OPINIONATIVE ARCHITECTURE

MAKING SPACE FOR THE POLITICS OF MANY

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16

The Discourse of Politics and the Poetics of Building

One can not reduce any culture to its explicit functions - political, economic, legal, etc. No culture is wholly transparent in this way. There is invariably a hidden nucleus which determines and rules the distribution of these transparent functions and institutions. It is the matrix of distribution which assigns them different roles in relation to (1) each other, (2) other societies, (3) the individuals who participate in them, and (4) nature, which stands over against them ... Beyond or beneath the self-understanding of a society there is an opaque kernel which cannot be reduced to empirical norms or laws. This kernel cannot be explained in terms of some transparent model because it is constitutive of a culture before it can be expressed in specific representations or ideas. It is only if we try to grasp this kernel that we may discover the foundational mytho-poetic nucleus of a society.[1]

Among many other things, the idea of "building as a political act" opens up two interpretations. Firstly, that somehow the processes of creating and erecting a work of architecture can serve, in an instrumental way, the aims of previously articulated political intentions, that the built work becomes an apparatus for demonstrating or actualizing the content of a discourse that happens in another form, usually spoken or written, and in another place, a cabinet, a debating chamber, a street corner, or an activist's basement.

A second interpretation is to suggest that the creative enterprise of making architecture is not the servant of political discourse, but an inspiration, a catalyst, a scene setter, an originating influence in the generation of political possibilities, together with many other crucial forms of cultural possibility.

The former interpretation, architecture as instrument of political intention, subjugates the expressive uniqueness of the language of architecture to another form of cultural expression which is given preeminence in the relationship. Whatever architectural expression sets out to be, it is here subordinated to the order of discourse, much like architecture's common subordination to the order of economics, the order of legislation, and the order of progressive technology. In this sense, architectural expression is partially removed from its responsibility to engage with the full implications of a culture, having its scope limited to pre-ordained ideas. Architecture becomes merely the carcass, or at best, the pattern or image of political intention which it has not been involved in creating. The idea of building as the outcome of political processes, combined with economic and legislative processes, is almost platitudinous in a contemporary western industrial context.

That building can have a political dimension or import is self-evident, but what sets the potential of architectural expression apart from political, or any other kind of discourse, is the recognition that to create architecture cannot remain a discursive act, but must engage with the scope of poetics, where epistemological concerns for the formulation of knowledge are eclipsed by ontological concerns for revealing "being." Imagination in architecture, along with the other creative arts, must open itself to the conditions of being and respond, through the metaphoric fluctuation of likeness, through the play of the similarity of dissimilars, to the full breadth of the burgeoning realities of a culture, within which the political dimension is played out alongside all the other multifarious concerns that interlace into particular matrices of human existence. Architectural creativity involves a means of addressing the issues at stake in the meaningful continuity of a culture in a manner unavailable to any other form of expression. This difference perhaps lies in architecture's phenomenal presence, its body, its physique — in the fact that it does, quite dramatically, "incorporate" (give body to) meaning. It is gestural at the same time that it is conceptual; it has sensual concreteness at the same time that it has intellectual abstractness; it has measure in relation to the human body at the same time that it "measures-up" human existence; and it is the setting for action at the same time that it sets forth possibilities for action.

Perhaps, above all, through its material presence architecture offers an opportunity for a dialogue between the artificial, rational orders of human invention — social, political, economic, legal, technological — and the given orders of nature. Architectural creativity has an obligation towards "matter." It should not suppress the qualities of matter for the sake of rational clarity, but embrace the special import matter provides. Architecture is about the relationship not only of humans to other humans, but of

humans to the otherness of a worldly context. The rationale brought to bear upon this dialogic situation (society in dialogue with nature) by the participatory contribution of nature is not logical, and is not discursive, but is orderly in a manner perpetually incomplete and unraveling, and it therefore demands a different kind of engagement. If architecture is to maintain a significant contribution to humanity, it must recognize the necessity to be present at the transaction between logos and physis, to contribute to the genesis of names, where the transcendent pressure of the naturally given is absorbed by the always inadequate accommodation of language.

