and a way of life more free, more just, and especially more pleasurable lies at the centre of our collective social and personal programmes. By means of the body, the mind or the imagination; in the context of the everyday or via the virtual world we have begun to inhabit. Yet these transformations take place amidst a culture where market values penetrate ever deeper into our social and political fabric and where citizens are confronted with ever more intrusive patterns of surveillance. These are banal observations not constituting questions of architecture, but they signal the differences separating the theoretical and political conditions of our time from that in which Cedric Price developed his ideas. Then, in the fifties and sixties reform movements originating in the 18th century reached their high-water mark, market forces were highly regulated and relatively benign, at least in the western democracies, and economic theory and political trends supported widespread state intervention in pursuit of the public good, however defined. In Britain struggling to mitigate the inequalities of class, Price saw taste and style not as an axe but an encumbrance. Price was afraid of style and dubious about aesthetics and accordingly, his investigations were focused on issues of technique and function. As Will Alsop has observed, Price aimed to design machines which would enable the client to achieve certain objectives and aims, including, and especially perhaps, experiential and social ones.25

Today, the battle against high art as a form of social control has long since been won, classical culture is a niche market, and a shrinking one at that, while the exploitation, for purposes of the market, of culturally advanced forms and sophisticated styles, often appropriated from high art, continues to be omnipresent. Under these conditions Alsop believes the justification of art lies in its ability to give form to, and, one expects, awaken, aspects of human experience and understanding inexpressible through other means. This belief comes naturally to Alsop, an architect who began his education in a college of art rather than a school of architecture and has subsequently taught sculpture and art history at London’s St. Martin’s College of Art. Moreover Alsop is quick to acknowledge his long admiration for the ability of Le Corbusier to balance the ideal claims of architectural culture of functionalism and art within a single body of work. Nonetheless such a position necessitated a rejection of sorts of the emphatic functionalism of Price and his generation and an engagement with issues of form and aesthetics, an engagement which, significantly, included in Alsop’s case the integration of art practices into the professional realm of the architectural office. Alsop’s writings show this methodological realignment did not come about easily, but its recognition marked the emergence of a personal and identifiable style.26 Today key to the interest Alsop holds for practitioners worldwide is his ability to respond imaginatively and convincingly to economic, social or urban design problems by means of aesthetic as well as functional investigations. At the Sharp Centre issues of aesthetics, in addition to function and technology, lie at the centre of the architectural argument. Immediately they became aware of the competition, Alsop’s colleagues Jonathan Leah in London and Greg Woods in Toronto understood that the design of an art college would respond well to
the techniques and ideas being explored by the firm. In the project, participants in the client workshops were invited to express ideas through crayons and paints as well as through language. Alsop’s own early studies and sketches for the Sharp Centre include sheets of bold, highly coloured gestural drawings, many suggesting spatial or emotional content (figs. 19–20). Later, these were combined with massing and spatial studies disciplined by the program brief. While some of Alsop’s techniques such as montage or collage have been used by architects since the birth of modernism, references to pop culture, the use of video and digital techniques, or the exploration of ephemera – an image of a floating screen superimposed on a photograph of Grange Park – reveal an artistic practice firmly rooted in contemporary art.

Seen from McCaul Street, the Sharp Centre appears to have no formal connection to its immediate context. Shimmering metallic surfaces, abrupt changes of scale, a disrupted streetscape, unexpected colours and massing – everything about the building appears in startling contrast to its surroundings. This strategy flies in the face of conventional doctrines governing urban design and Alsop would be the first to say this is a specific not a general solution. But while this uncompromising aesthetic is an important aspect of the project, the building, despite its size and unconventionality, is experienced as a carefully considered element in relation to the surrounding environment. From neighbouring streets the building is rarely seen, a surprisingly discreet presence in its dense urban setting. From across Grange Park, the Sharp Centre floats enigmatically just above the tree line, giving visitors a posterior view of the building and satisfying sense of definition and scale (fig 20).

On McCaul Street itself, the opening of Grange Park is a significant and welcome moment in the midst of a somewhat relentless urban landscape. The new public space promises to be imaginatively landscaped, a place of delight and animation for students and the surrounding community. Already the ability to walk through and around the giant legs, made possible because of this park, creates a sense of intense specificity unlike any other in the city fully integrated into the urban fabric. That this space is closely within the ambit of a specialized and therefore, by definition, exclusive institu-

Fig. 30 Sharp Centre for Design, view from across Grange Park, looking east.
Fig. 31 Sharp Centre for Design, right view looking north on McCaul Street.
depth of the window frames and the sitting and vertical position of the table top, offer a kind of awakening to the vertical dimension of the city—different in nature to the single view usually enjoyed in an apartment or office tower which is too high or too low or too limited for this particular effect (fig. 24). This sensation is reminiscent, if less intense, than the unfolding of the vertical dimension famously experienced in the exterior escalators of the Centre Pompidou or more recently the slow transformative views of the city offered by the London Eye. It can be no coincidence that both those structures are often included among the properties of Cedric Price, not only because it seems reasonable and fitting to hope that one day, in the not too distant future, funds will permit the Sharp Centre to install its own slow-moving “machine” taking students and visitors to a rooftop café and observation deck.

In his article on Bernard Tschumi, Devont Harrisson remarks that architectural form often functions as a kind of mask to hide or disguise an essential condition or reality: impoverished or compromised public space, the desire to create or preserve a political or commercial reality. In this way the employment of form has the effect of limiting architecture’s critical engagement with the conditions of life: “a socio-political network compromising production, communication and the very act of place-making.” At the Sharp Centre, Atelier, like Price and like McLuhan, both of whom devoted their lives to uncovering or “dismasking” the manipulation of cultural forces out of a bold in the emancipatory power of the forms of art in its poetry (McLuhan) or as art of conceptualized experience (Price), has employed his energy and talent with a spirit not indifferent to the public good but in aid of it. In a city founded on a culture long suspended of enjoyment and pleasure outside the domestic realm, and still linked in its understandings of meanings by which these values can be made public, the far sighted officers of the Ontario College of Art & Design have made the case for architecture as a form of public art intensively engaged with the conditions of life. Within the field of city, the Sharp Centre offers an example of the means by which architecture, on a scale which is urban, can bring the transformative power of art to bear, not as a device to mask an unacknowledged reality or to bring to market a lifestyle or product, but as a demonstration of the value and nature of art and art education itself.