

THE ART OF ANDRE FOURNELLE: A THREE-DIMENSIONAL EXPLORATION IN A WORLD OF PURE ABSTRACTION AND CONSTRUCTION

*Adrian Sheppard, FRAIC
Emeritus Professor of Architecture
McGill University, Montreal*

Consider the momentous event in architecture when the wall parted, and the column became. (Louis I. Kahn)

ABSTRACTION AND SYMBOLISM

The intellectual and artistic universe of Andre Fournelle is a multilateral voyage through a world rich with formal ideas, powerful symbolisms, and tectonic explorations. The metaphor is Fournelle's preferred means of conveying his thoughts. He elects his art to speak of ideas in an indirect manner. His images are generally coded, yet clear and powerful once decrypted. The effort required to grasp the message is well rewarded in the end. Fournelle avoids traditional figuration in art and prefers to investigate in the world of abstraction and generalizations. He presents ideas *de profil* rather than *de face*. Without a doubt, meaning and metaphor are more important to him than aesthetic beauty or visual gratification.

Despite the use of diverse sculptural languages and a wide range of thematic journeys, there is a manifest common thread through much of his work. This semiotic communality is partly related to the physical scale of his sculptures, and to his specific focus on architectonic forms. By making much of his sculptural works relate to the actual physical size of the observer, his art becomes emotionally and psychically "habitable". Many of his sculptures are conceived, not as objects to be viewed from outside, but as tangible and spiritual three-dimensional environments to be experienced physically.

Fournelle's art is both formal and spatial. He uses architectonic elements to create spaces that are structured and legible. Aside from their emblematic meaning, one can read his sculptural works as essays in architecture as well as explorations in pure form. Both sculpture and architecture deal with space and form, solids and voids, positives, and negatives. Form is the primordial component of sculpture, and space may be tangible or implied. In some instances, the space within or around "object" may be more important than the solids themselves. The sculptures of Anton Pevsner or Umberto Boccioni have physical form, yet the space within or around the form give these works their full meaning. One thinks of Boccioni's *Development of a Bottle in Space (1912)* as a sculptural illustration of a vortex of spinning space around a fixed pivot, namely the bottle. This implicit space provides the context for the form and generates the logic of the sculpture.

THE COLUMN AS AN EMBODIMENT OF THE HUMAN ACT

Fournelle's sculptural language is powerful at the formal level, it is rich in meaning, and is nurtured by numerous historical references. The prevailing elements found in his artistic vocabulary is the column, to which he returns repeatedly and which he uses in many ways. His concentration on the column goes way beyond that of an element of physical support. For Fournelle, the column metaphorically supports the entire universe, that of culture and human conscience. His column is like Atlas, the primordial Titan of Greek Mythology who held up the celestial sphere on his shoulders. Fournelle attributes a social and historical meaning to the column, which he sees as an allegorical tree, a landmark, a focal point for human encounter, a link between earth and heaven. One is reminded of Louis Kahn's poetic definition of the birth of the school. The school, he once said, was born the moment a man, sitting under a tree, told a story to a younger person. The tree was a place for teaching and learning.

The primal language of architecture is one of walls, floors, roofs, wall openings, and columns. The column, as Kahn noted, is the element that replaces the wall. It allows light to enter, space to flow, and the plan to be free. The column's role is not limited to that of supporting loads. They are the very bones of the construct and constitute the most expressive architectonic element in a building. The column's symbolic value is immense and is frequently used as the principal protagonist in defining the spatial composition. It can be used to give physical order to the building, to provide the rhythmic development, to emphasize movement, or to articulate a space. The various classical styles have been defined through their specific column and their relationship to the whole. The column can be seen as the embodiment of the human the human act, or even as a metaphor of the human form. The thirty-six columns framing the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC are placed, partly, to provide the structural skeleton of the memorial, but more significantly to represent the states of the Union at the time of Lincoln's inauguration.

