

fragments of sobriquet

a personal exposition of difference

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

As explicated and demonstrated through the work and studies of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu, and Gary Stevens, among others, architects have traditionally represented but a small and demographically homogenous portion of the population at large. What does this mean for design? For architecture?

The thesis is a picaresque story of the experience of architecture and the education of architecture, through the lens of someone who believes themselves quite different from the typical homogeneity.

Questions of difference, meaning, what design means to whom, and who has say in determining and arbitrating that answer, are all probed freely and experimentally.

The thesis explores the idea of architecture as narrative, and attempts to place emphasis on its narrative effects, as opposed to its physical or social, or other effects. The thesis explores architecture's ability to probe, to explore solutions, to explore problems, to explore possibilities, and to reveal what may be hidden.

The thesis is about exploring the idea that architecture is the means by which we create narratives for our lives, for our spaces, for the world around us. Through it, we explore the notion of architecture itself as a sobriquet, a sobriquet of our societies and of our worlds.

These explorations are then juxtaposed and layered upon the demographic homogeneity of architects and architecture, which allows us to question the very field in which we practice.

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THE BEGINNINGS OF A STRANGE AND UNUSUAL MAN

I came to be one hot summer afternoon in 1995, into a building which no longer stands in what was then the independent city of North York. Complications arising from the immense size of my head delayed my arrival by nearly a full 24 hours. I nearly died, as did my mother; I was almost a murderer—a crude, infantile kamikaze pilot of sorts—before I had made my first utterances.

My mother's second child, and my father's third, I was born a bastard homebody into a family of wanderers. My father was, at the time, a garbage truck driver, though he had been at other points of his long life, a valet driver, a tram driver, a streetcar driver, a bus driver, a construction worker, a subway operator, an accountant, a restaurant manager, and a bank manager. He had lived in three countries, three US states, and two Canadian provinces. He was of Jamaican, Jewish, German, English, Ghanaian, and Scottish descent.

My mother was, at the time, a sales agent for a rental car company, though she had been at some point in the past a deli worker. She too had lived in three countries.

While my father wished to name me Hugo, after the German industrialist and my great-grandfather, Hugo Stinnes, I was—after my mother's qualms that Hugo sounded “too old-fashioned”—eventually named Shanne, after the 1953 western film based on Jack Schaefer's 1949 novel of the same name, which was the last film my parents watched before my mother went into labor. My middle name became Nathaniel, a concession to my father, after my great-great grandfather, a man of whom I knew nothing other than the alleged fact that he spoke 16 languages.

This overdeveloped infant—I was nearly 10 pounds, and already possessed the ability to focus on and follow objects within my field of view—and possessor of an intensely observant gaze, was brought a few days later to what would become my home for better part of the next 18 years: Acorn Place, a social housing project located near the centre of the bright and cheerful mixed-class suburb of Mississauga.

The apartment, and my home, was located on the 6th floor of a 12-storey postmodern concrete and steel apartment building, whose construction was completed a few short years before my birth. In addition to my parents, the small—roughly 60 square meters—two-bedroom apartment was occupied by my older half-brother and my mother’s first son as well as other wanderers who had made their acquaintance with my parents over the years. I shared the master bedroom with my parents; my older brother occupied a room the occupants of the apartment referred to as the solarium—it wasn’t a true solarium—and the non-related wanderers occupied the second bedroom for indeterminate and indiscriminate amounts of time.

My home was very loud, very active, and very full. The sometimes-as-many-as-six occupants—with the exception of my father and myself—all possessed powerful and voluminous voices which pierced and were felt rather than heard. The words which thundered through the air were often of either a nostalgic nature—a constant reminiscing of the place they all first referred to as home; Jamaica—or sociopolitical—discussion and debate about the news, about the government, about money, about our allocation of resources. As befits a lower-class, fairly low-income household, the occupants could have all been described as Marxist, or socialist, or something along those lines, in their views.

