OCCUPYING PRACTICES

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Rooms are frames of mind and apartment ads become today's poetry, which is my favorite reading.
— Yoko Ono[1]

The nest or the web, the den or the hole are created by the animal in the harness of its genes. Dwellings are not such lairs for breeding; they are shaped by a culture. No other art expresses as fully as dwelling that aspect of human existence that is historical and cannot be reduced to biological programs. [...] citizens have lost the potency to imprint their lives on urban space. they use or consume their "housing". [...] Most people today do not dwell in the place where they spend their days and leave no traces in the place where they spend their nights.
— Ivan Illich[2]

Introduction: Fluxus as precedent

Fluxus work of the mid-century provides models for small-scale cultural production, models that inform architectural practice. This paper examines a series of contemporary architectural projects located in Montreal and Toronto where younger and emerging architects have proposed, designed and sometimes constructed themselves, innovative alterations and renovations that refurbish and restructure vernacular buildings in the urban core.

The loose association of artists who contributed to Fluxus derived work from the performance tradition, in the sense of the "happening" or "event," the latter a specifically fluxus term. It was aesthetic production fundamentally grounded in the city and its mercantile traditions, occupying urban space in a significant, game-like way. In reading Fluxus work in terms of performance, it can be interpreted as a process-oriented "environmental art," somewhat like its contemporary, Situationist art. Less radically politicized than Situationism, Fluxus accepted the prosaic, commercial metropolitan conditions of any given place as a basis for and substance of new work.

Still, Fluxus acted as an antidote to the mainstream contemporary movement, pop art, where the 'sellout' was seen as the first step in cultural production, after which the consequences were explored. Recognition of Fluxus has provided relief from problematic 'debased' aspects of pop art: the marketable Warholian flatness, its passivity towards issues of exploitation; and its adherence to a salon/atelier system mimicking industrially produced work by assistant-crafted series, then credited to a single celebrity-author for signature status.

Rather than opposing any other movement, Fluxus proposed openness. While its dada-derived, anarchic characteristics initially made its reception confused, the tendency of the work now reads as politically and culturally democratic and open. According to George Brecht, "Fluxus encompasses opposites. Consider opposing it, supporting it, ignoring it, changing your mind.[3]

The terms of its conditions of production were significant for the work. Fluxus was collectively created and distributed, including anonymous and collaborative work, by individuals of diverse backgrounds and origins — international, male and female, etc., and was built on consensus and accommodating dissension. Dick Higgins wrote about the organizing role of George Maciunas, "Maciunas might try to read people in or out of Fluxus, but as a group we operated more by consensus, regarding Maciunas as a member of the group who had great gifts for publicity and energy for correspondence, but ultimately as just one among equals. ... Maciunas was glad to accept that Fluxus was a collective and, usually, to function within that context."[4]

Close to street life, Fluxus art practice was inserted and incorporated into the web of industrial consumer culture. This celebrated the ephemeral, acting within mass culture but not subject to it, contesting and elaborating on it. George Maciunas, who was educated in architecture, packaged, organized, distributed and archived Fluxus work, as well as creating work himself.[5] He set up a store on 359 Canal Street, a "Fluxshop" in 1964 -65, where the work could be seen and obtained, and advertised by mail order. This cultural production involved a significant curatorial and entrepreneurial role, putting individual works into relation to others in a contemporary context, and making it directly available to a public instead of presenting work to the traditional dealer/critic. Like any small business, Fluxus was entrepreneurial, versatile and flexible.

Maciunas occupied buildings in Soho in an innovative way. He purchased 80 Wooster for the first Fluxus co-operative in 1967, the first he created "and organized fifteen more in Soho between 1966 and 1975,"[6] supervising a $75,000 renovation of Anthology Film Archives in 1974.[7] The photographer, Hollis Melton, quoted Maciunas saying "he thought home-making was the greatest art."[8]

Fig. 1. Kensington Tower, Baldwin Street, Toronto.