PASSAGE: AN EMBLEMATIC SCULPTURE

Fournelle's first seminal work of sculpture, *Passage*, was conceived in 1983 and stands as a landmark in the evolution of his art. It is a denunciation of the Turk's invasion and control of Greece as well as a lament of the desecration of the Temple. *Passage*, is the ghost of a classical temple. Fournelle uses plaster columns supporting a pediment made of illuminated white neon tubes. He affixes castings of various human parts on the columns, which he sees as a symbol of the humanization of the artifact. The columns cast a "shadow" depicted by a red neon light. Once again, one finds Fournelle's love of inversions. The cast shadows, which should normally be darker than the columns, are in reality light beams. He interlaces the assembly of columns with barbed wires, representing the violence of war. The three constituent elements of *Passage* are the sandbags, the "fire in the columns, and the barbed wires.

L'INCOMFORTABLE UTOPIE

Fournelle's most noteworthy work, *Real-Life Tragedy* (which he baptized *L'Inconfortable utopie*, in French) is a triadic composition in which the use of the column is the primordial constituent element. The sculpture was conceived as homage to the Belgian/French writer Marguerite Yourcenar. Unfortunately, it was never built. *Real-*

Life Tragedy originated with Fournelle's first communication with Actress Melina Mercouri who sensitized him to the question of the "plunder" by Lord Elgin of the Marbles of the Parthenon. As the Minister of Cultural Affairs of Greece, Mercouri was a vocal militant for the repatriation of the Marbles. For Fournelle it was the launching of a life-long fascination with the meaning of the column, with the architecture of Antiquity, and with the Parthenon as the ultimate quintessence of ancient Greece. *Real-Life Tragedy* was conceived in 1987 as three separate but related works of art that were meant to be erected on Mount Desert Island in the Maine, in the Museum of Contemporary art in Montreal, and in Balliol (?) in France. The sculptures were Fournelle's artistic *crie de coeur* for the repatriation of the Marbles to Athens from where they had been taken a century earlier. The work is clearly inspired by the architecture of the Parthenon, and the repetitive use of the columns is a means of connecting his work with that of ancient Greece. In the first instance, in Balliol (?), the columns are a semi-submerged along the shoreline of France. In the second instance, in Montreal, the columns are taller, more numerous, and stand closer together. In the last case, the columns support a sloping glass roof that is a symbol of protection of what lies below. In all three cases, Fournelle's columns are modern and made of industrial fabricated steel. Though they refer to a distant past, yet they proudly assert their modernity. His is a modern re-interpretation of a classical ideal.

The sculpture is a metaphoric tomb, a temple, a landmark, and an assembly of re-interpreted classical columns supporting a transparent glass roof on which is engraved a compilation of quotations taken from Yourcenar's *Mémoire d'Hadrien*. On a sunny day, the shadow of these deeply etched words is cast on the ground. As the sun moves, so does the shadow of Yourcenar's words. The row of columns appears to be unnecessarily strong for their purpose. Structurally, they merely support a sheet of glass. The colonnade is an unsettling passage defined by a rhythm closely spaced pillars going from one open space to another. The incongruity between the over-designed pillars and the minimal canopy they uphold is disconcerting. Fournelle's columns are a hybrid of many things: a classical masonry shaft, two slightly separated structural steel C-sections, a bronze capital, and a metal plinth. Fournelle is focused on the poetic logic of the column, not the engineering rationale. The point he makes is clear: the column, though classical in its inspiration, is a modern construct. The line between antiquity and modernity is straight and obvious. Art is a continuum.

The *Real-Life Tragedy* trilogy was initiated and conceived by Andre Fournelle, but the final design was a collaborative effort that included, besides Fournelle, Jules Lasalle, Ducharme Marion, Jean-Marc Latreille, Roger Lupien and Adrian Sheppard.

A FASCINATION FOR TOTEMIC FORMS

In his *Monument* in front of the new Contemporary Art Centre of Montreal, Fournelle inserts a shaft of solid stone as an exclamation point, or a signal to mark the spot. He brands the building with a classical granite column made of three large superimposed fluted blocks. The uppermost one is joined to the rest of the shaft, not with mortar, as one would expect, but with a halo of light. The stone hovers rather than support. Once again,

the inversion is disturbing and unreal. The ring of light dematerializes the heavy granite shaft.