My home was also one of smells. My father, a heavy smoker, would exhaust an entire pack a day at his peak, which left a tobacco-musk on all clothing and all otherwise porous surfaces. But they were also prodigious cooks; the smells of parsley, allspice, pimento, jerk, kingfish, and curry among many, many others, often danced with, mingled with, and sometimes overstepped the ever-present smell of cigarettes. Incense was burned, and various perfumes were used in attempts—mostly in vain—to mask the ever-evolving cacophony of smells.

In addition to the many people, my abode was also home to their many things. Two fridge and freezer units to store all their food. An inflatable kayak. Seven tables. Two record players. Two surround sound systems. Three

televisions. A deli slicer. A deep fryer. Many shoes. Many bottles of liquor. Many boxes of clothing. Many books: dictionaries, encyclopaedias, car magazines, novels.

It is within the covers of these books, old and new—but mostly old—where I found my solace, a reprieve from the constant activity and constant occupancy of my home. I had learned to read shortly before I came to be 3 years of age, and quickly put this new skill to use. The books opened to me new worlds—worlds which I could absorb at my own pace, and at my own leisure—and worlds beyond my own, which grew rapidly more monotonous. These books satiated my innate desire to *understand*—understand how things worked, why things worked, where things were, what worked together, what didn't, and why.

My world, and my life for the most part were quite internal: I spent much of my personal time within the confines of novels and encyclopaedias, and consequently in my own head. My parents, after working long hours generally preferred to plant themselves in front of one of the many televisions, as opposed to partaking in any sort of active activity or hobby, which meant that they rarely went outside at all beyond purposes of work, or the collection of more stuff. As a result, I rarely went outside. Not that I was at all bothered by this; the real world always seemed to lack the creative inventiveness I so loved in works of fiction, and simply did not strike me as interesting or as engaging as the worlds I explored within the words printed on paper.

The outside world was also dangerous; it was a place where diseases, allergens, and solar radiation all roamed lawlessly. There was also the more immediate and pressing issue of crime; shots rang out frequently, angered and impassioned arguments were oft heard, rumors of drug deals, stabbings, and deaths often made their way into the endless miasma of conversation of my home, and as a result, there was a constant, intimidating police presence. The outside world was interesting to observe—beautiful at times even, when the birds were in full song, the trees were in full bloom, and there were no people to be heard or seen—but I felt no drive at all to interact with it. I was all too content to observe from the lofty vantage point accorded to me by being 6 storeys above the ground.

My younger brother's immergence into the world one spring afternoon in 2000, was far less dramatic than my own; there were no complications, no delays, no near-deaths. He was, by all accounts, normal. Born in a different

hospital in the borough formerly known as the independent city of North York, he too was brought home to Acorn Place a few days later, becoming yet another voice which polluted the air within my home.

His entrance into the picture marked an organizational change within the apartment; he now shared the master bedroom with my parents; I moved into the second bedroom which had hitherto been occupied by various vagrants and wanderers; they moved to sleep on one of the two green couches in the living room, and were anyways present with an ever decreasing frequency.

The outside world also changed with his arrival; the beautifully quaint pocket park found to the south of the apartment building complex was destroyed and replaced by a mixed-use building; a community centre on the bottom storeys, a home for at-risk youth on the top. The off-white vinyl-clad building capped at 6-storeys in height, forevermore blocking my view to the outside, and further internalizing my world. Shots began to ring more frequently, the rumors of drug deals, stabbings and deaths became more constant.

My schooling also began around this time; first at a local catholic school, then a fairly distant public school. School for me was a paradise on earth—initially. An institution where my enthusiasm for information and understanding was met with delight and encouragement, at least by the teachers; my peers generally thought I was odd—I knew far too much about things which ultimately did not matter; had no interest in the outdoors or in play; was very quiet; and often posed puzzling questions.

