

Architecture Series (Neutral Ground)

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Number 59, Spring 2002

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9325ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Beatty, G. (2002). Review of [*Architecture Series* (Neutral Ground)]. *Espace Sculpture*, (59), 39–40.



GREG BEATTY

Architecture Series [NEUTRAL GROUND]

From a historical and practical perspective, visual art and architecture are distinct disciplines. Still, to the extent that practitioners in both fields use line, shape, colour, scale, and texture to explore aesthetic issues, cross disciplinary overlap is possible. To this day, the most intriguing exhibition I have ever seen was that organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1988, a retrospective of Gordon Matta-Clark's sublime "cuttings" from apartment buildings and factories scheduled for demolition.

Other artists who have been inspired by architecture include Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Lorne Beug (a Reginan, Beug photographs building details and uses a montage technique to construct imagined cityscapes). Among architects, Frank Gehry, Robert Venturi and Douglas Cardinal are acknowledged masters at balancing function and form. Seeking to deepen the intersection between the two disciplines, Regina's Neutral Ground recently mounted an ambitious four-part Architecture Series featuring work by three artists — Rodney LaTourelle (Winnipeg), Christine Shaw (Regina), David Grenier (Toronto) — and one international collective, KIT. In addition, architectural theorists Karen Shanski and Eduardo Aquino were contracted to

develop a catalogue "in dialogue" with the series.

"To steal a word from Microsoft," said Felipe Diaz, past chair of Neutral Ground's programming committee, "the Architecture Series was a happy 'convergence.' We'd already received a proposal from Rodney. At the time, I was trying to alter the committee's role. Rather than passively wait for submissions, I wanted to start coordinating our exhibition schedule to get a more cohesive presentation." Prior to LaTourelle's submission, Diaz had been "debating the idea of architecture and visual art and the relationship between the two." After consulting with a couple of local architects he began to formulate a plan for an integrated exhibition series. The project received added impetus when Shaw returned to Regina after obtaining her MFA from the University of Western Ontario. She, in turn, brought Grenier to Diaz's attention. Completing the program was an unsolicited submission from KIT.

In contrast to the rich critical discourse that informs visual art practice and appreciation, architecture exists almost in a vacuum. Certainly, theorists and critics such as Witold Rybczynski (Canadian academic and author), Bernard Tschumi (creator of Paris's Parc de la Villette) and Rem Koolhaas (designer of the Guggenheim's Las Vegas branch) ply their trade. But the discourse they engage in is even more rarefied than its counterpart in art (for instance, how many newspapers run regular architecture reviews?). Yet, as Diaz rightly



noted, "architecture is part of everyday life. With visual art, people have a tendency to be intimidated. They set up blocks against it. But architecture is more insidious. When you either live or work in a building, you have to relate to it. That, in itself, is like a performative task." Often, this interaction takes the form of a collaboration, where people subvert or modify an architect's original vision to satisfy a perceived need or desire on their part. One example cited by Diaz was graffiti artists who place their "tags" on buildings and other structures. Another is pedestrians who ignore a prescribed pathway in favour of a more convenient shortcut. Still, it is no coincidence that noted libertarian Ayn Rand elected to make an idealistic architect the central figure of her 1943 novel *The Fountainhead*. Especially in a

corporate/institutional context, architectural space tends to be highly coercive to meet the twin goals of promoting efficiency through standardization and reinforcing privilege through exclusion. Complicit in this process of social control are restrictive civic bylaws and the creeping privatization of public space.

Christine Shaw's *behave* (March 14 - April 14, 2001) consisted of twenty-five jointed plywood sheets installed atop the gallery's hardwood floor. Supported by slabs of polyfoam, the false floor curved gently upward so that when patrons walked on it, it flexed under their weight. On one level, *behave* serves as a plea to architects to consider ergonomic principles in designing their buildings. As anyone who has ever spent long hours standing or walking on tile or concrete knows, those sur-

CHRISTINE SHAW, *behave*, 2001. Photo courtesy of Neutral Ground Gallery.

faces place significant strain on the back and legs. Yet they are undeniably durable and relatively easy to maintain. "There's a movement happening in architectural practice," Shaw noted. "It's still fairly emergent, but it involves the development of architecture that is conscious of both program and use, so that buildings are constructed in relation to or dialogue with their future inhabitants."

One exponent of this philosophy is Frank Gehry, who in his desire to depart from the "rational Miesian box" strives to create architecture that functions as a living organism. With respect to his proposed new Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan, Gehry said, "Making a building that has a sense of movement appeals to me, because it knits into the larger fabric of movement in the city." That was another feature of *behave*. When patrons walked on the floor, their steps caused reverberations that other patrons could feel, regardless of where they were situated. By facilitating this exchange between acquaintances and strangers alike, Shaw challenged exclusionary notions of architectural space that have heightened urban alienation and contributed to hierarchical divisions within society. Furthermore, by presenting the gallery floor as something that was no longer fixed and immutable, she dramatized the destabilizing role that art often plays in our society by questioning received values and belief systems. Completing the installation were numerous segments of surgical tubing that were strung floor-to-ceiling to create a permeable wall. Not only could people see each other through this "barrier," they could also pluck the tubing so that it vibrated like harp strings. By concealing the polyfoam beneath the plywood, Shaw created the illusion that the floor was floating. Thus, the tubing could also be read as a load support mechanism akin to the cables of a suspension bridge.