In terms of the potential to communicate meaningful human experience, an act of politics cannot eclipse an act of building (though history is plagued with examples of the muting of acts of building by politically inspired acts of violence). More accurately, acts of political discourse cannot eclipse acts of poetic architectural production, where that production proceeds by means of the transformative leap of metaphoric vision, as opposed to the methodical stride of discursive argument. This is not to devalue the importance of discursive exploration relative to the poetic, since they share the common basis of dialogue between different parties spurred on by a desire to discover commonality, shared identity, places of coincidence and accord, always in a context of difference.

Individual and Institution

In the realm of institutions, the consensual generation of general norms of action through practical discourses moves to the fore. In the realm of personality formation, the development of individual identities becomes increasingly more dependent on the reflexive and critical attitudes of individuals in weaving together a coherent life story beyond conventional role and gender definitions. Self-definitions, who one is, become increasingly autonomous vis-a-vis established social practices and fluid when compared to rigid role understandings. Likewise the appropriation of cultural tradition becomes more dependent upon the creative hermeneutic of contemporary interpreters. Tradition in the modern world loses its legitimacy of simply being valid because it is the way of the past. The legitimacy of tradition rests now with resourceful and creative appropriations of it in view of the problems of meaning in the present. Viewed in this threefold fashion, the principle of participation, far from being antithetical to modernity, is one of its chief prerequisites. In each realm — society, personality and culture — in the functioning of institutional life, the formation of stable personalities over time and the continuity of cultural traditions, the reflective effort and contribution of individuals becomes crucial.[2]

Benhabib has suggested that the "political" is an enterprise of "making public," of making issues and concerns accessible to debate, reflection, action and transformation; in other words, to democratize them. Such an enterprise generates, conceptually, a public space where discourse takes place, where members of a culture are at liberty to construct arguments and express opinions; to engage in moral conversation with a view to arrival at some form of agreement. As such, the domain of the political occupies, and constantly redefines, a shared discursive space of public participation. Here, the space of politics, as the location of one form of meaningful human experience, issues from the dynamics of reciprocal human intercourse. It is an abstract space, though no less real for it, and one sustained by the willing placement of private individuals, via their opinionative stance, into a collective arrangement, a relationship, an order, an institution. This discourse must take place as it harbors freedom and nurtures the inclusive net of communication against threats of its converse, the entrapping net of muteness. Restraint against communication is the first violence.

One might expect the relationship of individual and institution to be forged within a context of reciprocal communicative exchange. However, keeping this exchange open and vital seems increasingly dogged by the encroachment of systematic bureaucracy; by the reduction of communicative enterprise to a monologic display of simplified, literal meanings; and by the continued dream of post-Enlightenment subjectivity to attain complete emancipation from an objective world. The idea of the institution as the establishment of a site of communal meaning amongst a population of individuals has become attenuated to the debate concerning the simple binary opposition of public and private space. In the architectural discourse of modernity, public and private have tended to become the two sides of a straight forward issue of spatial possession, distinguished by an explicit edge, a border, a line. Configuring space as a possession, where one does or does not owns it, is incompatible with the figuration of space through the dynamic enterprise of open dialogic conversation. In the possessive model one simply occupies public space or moves across a line and simply occupies private space. The idea of the malleable negotiation of territories, of subtle nuance, of complex and transient inter-weavings of the definition and character of each, of blurred lines, overlappings, and migrations amid infiltrations, cannot be accommodated by the binary disposition of opposites.