All this said, I was generally happy at school. Much happier, in fact, than I was at home. Home was a place of constant chaos, constant flux and constant change. It could accurately be said that the most constant thing within that home was the inconstancy. It was difficult for me to feel settled, and as everything was being shared at all times, the infantile narcissism inherent to all children was driven out of me at a young age; individual ownership or possession was not something I could afford—spatially or monetarily. Placelessness and detachment then, became inherent parts of my sense of self.

School however, while still a refuge of happiness, soon ceased to be an outright paradise, or utopia for me. My peers—who at first simply thought of me as odd—as they aged and became more comfortable with language,

began to go out of their collective ways to point out to me the myriad ways and reasons for why they deemed me odd and different: I spoke like an old person (to be expected; the individuals in my household—with the exception of my younger brother—were all at least 18 years my senior; to speak with any of them at all, I had to speak like an old person); I knew too much about some things—history, geography, politics, science, the weather—and not enough about others—individuals, sports, pop music, movies and other visual media; I was quiet, and not due to some sort of social anxiety or shyness: I was quiet because I chose to be. Wouldn't the same choice have been made by any one of you, had your homes been as loud and chaotic as mine?

Eventually, my race, or rather, perceptions of my race, too became an open topic of discussion. My parents were both of mixed descent, though they both identified as black individuals. As their child, I also identified as black—initially, anyway. My peers had different ideas.

Those peers who also identified as black, refused to accept me as black: I was too quiet, too reserved, too diffident and too indifferent. The words I used were too big, I spoke and acted too much like a white person—a phrase whose meaning and purpose in utterance escapes me to this day—and while I looked *partially* black, I did not look *entirely* black. Could I really identify as a black individual, if black individuals themselves did not see me as a black individual?

Peers who identified as other races did not make the question any easier to answer for they all saw me as a black child—inquiries about my sunscreen use, requests to feel or examine the texture of my hair, questions about what words and phrases did and did not offend me, discussions on what I thought of cold weather, fried chicken, grape flavoring, watermelons—these became all-too-frequent hallmarks of the conversations I eventually began having with others.

Who was I then? *What* was I then? While this question was one on which I spent much time pondering, I eventually came to the conclusion that the answer to this question ultimately didn't matter. I was different; I *am* different, as we all are. This difference is what connects us, what is constant between us. Difference is the grand equalizer. What difference does it make what kind of different we all are?

My teachers—the overwhelmingly vast majority of whom were white—further emphasized this difference; many of them wasted no opportunity to tell me that “I was not like the others,” or “the rest,” or “them”—one may easily and correctly identify to whom my teachers referred in their use of generalizing and grouping terms, such as “the others,” or “the rest.”

As I grew older, I gradually became distrustful of these same teachers—the emphatic spotlights of my difference—as arbiters and authoritative figures on the topics they taught, as they more and more frequently became unable to answer some of my stranger questions. This is not a poor reflection on them however; many, if not most, of my teachers were forced circumstantially to teach things in which they only had basic knowledge—my physics teacher for a time was originally trained as an architect, and should have had no business teaching electromagnetism or dynamics, for example.

All this means is that I eventually ceased to respect figures of intellectual authority for their own sake—teachers had to prove to me, directly or indirectly, that they knew their subject matter for me to take them seriously, so to speak.



THE ABSOLUTION OF OPINION

These individuals became my community for the next five years. They became my surrogate family, a temporary replacement for the chaos and boisterousness of my own home, and the belligerence and aggression I observed in the outside world.

While this proxy environment was in many respects, quite different from the environment of my origins, there was one shared commonality: their opinionations, and their willingness—which looked at times like a need—to share their opinions, founded and unfounded, with the world.

Not that there is anything wrong with this of course; people of all shapes and sizes, and from all backgrounds have every right to express their opinions as they so wish. The observation then is not at all ground-breaking, and its general ubiquity among people in general—in addition to my communities of both the past and the present—draws the utility of its mention into question. Why bring then, make mention of this observation?

