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Dialectical Furniture for Highway Interchanges

David Rifkind

Richard Sennett has argued that the streets of the American metropolis have been transformed since the early twentieth century from the site of participatory democracy to a conduit system for traffic. ([note1](#)) This transformation has its perils ([note2](#)) and must be addressed in contemporary public discourse. Yet while this issue of urbanity in North America has made for compelling discussion for some time now, it is rarely central to architectural works. It can be argued that on the subject of the street and the city, architecture has chosen to remain silent.



This project does not attempt to revive the *architecture parlante* of Ledoux. Instead, taking its cue from sculptor Richard Serra's powerful critique of architecture and urbanism, ([note3](#)) the work engenders the ethical discourse necessary to reinvest public space with the rituals of public participation.

The intersection of Avenues du Parc and des Pins at the foot of Mont Royal presents a tailor-made site for this discourse. A concrete interchange geared to automotive traffic, it is largely shunned by pedestrians despite abundant (though circuitous) walkways through the site. It is here, where Montréal has forsaken the role of the street as a place of congress, that we can contemplate this loss and the challenges left in its wake for an urban society.



Three pieces of furniture provide the foci of this discussion. They deal with issues of growth, maintenance, decay, displacement, and responsibility. Each decision regarding form and siting is a political one; each gesture is self-conscious of its consequences. The speculative character of the work demands consideration by those who encounter it. Here, a bench begs more than to sit - it is a call to act.



The **planter** sits on a grass strip along northbound Avenue du Parc. To *plant* is to dig into the earth with one's heel; the Latin root is close to *plan*, the marking of intention onto the earth. To live is to leave foot prints, and the planter reveals the dimension of displacement innate in any act of growing. The armature on which the vines grow is reflected in plan by a concrete slab, cast in place to occlude an area of grass equal (in plan projection) to the vines above.

Ritual is important to the didactic character of each piece of furniture. For the planter, the initial act of casting in place (*im*)plants the piece, tying it to site. The annual act of planting seedlings and the frequent act of watering talk about maintenance the continuously responsible relationship of public to city.



Maintenance and decay are central to the **sundial**, which depends for support on a visibly deteriorated concrete wall separating vehicles from pedestrians on southbound Avenue du Parc. This horologe is anamorphic the vertical gnomon must be moved regularly within a set path to ensure accuracy, given the horizontal sundial surface. Yet this accuracy is provisional; the gnomon is steel, and began oxidizing as soon as it was moved outdoors. This internal decay is made manifest by the rust collecting on the sundial's face, recording time by another measure, that of obsolescence in an industrial society.

The **bench** sits outside the interchange. Its vantage from a nearby park draws the two sites into visual dialogue, and requires participants to consider their responsibility (within the public realm) to sites that they do not inhabit. The bench's seatback is supported by a pole which acts as a hinge. The bench rotates along a steel rail laid in the ground across a pathway. Because the latter position affords preferable views, the participant must acknowledge the consequences attached to sitting/dwelling a decision must be made whether or not to block the paths of others for the sake of a view. The immediate ethics of the latter decision can be contemplated in relation to the view of the interchange, where we question our own role in the shaping and maintaining of our common environment.



Ultimately, these are the questions posed by the trio what role do we each play in the continuous act of making the city? Do we truly participate in this making do we build as citizens and if so, how is this reflected in other forms of democratic exchange? What is our responsibility to the other, "the neighbour"? ([note4](#)) Dialectical furniture for highway interchanges asks these questions through an architectural medium.



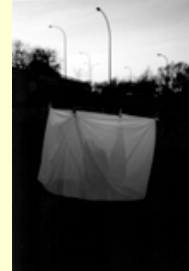
Postscript...

I came to Avenues du Parc and des Pins looking for a site-specific challenge to conventional architectural practice, but what I found is a garden. This place, so maligned by most who have walked it (and rightly so), is an English garden in





waiting. The serpentine paths rise and fall as the ground swells and recedes, leaving pools of utter calm suspended between the heavily trafficked roadways. There are ready-made grottoes and waterfalls in the underpasses. Perhaps these garden furnishings (the planter, the sundial, and the bench) offer a model for reclaiming the poetic potential of such places.



Notes:

1. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company 1974).
2. Paul Virilio points out that the Volkswagen was marketed heavily by a Nazi party who felt that getting people into cars meant getting them off the streets, out of the traditional place of assembly, and of revolution. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, tr. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e) 1984), 25.
3. This cue is taken in spirit, not in form. Serra's relationship to architecture and the city is the subject of my thesis.
4. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics and Politics", tr. Jonathan Romney, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell 1989), 294.