A significant aspect of this problem lies in the dominant ethos of prediction and control issuing from industrial, technological necessity, but now thoroughly commanding the expectations of many participants in practical social life and cultural production. Deviations from the clarity of this kind of logical thought are considered, as one might expect, deviant. The subjective individual is constantly cajoled into adopting a defined and stable persona, appropriate to their position in a highly formulaic environment of action and speech. The architectural manifestation of this condition, especially in the educational context, lies in the promotion of stable building typologies and quantified building programs where the truly inventive and interpretive act of translation from human action to built gesture is inhibited by so many standards, so many codes, and so many

18

organizational stereotypes. In this prescriptive environment it is no wonder that the discussion of the "juxtaposition of form" and the "interplay of image" become the central preoccupation of architects and students of architecture, the last remaining venues for the dream of originality to play itself out.

Conversations on the Theme of Identity

In an attempt to break out of the inertia of the typology-program-form model for an architectural design studio and break into another kind of engagement with the issues at stake in the making of works of architecture, the idea of the "conversation of strangers" was proposed to a small group of graduate architectural students. The primary intention was to generate, quite literally, a conversation inspired by the personal contribution of individuals; an opportunity to air opinion and to articulate deeply felt and passionately held prejudices and beliefs. Most importantly, it was intended to show how shared opinion might operate amongst individuals and can be capable of coalescing into a forceful and persistent projection of common identity, producing and sustaining meaningful institutions.

> The "truth" of the subject emerges only in a fragmentary manner, in an interweaving of appearances, perspectives, practices and narratives. The identity of the subject ... does not involve a logical identity, but is rather the "same" that varies, modifies itself, has various faces and phases: a subject ... that loses its Cartesian certainty and is only able to recognize itself when it is 'in play', in movement, in other words, when exposed to alterity. This subject does not have its foundations within itself, it can only "believe in itself" through the testimony of its body, memory, language, other subjects and the opacity of its own consciousness.[3]

The intention of the design studio, "The Conversation of Strangers" (Portland State University, Department of Architecture, Winter Term 1995), was to nurture an environment of open discourse about issues that matter from human to human, then encourage the refraction of opinion through the lens of poetic imagination. In other words, to cast the self-understanding of individuals elevated by the shared understanding of institutions into vital communication with the horizon of nature, where what we believe we know is questioned against what we believe we are.

Beyond the simplistic juxtaposition of public/private space the studio asked what role can architecture play in a mediation of individual and collective experience, as a channel of communication between what is simultaneously important to one and to everyone within the giveness of the natural setting. Each student was charged with the responsibility of discovering and articulating their identity in terms other than a private language of obsession, by probing their sense of productive involvement in the generation and continuity of common values and customs, and by having to orient themselves in the company of others through an enterprise of

conversation which "sets its theme before those communicating like a disputed object between them. Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who speak with one another."[4]

The conversation was provoked by the double-edged question: "What is the nature of my patriotism; and what is the nature of my neighbor's patriotism?" The studio was structured around three main tasks. The first focused on a private territory, an individual's particular sense of patriotism; the second focused on a public territory, the identification of institutionalized patriotism built into the fabric of the city; the third focused on the potential for dialogue between the individual and institutional manifestations of patriotism, where the definition of what is deemed public and what is deemed private might be refigured in meaningful ways in response to innovative expressions of opinion. It seemed imperative to suggest that an architecture inspired by original opinion has a different cultural vitality than an architecture that results primarily from a striving for original form.

Task One invited students to indulge in an introverted conversation with themselves, to seek out their patriotic self, where they stand on the issue of patriotism. The difficulty for many students was how to deal with simultaneously embodying patriotism as an individual through action and persona, while reflecting intellectually upon its meaning, articulating what really counts, what forms the foundation of its being, sifting out extraneous detail from essential content. Following the tradition of the mannerist wunderkammer, the 18th century curiosity cabinet, and the worlds in a box of Joseph Cornell and Fluxus, students were asked to make a space for their patriotism, to locate it in a box, articulated as a gathering of artifacts (in conversation), embodying the full and profound character of their own idiosyncratic sense of patriotism. Though many students considered themselves patriotic, albeit tinged with various forms of mild cynicism, the exercise of facing up to what they believed in and showing it in public was unanimously problematic.