In the autumn of 1976, for an exhibition in Berlin, "New York – Downtown Manhattan: Soho," Maciunas and a group of Fluxus artists worked in installation format, designing a Flux-Labyrinth that incorporated a range of humourous, spatial-perceptual experiments.

There was a typical economy in the work. Projects were inexpensively effective, assembled from ordinary available materials. Alison Knowles summarized, "Well, those event pieces did have particular qualities I've mentioned: no cost, no fuss. Let's add that they had a single idea and a limited duration. We could say they were minimal." [9]

Yoko Ono was an early Fluxus member, and she later introduced John Lennon to the group. John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "Billboard" work was a series of interventions in a number of cities, including Montréal and Toronto, late in 1969. From the week beginning May 26, 1969, Lennon and Ono had occupied a bed in a hotel room in Montréal, as part of their peace compaign. On Dec. 15, 1969, Ono and Lennon posted a Christmas message on billboards in 12 cities around the world — Paris, Rome, Berlin, Athens, Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Montréal, Hong Kong, and Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. [10] In Toronto, where they performed a Peace Concert, the city was plastered with WAR IS OVER posters and some 30 roadside billboards. With a gesture that synthesized the conventions of the popular greeting card, a political campaign and advertising, Lennon and Ono's Poster campaign flashed an important signal to the public. In addition to the message that the billboards and posters conveyed — the critique of the Vietnam War in particular and in general the military-industrial complex — Ono's and Lennon's intervention re-appropriated urban space for political discussion and proposition from sites associated with random consumer advertising.

Earlier "Instruction Pieces" published by Ono dealt with domestic space and individual occupation of, and responsibility towards, collective, public space. Ono's performance-based work tended to explore consciousness and to assert the individual's place in the city. Combined with Lennon's more overtly militant attitude, the occupation works introduced the problem of the transformation in status of the public and private realms in the late 20th century, as related to working and dwelling in the metropolis.

Prototypes for Urban Interventions

These precedents bear on a series of modest projects that adapt, re-use, repair, and reinforce urban fabric. A reinterpretation of the Fluxus attitudes of incorporating the "ordinary" in proposing and interpreting social and aesthetic modifications to micro-environments can be seen as having resurfaced in these small schemes which tend to improve and densify existing small-scale housing stock.

In Montreal, a city that has been an economically starved pawn in struggles between provincial and federal governments, architect Eric Gauthier built a new house, acting as his own client, infilling an empty urban lot. It is a simple, unpretentious scheme of home as arranger of things and spaces. He described it as an ordinary building and garden, whose *parti* involves a domestic premise arising from the simple arrangement of space in relation to a linear array of closets.

In a building he occupies and manages, architect Thomas Schweitzer reorganized the top floor of the triplex plan to face south, gain view, and take in light and energy. He reoriented the traditional layout, relocating the plumbing and storage rooms to upgrade the flat's livability. The shell of the typological order of the triplex was recognized as urbanistically viable, while its internal ordering needed repositioning. The new interior capitalizes on the generous volumes of the traditional triplex.

In Toronto, the urban texture is somewhat thinly dispersed. The municipal government has struggled to encourage densifying initiatives. At a scale inscribed within traditional lot patterns, two cases successfully added living space in the form of tiny towers, built in the rear of the Toronto lot. Independently built by their designers, who were also acting as small developers, they are prototypes for densification.