The floor was also the focus of David Grenier's *withdrawingroom* (May 19 - June 2). This exhibit lasted half as long as the first two, because *withdrawingroom* involved the installation of several dozen square metres of sod in the gallery, and Grenier, as is his usual practice, wanted at show's end to parcel it out to local homeowners while it was

still vigorous enough to be transplanted. Through his sod floor, Grenier offered a literal evocation of Gehry's imagined ideal of organic architecture. When the prairies were first settled, of course, the scarcity of wood forced homesteaders to build sod houses. While these dwellings might possess a certain nostalgic charm, they were dirty, bug-infested, and prone to leaking when it rained. Grenier's reliance on sod was much more modest. Nonetheless, during the exhibition the grass markedly affected the temperature, humidity, and fragrance of the air in the gallery. The grass was certainly pleasant to walk on, but its long-term viability was doubtful. So, like Shaw's, Grenier's architectural intervention was not intended for practical application. Still, the concept was intriguing. It recalled a recent New York City initiative to postpone construction of a costly water treatment plant in favour of rehabilitating land in an adjacent watershed and allowing natural processes to purify rain and snowmelt.

In North America, the lawn is a signifier of social respectability and neighbourhood solidarity. Often, its maintenance falls to the "man of the house." Grenier complicated this paradigm by installing decorative wallpaper on portions of the gallery wall. This conflation of "masculine" and "feminine" created a hybrid space that permitted him to articulate his queer identity. He did this in a pair of performances. In *graze 2*, he dressed in a suit of clothes with a plain white back and a front adorned with the wallpaper pattern. For five days, he relentlessly circumnavigated the luridly blue-lit gallery in a clockwise direction, alternately facing inward or outward to blend in with whatever part of the wall he was in front of. Patrons dictated his pace. When they moved in the gallery, he froze. When they stopped, he started again. By camouflaging himself, Grenier dramatized the pressure queers sometimes feel to remain unobtrusive and avoid public scrutiny. In *graze 1*, he "cut" the sprouting grass in the middle of the gallery that had escaped being trod upon in *graze 2*. By using a pair of scissors for this task instead of the usual tool — a power mower — he further subverted the macho trappings associated with suburban lawn care.

In his wake, he left behind little piles of clippings that suggested an agrarian harvest.

Often when artists and curators attempt interdisciplinary projects, their impact is blunted by a lack of engagement with the target community. Aware of this problem, Shaw felt that the programming committee "needed to fill out the program" if it was serious about "contextualizing the four exhibitions as a series, and looking at how artists and architects [create and manipulate] social space." So she suggested contacting Aquino and Shanski. Trained as architects, the collaborative duo critiques traditional notions of architectural practice through such means as guerilla action, teaching, filmmaking and publishing. They are committed to disrupting existing boundaries

part of a single chaotic urban landscape. By adopting the same communications strategy as IKEA and Benetton, Aquino and Shanski hoped to achieve broader market penetration. Their market, in this instance, comprising both the art community and art-literate members of the general public.

Howard Roark, the central character in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, mentioned earlier, is an architect who dynamites his own building rather than see his architectural vision compromised. Libertarians regard Roark as a paragon of integrity and virtue. But as one of the principal players in the construction of our built environment, architects must recognize that they do not operate in a vacuum. As Witold Rybczynski observed in a July 2001 *Globe & Mail* interview, it is always dan-



between architecture and art to create a blended discipline that's "technologically adventurous, politically critical, and socially responsible." Determined not to produce a conventional catalogue with modest readership, they explored a number of possible formats. The one they settled on was the magalogue — a glossy, hybrid publication, which promotes shopping as a leisure activity that helps shape one's identity. Their decision finds resonance in the Koolhaas-organized exhibit *Mutations* (2000) at Bordeaux's *Arc en Reve*, which explored the culture of shopping malls. In Koolhaas' mind, the shopping phenomenon has engulfed the world, making museums, galleries and malls all

generous to make the building more important than the public. "That's one of the great faults of modern architects," he said. "They don't have a sense of proportion. Whatever they're building, it has to be a statement." Statements are fine, but they shouldn't be made at the expense of other members of society or of the environment. To that extent, Neutral Ground's Architecture Series offered a valuable opportunity for artists to critique the principles underscoring a discipline related to, yet significantly more influential than their own. ←

Rodney LaTourelle, Christine Shaw, David Grenier, KIT Architecture Series, 2000-2001 Neutral Ground Gallery, Regina

DAVID GRENIER, *withdrawingroom*, 2001. Photo courtesy of Neutral Ground Gallery.