It was intriguing to discover that a concept based on collectivity, in particular the collectivity of nationhood, could engender such consternation and difficulty for its individual participants. A conversation on the subject of patriotism was one they had rarely had, yet they all could recall the performance of patriotic ritual early in their personal histories, and had the ubiquitous icons of patriotism emblazoned in their consciousness: the Stars and Stripes, the White House, the physiognomy of great presidents, the victorious soldier, and so on.

It was somewhat surprising to discover the seeming inadequacy of most of these primary icons in holding any true meaning in the proximate foreground of individual experience. In fact, a general conclusion was that the ubiquity of such icons amongst the common currency of cultural images contributed to their perceived emptiness, that they tended to harbor stereotypical opinion, a hollow, superficial patriotism, more a danger as potential rallying points for naive, uncritical, monologic forms of nationalism.

Task Two asked the students as a group to identify all the existing sites of institutionalized patriotism in

Fig. 1. Erik Gerding, World in a Box, the short-sightedness of the military solution.

Fig. 2. Arn Strasser, World in a Box, the voice(lessness) of immigrant minorities.

downtown Portland, Oregon, and to make a consensual mapping based not upon topographical and morphological relationships but upon relationships of opinion concerning the relative significance of each identified locus. This activity proved extremely problematic. It seemed that once the common, objective ground of physical, geographic placement was removed from the situation the exercise of mapping became a struggle, firstly, to identify the position of each participating student in relation to each urban patriotic locus. And secondly, a struggle to identify a common language of expression that was born of the contest of opinion, and which avoided falling back on tried and tested cartographic conventions such as symbols and schedules, which merely denote the content of a mapping, rather than reveal and embody the nature of the negotiation that produces it. The main loci of institutional, public patriotism included: the Federal Building, the U.S. Post Office, the Armory, the Riverfront Park (site of July 4 celebrations), the flagpole in the Riverfront Park, Pioneer Courthouse, Pioneer Courthouse Square (the central plaza of downtown Portland), and the Justice Center.

The studio consisted of 10 graduate students. A map is predicated on the assumption of a common reading of the world, on a consistent, agreed upon system of signifying conventions that translates terrain into territory, converts found ground, through a filter of prejudiced perception, into established place; where phenomenal space becomes graphic space; where the uncharted gets charted. A knowledge of the signifying graphic conventions proceeds the usefulness of a map. For the studio participants, plotting the physical location of each
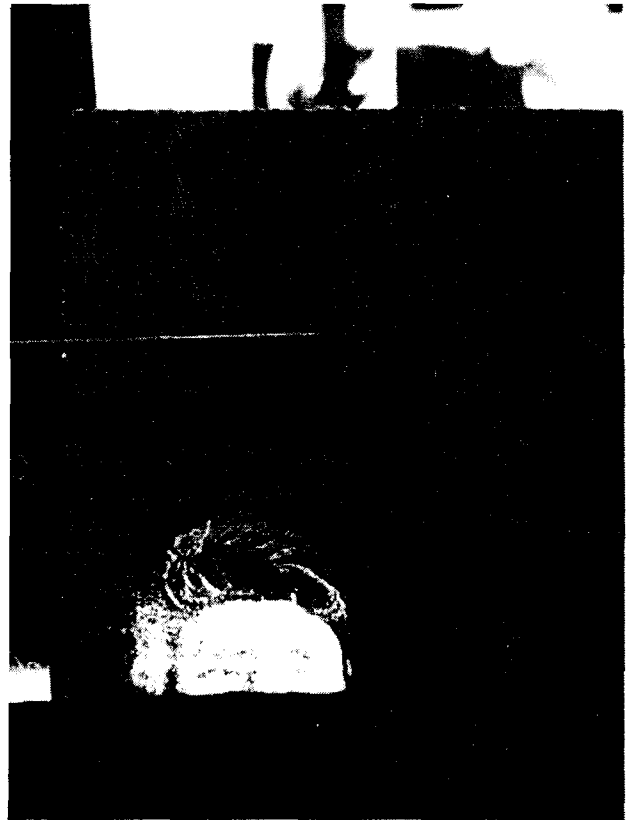
institutional patriotic site as an item of geography was made easy by the matrix of the city grid, the bounding edges of the Willamette river and the encircling interstate freeway; in other words, the accumulated and visible geometry of the city. Identifying and inscribing place in the visible landscape proved no problem. However, identifying place in the invisible landscape of individual and collective opinion about patriotism proved to be more difficult. Plotting the relative significance of an institutional site in terms of an hierarchy of importance was wrought with difficulty as each individual tended to retreat into a steadfastly personal account of the order of things. Finding commonality seemed secondary to protecting one's own territory. Endeavoring to invent a graphic language through which each member of the group could adequately speak generated anxiety and frustration. In the end, as time began to run out, the group stopped speaking and transferred energy to the piecemeal construction of what became known as the "monster-map-thing." The only satisfactory point of agreement was recognition that the text of the Bill of Rights, beneath all differences, must remain inviolable. A reprographically enlarged manuscript form of the text thus became the foundational matrix of the new map, over which layerings of personal input accumulated by means of, more or less, private making and attachment. The success of the assignment lies in the recognition of the nature of the difficulty, not in overcoming it.