Gregory Peacock designed, with Tracey Eve Winton, the addition in Kensington Market, on Baldwin Street, and built it with a team that included Winton and Otis Maréchaux. The scheme ingeniously created an original double-height apartment at the grade level. The new tower and its upper level lookoff balconies enhance the lively streetscape of the market. Peacock continues to occupy the tower as a roommate, and manager of the
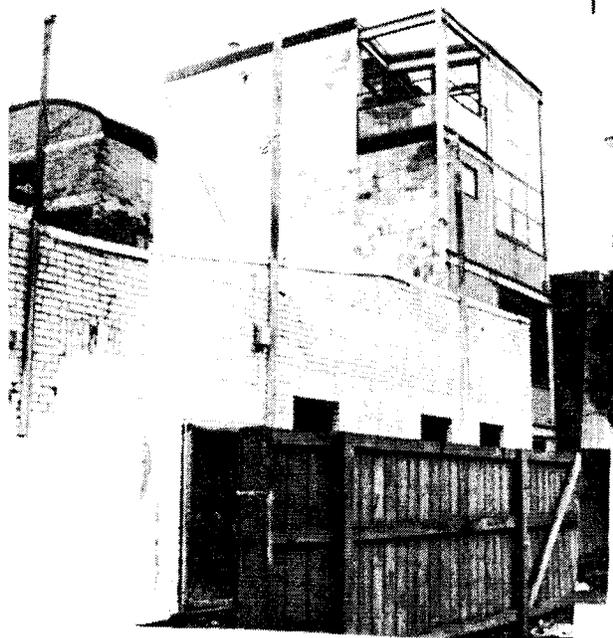
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Fig. 2. Tower addition to 1024 Queen St. West, Toronto, view from lane.

Fig. 3. Demo Home, Richmond Street, Toronto, August 1994, view from entrance.

project, and as landlord for the lower units. Recently Peacock worked in the development phase with architect Terence van Elslander, participating in the planning of a project of a similar nature down the street, on Augusta near Baldwin.

At the rear of the lot of a typical commercial street, Queen West, architect/owner Kathleen Kurtin built a slim tower, containing flexible rental units. To improve the viability of the scheme in a "distressed" neighborhood, she also started up, with a partner, designed, and ran a popular café in the building, until another restaurant business was attracted to the location and proposed to take over.

Graduates in architecture, Kenneth Hayes and Norman Richards adapted the classic Toronto duplex type to an up/down flat. This is a typical vernacular conversion, only unusual in its approach: customized by

adaptive devices. Economical means and found elements were preferred because the designers remain two tenants. In this modest renovation of a small, traditional urban Toronto house, devices were installed to allow the living and circulation space to be used differently at different times.

Architecture in the Expository Tradition

Lastly, an ephemeral project proposed what Kenneth Hayes has called the "expository condition" of architecture. In Toronto, the week-long event by Hayes and Barry Isenor entitled "Demo Home" used the installation practice to insert a temporary model dwelling environment into a grade-level raw space at the base of an unoccupied late-1980s tower block in the garment district. Demo Home presented to the public a series of issues derived from contemporary dwelling and poetically analyzing inhabitation.

For a week, Demo Home incorporated the presence of the designers to test the overlapping of private and public spheres. The project used time-based media such as film and appliances triggered by motion detectors to address temporal questions of dwelling through the relations of day and night. The project explored the role of plastic and synthetic materials and their recycling in the make-up of dwelling space. Formally, Demo Home demonstrated the assembled character and fusion of the historic monumentality of the vast space of minimalist sculpture with "loft living."

In its serial assemblies, arrayed on the unfinished concrete, Demo Home evoked a dense range of theoretical issues related to architectonic minimal dwelling space. Each assembly was prosaically titled: "Deep Sleep," "Conglomerated Foam (Lounge Ensemble)," "Primitive Accumulation," "Hot Plate," "Earthwork #1 (Box of Worms)," "Buff," "Ice Box," "Dish Wreck (White on White)," and "Colour Study #1." In "Deep Sleep," composed of a metal bed frame, rear projection screen, super-8 projector, film loop, motion detector, the question 'the serial' or 'the repetitive' was raised by means of the film projection cycle, where a film sequence, triggered by the motion of a passer-by on the sidewalk, was projected on a projection screen/headboard to materialize the nightly dream cycle. The bed was a custom-made inflated mattress, of transparent plastic, occupying the entrance area like a floating object.

