

NORBERT SCHOENAUER: AN INTRODUCTION

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Norbert Schoenauer was a highly principled person who repeatedly lamented the lack of morals and ethics in our world. He ardently believed that values could be taught only by example, never by moralizing. He once turned down a professional commission of the scale and importance of his work on the new town of Fermont in northern Quebec when it became clear he could not serve the client, and especially the users, according to his ideals.

The touchstone for his ethics was housing. He was concerned, famously, with the history of housing around the world, but also with a wide range of ideas about house, home, apartment, city block, urban design, and architectural design: the forms and customs that constitute the humble place of the individual in the community, and the community in the world. In Schoenauer's hands, housing was a subject connected not just to history or design, but to ecology, politics, morality, and pleasure.

This special issue of ARQ both praises and appraises the life and work of this remarkable architect and planner. He combined teaching and practice, public life and private friendships with a degree of ease and success that is becoming rare in our current relentless drive towards specialization. These articles on his discipline, passions, quirks and leadership encompass reflections from professional and academic colleagues, former employers and former students, and above all friends. Indeed, support for this endeavour came from a broad range of family, friends, and colleagues. We would especially like to thank Astrid Schoenauer, André Hoffmann, and David Covo. We must also acknowledge the patience of Pierre Boyer-Mercier, who generously agreed to provide for this special issue.

As the authors in this issue attest, Schoenauer was above all a modest man. He sought simple things: camaraderie, good books, nature. Because possessions were a burden to him, he amassed few material things. He loved history—architectural, political, cultural, and art history. But though he was keenly interested in the past, he was in no way sentimental about it. He was neither pessimistic nor optimistic about the future. He loved the here-and-now, the everyday, the things he could experience directly: people, buildings, a chestnut, the sky. He liked to call himself an urban animal, one who cherished the complex layering of the city and who abhorred the simplified homogeneity and order of suburbia. He took pleasure in Montreal's mix of high and low culture, of history and ethnicity, from its *mélange* of building types and public spaces, and from its social heterogeneity. Had he not been such a dedicated professional and teacher, Schoenauer would no doubt have become a *boulevardier*, a modern-day Oscar Wilde, spending his time in the company of the slightly hedonistic, very verbose, and spirited crowd that daily packed Montreal's emigrant cafés and bars.

In short, it is no accident that the contributors to this issue had personal contact with Schoenauer. He was one of those rare people who change the lives of those around them. As Annmarie Adams recounts, even the record of his publications shows a great concern with communicating his ideas to those in his immediate sphere, and less worry (but immense delight) in spreading the word to a broad but remote audience. Adams begins here the crucial process of evaluating Schoenauer's scholarship now that his eloquent, authoritative and often stubborn presence is no longer there to bolster the thinking behind the text and drawings.

The recollections and appraisals compiled here describe and assess Schoenauer's influence as a teacher, as a colleague, and as a professional. As Pieter Sijpkens explains, because of his generosity and welcoming demeanour, Schoenauer was adept at making transitions between such categories. For instance, in trying to explain Schoenauer's extraordinary popularity and commitment as a teacher (recognized by two major teaching awards), Nadia Meratla relates how Schoenauer's open-door policy turned many humble and intimidated students into admirers and friends.

Even in articles that assess particular facets of Schoenauer's professional relationships, writers return again and again to Schoenauer's in culture as revealed in the broad intersections between architectural and social forms. As his longtime academic colleague Vikram Bhatt relates, this willingness to immerse himself in new architectural and cultural experiences made him a great traveler. At the same time, as his longtime professional partner Maurice Desnoyers recalls, it also made him an especially exigent ideologue.

Norbert was a professional. Jeanne Wolfe explores the result of Schoenauer's principles in his largest undertaking as a professional planner, the new town of Fermont. Here Norbert was able to convince corporate clients of the soundness and value of his unusual ideas. As Gary Hack points out, Schoenauer was less successful when dealing with politicians. Schoenauer's unrealized plans for the new community of Woodroffe near Ottawa, along with those for the Angus Yards in east end Montreal, are perhaps the greatest disappointments of his professional career. The gap between his designs and the banality of what has been built on those sites underscores not so much the quality of Schoenauer's vision, but the resourcefulness needed to bring good design to life.

As David Covo relates in a short biographical essay, Schoenauer was a child of war, of World War II. He often referred to the difficult period of his youth, vowing never to inflict on others the injustices he had endured. He treated all as equals. He had simply no prejudices about others. He loved telling colorful jokes, but never one that denigrated others.

Still, despite such all-too-human characteristics, in practice as in life, Schoenauer was a man of reason. He disliked the arbitrary, the impulsive, the subjective. To him, architecture was an exercise of the mind. Every move, every detail, had to have a demonstrable *raison d'être*. Thus, he shunned formalism, clever games, and unnecessary complications. For example, he objected to this very contemporary infatuation with

making recondite architectural jokes inexplicable to the general community. This reasoned attitude is described by Witold Rybczynski, who places Schoenauer's professional interests within the history of the postwar (Danish) concern with modernist, rationalist housing.

While the tone of the issue is often eulogistic—Schoenauer touched our lives and has left a void in our world—the issue is motivated by a sense of assessment as well. Schoenauer believed in the modern notion that nothing is ever completed or immutable. He preferred the term “organism” to “composition” when discussing his work. This preference was a tacit acknowledgement that the design of a finite product was a lifeless act--that life goes on. In 1995, when he was awarded the *Ordre d'architecture du Quebec's* Medaille de Merite for his lifetime achievements, he spoke softly of his great concern with the state of the modern world and contemporary architecture. His message--his hope--was that his life's commitment and his convictions would now become our own.