Task Three asked students to select one locus of institutionalized patriotism, investigate the nature of that
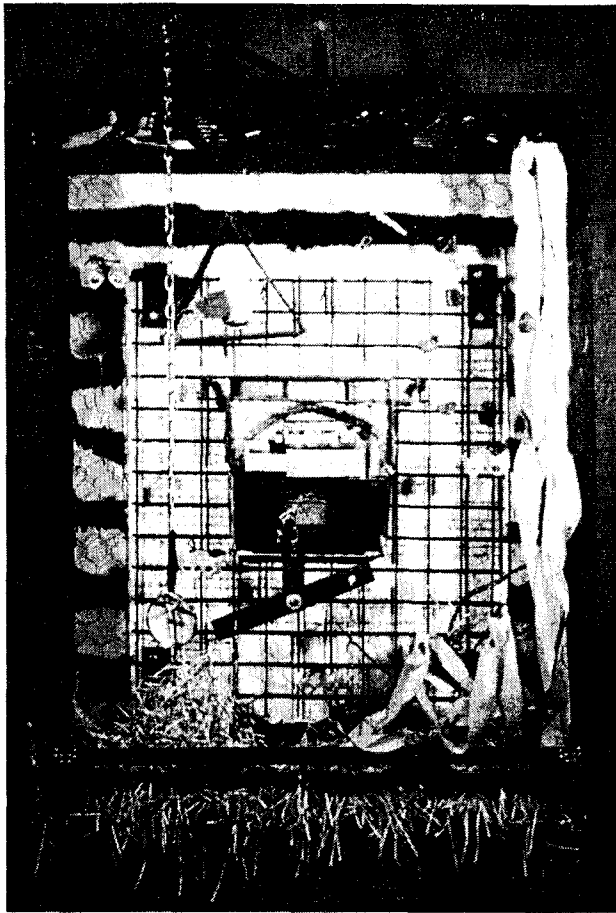
20

Fig. 3. (not so)Consensual mapping, the "Monster-Map-Thing."

Fig. 4. Arn Strasser, Intervention at the United States Post Office.

institutionalization, and explore how the built artefact responds to its responsibility. They were asked to make more focussed mappings and then to create an intervention inspired by the character of private patriotism expressed in Task One (World in a Box). The intention was to generate an architecture of mediation between individual and institutional experiences of patriotism. Interventions were to orchestrate a transformation from an exterior of common experience to an interior of particular, partisan experience. The intervention was to act as a complex threshold focusing one's perspectives towards a culminating space in which to be alone, contemplatively, with one's reveries.