This same willingness, or need, to liberate my opinions into the air never existed within me. The desire to share was simply not there; I had no desire to share with the world at large, nor those with whom I was distantly acquainted, nor even those with whom I was close, my opinions. This is not to say that I possessed no opinions; I was as opinionated as most, and probably more opinionated than many. I derived no joy, or satisfaction from this sharing, which given the atmosphere of my home, comes as no surprise; the endless miasma of discussion, debate, argument, and near-constant verbalizations which I eventually came to loathe within my home found ammunition, not in different opinions of the six or so individuals which shared my home, but the *desire* to share these opinions, and make these

opinions known to others. Often, these opinions were presented as fact, presented as absolute, and conflated and equated with evidence to support one's position in an argument. And—to misquote *Hamlet*—therein lay the rub.

I have always counted myself a relativist; there exists no absolute truth, no objective reality, and that views are relative to differences in perception and consideration. Opinions especially, and that which is understood to be fact even, should be worded such that their conditional nature is apparent to all listeners; nothing should be presented as an absolute truth. This is true especially for those in a position of intellectual authority—imagined or otherwise. And this is true especially when speaking to an unquestioning, naïve, and largely uncritical audience. As many of us at the school of architecture were at the time.

But aren't I being blatantly hypocritical? I first describe myself as a relativist that does not believe an absolutes, and that everything is relative to differences in perception and consideration. But then I recite an invented commandment, and word it such that it appears to be absolute, or at the very least, absolute in my very-obviously-not-so-relativist mind. It would have been perhaps more accurate to say that should these *conditions*—intellectual authorities speaking to an impressionable audience—be met, the relative and conditional nature of what we say and what we believe, and what we hold as absolute and trustworthy should be made clear.

The school of architecture represented one such location where those conditions were met. The nearly-uniformly black-clad professors, all of whom were white, represented the intellectual authority within the school. Most were bald men, or on their way there. All possessed their own unique eccentricities—which student of architecture doesn't—though, like my peers, were more similar than different, in spite of these eccentricities. In addition to being white, the vast majority were members of the boomer generation, and while I never got close enough with any of them to comment accurately on their socioeconomic backgrounds, and where they came from, I can confidently assert that they were all *now* comfortably middle class, or even upper-middle class. They initially came to be viewed very highly—almost to the point of worship—by the student body, despite their intentions and their efforts to remove themselves from the pedestal which the students had unwittingly placed them—efforts such as insisting they are referred to by their first names, in order to maintain or invent the illusion of equality and egalilty between students and themselves, the

professors. And to their credit, this was an intention of theirs, espoused at least through their words. Words alone however can be dangerous, and dangerously fickle.

The other party—the impressionable audience—was represented by my peers, the student body, about whom much has already been written, and about whom much more will be writ. The vast majority of them were fresh out of high school—those that had completed previous degrees or had taken a year or two off numbered fewer than the fingers on the average hand. Most then, had come from a system which ostensibly taught one how to think, what to think, and how to justify that line of thinking. Few had ever been given reason to doubt their instructors, or more specifically, doubt the validity and the truth of what their instructors taught. Skepticism then, was not a mode of thought which came naturally—or at all, really—to these students. Critical thinking and critical questioning were not skills which were strong with anyone, myself included.

This imbalance became apparent to me over the course of the first few lectures, over the first few weeks, especially lectures given by the professors who were more gifted and captivating orators. Silence was complete, for no one wanted to risk missing a single utterance. Eyes were wide with interest, with nary a sign of fatigue from our long days and our longer nights. The sound of scratching on paper was oft heard in conjunction with the rapid snap of keyboard keys as some students scribbled furiously and others slammed their fingers on their laptops in the collective effort to accurately and precisely transcribe this sacred knowledge which was being imbued unto them.