"Primitive Accumulation" addressed consumption and accumulation. Styrofoam packing crates made visible and three-dimensional the consequences of the fordist model of accumulation as the collection of objects for domestic purposes. These were presented within the minimalist aesthetic of vast, luxurious spaces – the miesian/commercial precedent merging with the loft/domestic. "Conglomerated Foam" used slabs of composite, recycled foam to define a lounging area. "Earthwork #1" was a plastic box filled with red wriggler composting worms, acting as memento mori, according to the designers, in a humorous aside to the landscape ambitions embedded in minimal art practice. "Buff" used a series of Hoover floor polishers on timers to intermittently, and noisily, glide over the floor in formation and render its surface evermore reflective. "Colour Study #1" was made of

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Fig. 4. Demo Home, Richmond Street, Toronto, August 1994, view from rear.

Fig. 5. Demo Home, Richmond Street, Toronto, August 1994, Deep Sleep'assembly.

recycled collected plastic bags, taped together and suspended in the space as a giant painting, humbly referencing an ideal enormous scale.

The assemblies provoked an awareness of dwelling as a facet of a micro-political economy, one including both domestic work, paid and unpaid, and public'personality for sale, capitalist economy having penetrated deep into the private sphere, in the guise of celebrity art practice. The installation tested how contemporary architectural design culture commodifies the role of artist, architect, or cultural producer. Their development of what Hayes has called the "expository condition" was emphasized by the role played by the designers, not so much as expert, rather, as maker, occupier and demonstrator, derived from what might be considered a debased referent: selling.

These modest projects stand in contrast to the conventional history of domestic architecture and its tradition of the model of dwellling as the villa, as a showpiece: the independent palatial house in the cityscape or landscape. They constitute important examples for the present when architects have to take initiative, innovate, and remain to manage and continue involvement in small scale, modest, constructive undertakings. As practitioners work to expand definitions of expressions such as pro-active and empower, it is important to discuss and recognize this modestly scaled, but sensitive, productive and ambitious work.

NOTES

[1] Yoko Ono, "On Rooms and Footsteps," *This Is Not Here* exhibition catalogue (Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1971).

[2] Ivan Illich, *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1985), pp. 10-11. As for the latter part of the quote, this paper constitutes an optimistic attempt at rebuttal.

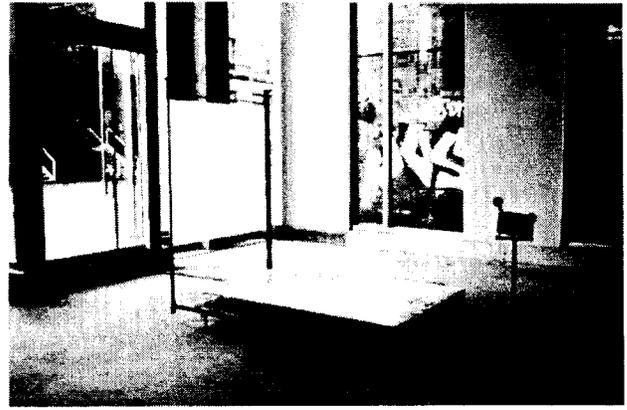[3] George Brecht, quoted in Stephen C. Foster, "Historical Design and Social Purpose, a note on the relationship of Fluxus to Modernism," in Estera Milman, guest curator, "Fluxus, a conceptual country," *Visible Language* volume 26 number 1/2, Winter/Spring 1992, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, R.I., p. 42.

[4] Dick Higgins, "Two Sides of a Coin, Fluxus and the Something Else Press" in *Visible Language* (1992), p. 152, footnote 4.

[5] George Maciunas studied at the Cooper Union, 1949-1952, and received a Bachelor of Architecture from the Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1954.

[6] Jonas Mekas, "Notes on George Maciunas' Work in Cinema," *Visible Language* (1992), pp. 125-132, and p. 129.

[8] Hollis Melton, "Notes on Soho and a Reminiscence" in *Visible Language* (1992), p. 187 and footnote 5.

[9] Ibid., p. 198.

[10] Estera Milman, quoting Alison Knowles in 1985, "Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People: A Conversation with Alison Knowles" in *Visible Language* (1992), p. 103.

[11] Anthony Fawcett, *John Lennon, One Day at a Time* (New York: Grove Press, 1972), p. 59.

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