Exploring the theme of an individual's inalienable rights, one student addressed the process of assimilation into citizenship experienced by immigrants. A branch of the United States Post Office was identified as a site of institutionalized patriotism, a trenchant national service institution embracing, with its networks, the entirety of the terrestrial scope of the country, and offering a locus of communication, a connecting valve, between new immigrants and their places of origin. An intervention at the post office was proposed that would create an unintimidating place to offer information to immigrants in support of their journey through the great bureaucratic edifice of the Immigration and Naturalization Service,
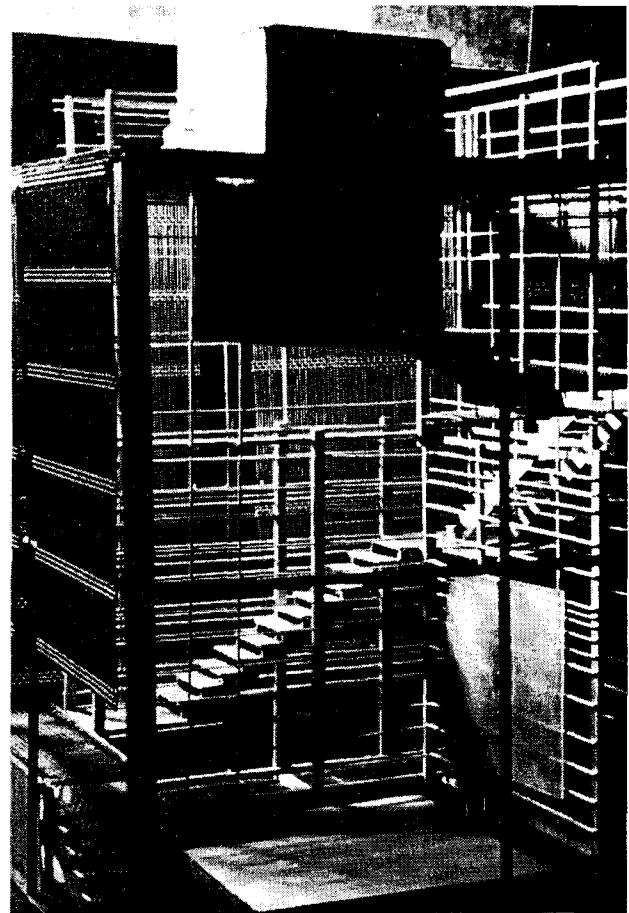
where the disenfranchised individual is transformed into patriotic citizen. Interwoven in and through this environment is the opportunity for visitors to publicly and legitimately express self-identity through instantaneous video projection of opinion to those waiting in the interior gathering space, and to the street.

Exploring the theme of one's duty to fight for the protection of the nation, one student proposed an intervention at the old Armory, once a rallying place for military personnel and equipment, now a warehouse for a brewery. The main gates to the building are no longer in use, a kind of mute remnant, together the with thick castellated walls, of previous gestures of security and sanctuary. As a form of grafting, or prosthetic enhancement of a dead limb, the gates were reactivated, not as a horizontal threshold from exterior to interior, but in reference to mortal vulnerability and sacrifice, a metaphorical threshold, articulated vertically, between dutiful life and worthy death. Two contrasting contemplation spaces were created, one extroverted, offering recognizance over terrain from an elevated point of advantage; the other introverted, offering reflection across an internalized landscape of memory interred, below ground in communion with the earth.