For most of the earlier lectures in our first year, this overt enthusiasm—driven in part by an overlying atmosphere of competition, an overlying desire to at least match the enthusiasm of the person sitting next to you; driven in part by an exposition of genuine passion—though it remained odd, was fine. Our first few courses revolved around topics of sustainable and environmentally responsive design; the architecture of the holocaust; what architectural drawing was, and how to draft by hand—topics which, though not *entirely* objective, are more based in observable realities—that of the Holocaust, of the climate and the environment, of the hand which holds the pencil and drags the line along the velum. This makes them ostensibly more objective, and in my mind, the lack of critical judgement or questioning about these topics less of an issue. Where it becomes an issue, is in the open space of studio, which is where we would be spending the vast majority of our time.

Studio, which I have mentioned once before, was a large space where we did the majority of our creating, our work, our thinking, and our leisure. I am reminded of the open classrooms of my elementary school years, with the one notable and important difference being that we were not supervised in studio: work, and other initiatives had to be self-directed. This was supposedly a space of collaboration, of sharing, and of discussion, made more private than the aforementioned elementary school classrooms by the lack of instructor supervision. This was the physical space in which design happened.

Most of us had no idea what design was, having never really had to go through any process of design before this point. Few of us had gone through the rigours of iteration, of self-reflection, of precedent research, of self-criticism, of elimination, and so on which constitute the design process. We were designing blind, and left largely to our own devices to figure it out.

On occasion however, we did receive guidance, in the form of the desk review, or desk critique, or “crit,” as it was eventually abbreviated. Twice a week generally, the professors would do the rounds of the studio, and spend anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour at times—depending on the student, the professor, their conviviality, their talkativeness, their moods, their fatigue levels, and so on—to discuss and provide advice assistance, and opinions on our respective studio projects.

Blind, helpless, and generally altricial as we were, we welcomed the outside words with open and needy arms. The collective enthusiasm of the class expressed in our lectures was equalled here. We discussed our projects with fervor and with as much clarity as our relatively unpracticed minds could muster. We took notes—the more assiduous of us asked others to take notes during our reviews so that we may focus on the discussion at hand—and every word was taken to heart. The words were often harsh, but because we knew no better, the words were all tantamount to truth. If this meant completely discarding what we had done before, so be it. If this meant restarting anew one week before a deadline, so be it.

We didn't always agree with what was told. Many of us did not want our spirits torn, our hopes cast aside, to restart anew, or to discard that into which we poured our sweat and tears. But how were we to argue? We knew not the first thing about architecture, or why we intuitively did certain things, and disliked doing others. We could not defend our own opinions, or argue why we may not like what our professors suggested. We lacked

the inability to articulate, or to rationalize what we were doing, despite our efforts and desires to do just that. So many of us, unable to reasonably or articulately do otherwise, went along and blindly agreed with whatever was suggested to us. Even if it didn't make sense. Even if it meant changing everything from the ground up.

We agreed. And agreed. And agreed. It could be said that we eventually began to drop our own opinions, our own premonitions; we discarded what baggage we may have had initially, our own personal experience, and bits of ourselves. The opinions, advice and guidance of our professors became our own opinions, our own advice, and our own guidance to others and to ourselves.

Eventually, the words and the confidence to defend our own opinions and our own desires, and to assert our own control over our own designs was found. But by that point, the damage had already been done.

The minds of our instructors did not replace our minds—what we created remained as diverse, as multifaceted, as exploratory as ever—but we had in a sense, come to embody the same concerns, values, and sense of aesthetic judgement as they did. We came to share the same design priorities as our professors; individuals who, even if they did not themselves come from middle or upper-middle class origins, were now firmly entrenched in that class. Even if we ourselves did not share their origin, we largely came to see the world the same way they did. Or we attempted to.

Near the end of the first term, we had the first of the many final reviews we were to have over the course of our architectural education.