Fournelle's eloquent transformation becomes most vibrant in one of his simplest sculptures, the *Obélisque*, specially created as a visual marker in the lobby of the Ministry of Finance Building in Quebec City. *Obélisque* is his finest example of integration of art and architecture. It is a figurative replica of a classical obelisk, but "nonsensically" made of glass. The sculpture occupies the very centre of a monumental elliptical space defined by a peripheral grand stair. The tectonic contrast between the glass object and the marble-clad space is striking, and somewhat uncomfortable. The environment (walls, floors, and stairs) is made of weighty masonry but the obelisk, this modern spatial pivot and conceived to be the spatial focal point, is made of easily broken glass. The obelisk is a form rooted in antiquity, but Fournelle's construction manifestly contemporary. Once more, his inversion is provocative and surreal. *Obélisque* stands as a heroic, yet fragile, element that holds a monumental Beaux-Arts space together. It is his personal poetic re-interpretation of permanence and centrality. Figuration becomes abstract, the solid becomes a void, and history is inverted. We have entered the world of Alice in Wonderland.

Fournelle's fascination with the column's tectonic and formal potential can be witnessed in much of his work. As a minimalist artist, he is seduced by its intrinsic logic, meaning, and economy of means in performing its practical task. The column appeals to his minimalistic design instinct. It is, after all, a metaphor for strength, simplicity, and legibility. Fournelle uses the "column" as a pivot, as an exclamation mark, as a skeletal element of a structure, as a definer of space. He uses it as a free-standing totemic form or in a repetitive manner to produce a rhythmic cadence, he lays it down and transforms it into a beam as he does in *L'Ombre rouge*, he slopes it in a tepee-like construction, in *L'Interdit Damoclès*, from which he suspends crosses of fire or flowers.

It is interesting that the plum bob, which is diametrically opposite of the column, is of equal fascination to Fournelle. By definition, the column is an object of compression while the plum bob works only in tension. As an instrument, it is used to create the perfect vertical, which is precisely what an ideal column "wants to be", to use a Kahnian expression. Fournelle uses the plumbob in a number of his sculptures such as in *Et si la blessure était de plomb*, in *L'Esprit des lieux – la paix*, in *Bâtissons une cathédrale*, and in *La dimension de l'absence*. In all these projects, the bob is not a mere weight on a pendulum, but as a fundamental element that structures the entire composition and provides it with a potent visual order.

IN SUMMATION

Fournelle's interest in both the physical and figurative structure is consistent with his view on art. Fournelle's art is Platonic, intellectual, and metaphoric. There is nothing sentimental or romantic about it. He shuns expressionism and mannerisms. Fournelle's art could be classified as Abstract Minimalism. He is an artist governed by a need to express ideas in the most unfussy manner. He defines himself as a realist artist, but for

whom realism does not imply figuration. It is a way to seek the essential by way of abstraction. His, is a reductive art.

He loves to transform, to reinterpret, and to convert well-accepted forms into a totally new thing. He loves reverse logic and provocative contrariness. As with all true artists, the process of transformation of familiar forms affords the original object with a new meaning. Fournelle's transformations are not unlike Rauschenberg's who alters a traditional telephone by exaggerating its scale and constructing it out of soft hanging black vinyl. In point of fact, much of the history of art is the history of the transformation and reinterpretations of past and present realities.

Fournelle's work is tied together by an authoritative sense of composition and geometric order. His sculptures are graphically powerful, memorable, and unquestionably contemporary. Yet, despite their modernity, he uses history as a friend. They speak simultaneously of the past and the present. Though his art dwells in the realm of pure abstraction, his works invites one to enter a world of reveries. Like all good art, it gives the viewer pleasure, but it requires a substantial effort to be fully appreciated. The returns are considerable. His, is not an easy art. It does not come with an understandable narrative and is not pretty for the sake of pleasing the viewer. Psychologically and emotionally, his work can be as uncomfortable as it is powerful. His art questions but gives no ready answers. It confronts and it shocks. It is an art not made for the faint-hearted. It is the art of the hero.

Adrian Sheppard
Montreal, Canada
December 2012