Other themes included the power of the law in administering the binary opposition of freedom and
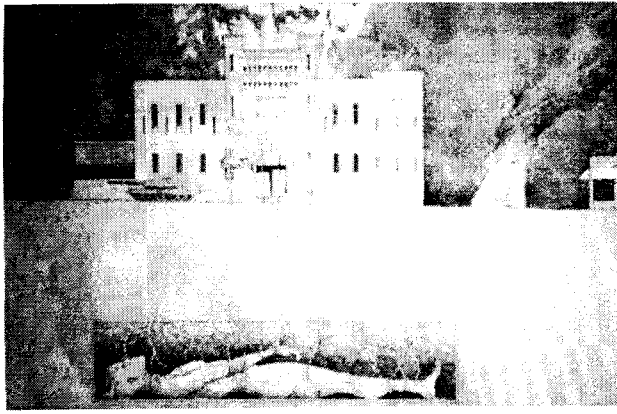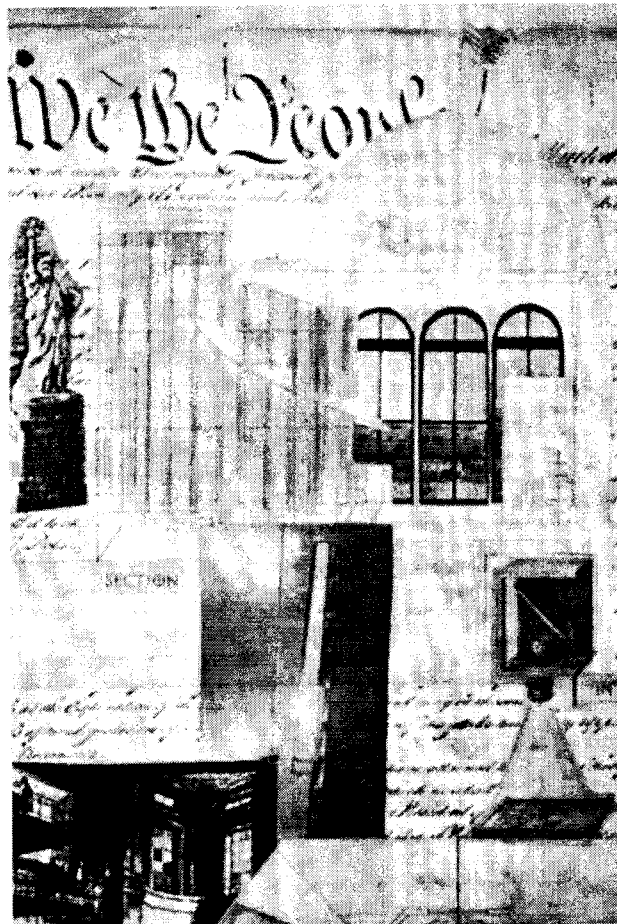
Fig. 5. Stephen Korbich, Intervention at the Armory.

Fig. 6. Chris Roberts, Intervention at Pioneer Courthouse.

incarceration; this led to an intervention on the issue of virtue and choice in an existing public speaking amphitheater in a park across from the Justice Center. Another dealt with the power of festive experience in generating common bonding and participation in a sense of 'oneness'; an intervention in Riverfront Park attempted to further enhance the sense of commonality beyond human to human relationships, towards that of human to nature by encouraging group participation in the dynamic transformation of the river over time. Another student explored the significance of the flagpole as rallying point, a marker of collective claim to a territory, and a gesture of ownership over the horizon. And another student incited the importance of founding rituals in establishing and reestablishing the axis mundi of the city; he infiltrated the redundant space of the cupola of the existing symbolic center of Portland, the old Pioneer Courthouse, redirecting its 360-degree panorama towards the east in celebration of it as a primordial source for all things west (pioneer migrations and settlement in particular), while rooting the vertical axis of the tower to its site with a plumbline slung internally from the top, penetrating each floor

Through the action of culture, I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine. I confront them, I make one known to the other, I make them equally possible in an order of truth, I make myself responsible for all of them, and I create a universal life.[5]

NOTES

[1] Paul Ricoeur, "Myth as the bearer of possible worlds" in R. Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: MUP, 1984), pp. 36-37.

[2] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 104.

[3] Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 118.

[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward. 1975), p. 404.

[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence." *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964), p. 75.