The project brief was a house—or retreat—for an artist, at a wooded location with a small lake, some distance from the school.

The term “artist,” was never quite defined. Most had designed their homes for plastic artists—painters, sculptors, potters, the like—or musicians. I—and less than a handful of others—decided to design this home for a writer. The creativity, craft, practice, and immersion—the complete and utter prowess and mastery over words—necessary to create captivating literature made writing, wordsmithing, as much an art as any other. A fact which is ignored entirely by many within the field of architecture, if modern, postmodern, and contemporary architectural literature is to be of any indication. But I digress.

My design was—as was eventually to become a trademark, or trait of mine—almost insultingly simple: a small, flat-roofed, box, roughly four meters in width by 12 meters in length. It was clad in charred wood, and possessed but 4 rooms: a bedroom on one end; a bathroom next to it; an open kitchen and living space in the middle; and on the other end, overlooking the lake, a library and working space, replete with bookshelves, empty wall space, and a couple of desks. A space in which I would be very happy to write.

My hand-drawn drawings pinned up, I smiled at the reviewers; two adjunct professors—a tall middle-aged blond woman, and a short middle-aged blond woman—and a senior member of a Toronto-based firm; Diamond Schmitt, if memory serves. The adjunct professors sat upright, smiling broadly, inviting me to begin. The large and broad man between them sat slumped in his chair, arms crossed, and looked at me with what would be best described as an uninterested glare. No one else was present.

I began to walk them through my project. The descent the writer would take down the hill from the road towards the lake. The stroll along the boardwalk which would snake around the edge of the lake, embedded in the tall reeds.

“Where do I dock?”

An interruption. The man had an eyebrow raised.

I squinted, an automatic reflex to a question which had left me dumbfounded. “What?” was all I could mutter in response.

“Where do I dock my canoe or my kayak?”

Still squinting, I shook my head. The question didn't make any sense. A canoe? A kayak? Why would a writer have either of those? And as the lake was dammed, it wasn't possible to reach the site or the house by water.

The taller of the adjuncts nervously urged me to continue. The man sighed deeply and shook his head.

I continued, though much more apprehensively, pausing more extensively between my phrases, awaiting another interruption I was sure would come.

And surely enough, one eventually did come. The man shook his head again. “Where do I entertain guests?”

Another squint and headshake from me. Entertain guests? This was a retreat; isn't the entire point of a retreat to retreat into solace and solitude, to focus, to isolate? At what point do guests become a concern to anyone at a *retreat*?

Confused, and at this point slightly annoyed—both by the interruptions, and by the nonsensical nature of these questions—I attempted to respond, to rebuke.

But I was pre-empted. Interrupted before I could begin, the man began to lay into me.

“This is a lazy project.”

“This reminds me of a shitty shipping-container house.”

“This isn't simple enough; why doesn't the furniture fold into the floor, or into the walls, to truly give an open space?”

“This is like a shitty version of the Farnsworth House.”

And so on. He continued, enjoying it almost, it seemed. I had long since stopped taking notes in my small Moleskine notebook. Very little he said and continued to say made much sense to me. So I stood upfront, unmoving, hands clasped. I neither shook my head in defiance, nor nodded in agreement. My face was kept as blank and emotionless as possible to conceal my growing confusion and bewilderment. I made no attempt to speak, to defend myself, in respectful defiance to the current speaker. A courtesy I myself was apparently not worthy to receive. But I digress.

Curiously, the adjuncts, vocal in their praise of the project just a few weeks prior—and vocal in general—were completely silent during this review. Instead, they nodded incessantly, agreeing with every utterance made by the guest reviewer.

The reviewer finished, at his wits end, and the adjuncts, having nothing else to add smiled and thanked me for my abridged presentation. I nodded in return, too bothered by what I had thought a complete waste of time to return the smile.

I was warned of this; my senior peers had warned us that reviews in the first year, especially in the first semester, were particularly harsh; they were meant to remove us from the privileged bubbles from whence many of us came. They were meant to tell us that we were to be judged on the merit of our designs, and on the merit of our designs alone.

I wondered about that. The comments made by this man from Diamond Schmitt did not appear to be doing any of that. His words seemed, in a sense, to critique a *lack* of privilege. Why *didn't* this lakeside house have a place to dock a boat? I should know better: all lakeside houses have places to dock boats!

I remembered seeing this in the books I had read over the prior months, as I collected precedents, prior examples of lakeside houses; they did all appear to have docks. But this was something I viewed as a *luxury*, and not a *necessity*; lakeside homes—in the West in any case—tend to be owned by wealthy individuals. Individuals who often conflate luxury and necessity. Writers—averaging a salary of roughly \$40,000 CAD in Ontario—did not fit my conception of a wealthy individual—and this was only a conception, as I myself was not a wealthy individual, and until I came to this school, personally knew no wealthy individuals. Writers would therefore not conflate the luxury of a boat dock with a necessity, and would therefore be okay with one not being there, if it was omitted for the sake of simplicity and complete utilitarianism.

But why, it may be argued, am I thinking in such pragmatic and practical terms for a studio project? Why *not* go for luxuries? In response, I would suggest that the luxuries themselves here aren't the point, aren't the problem. The problem here arises from the fact that certain individuals think of these things as luxuries, whereas other individuals will not. This difference arises from different embodied knowledge which itself arises from different upbringings.

An individual of comparative wealth will see certain luxuries as expected parts of an architecture, of a space, of life, because they have experienced it, and because they have experienced it, it is embodied. An individual of less comparative wealth will see these same things, and question their validity, their usefulness, their purpose. Rote knowledge of these things as acquired from precedent study, or from books, is not enough. The knowledge has to be *embodied*, which it simply will not be unless the knowledge has been *experienced*. This difference in how individuals of different backgrounds

experience architecture, and space, and the world around them will not be apparent if the field is homogenous—if everybody embodies more or less the same knowledge. And this is a problem.

Architects design, create, and build the physical world we inhabit. They are, in a twisted sense, the closest thing to gods. They bring our world into existence. Architects also purport to do this benevolently; we create *good* spaces, spaces which make our lives *better*, spaces where we may be *content* or *happy*. Spaces where we may find *joy*. Of course the reality isn't so clear-cut or as bright or hopeful. Happy benevolence isn't our only intent, our only goal.

But even the *ideal* is short-sighted. Can it really be said that we are attempting to create good spaces, spaces which make our lives better, spaces where we may be content or happy, spaces where we may find joy, if our frame of reference for what constitutes a better, happy, joyful, or content space is narrowly defined by the middle-to-upper-middle class values acculturated by our instructors? Architects supposedly build for *everyone* after all; a nearly unimaginably wide range of people with an even wider range of backgrounds and experiences. Is what is good to the upper-middle class architecture professor going to be good to them? Are their interests and priorities shared interests and priorities?

Naturally, this doesn't occur as a problem if the only individuals for whom we build are the individuals who share our values and the way we see the world, which in reality is not the case. Is it not?



MEDITATIONS ON THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

The loud and crowded apartment in the city of Mississauga was my home for the next 18 years. In that time, I visited Kingston, Jamaica twice—the first, when I was a year old, and of which I have no recollection whatsoever; and again when I was 5 years of age, of which I only recall falling violently ill; Florida three times—St. Petersburg to visit a friend of my mother's, and Fort Lauderdale twice to visit my paternal grandparents; Chicago once—to visit a paternal grand-aunt; Atlanta once—to visit an aunt; and various suburbs of New York City 14 times.

My family would visit New York once a year—around Christmas—for a week. Initially, the purpose of these visits was an annual family reunion; my father's many relatives and their many children would all gather in their parents (and my grandparents) house in Central Islip—which was located about an hour east of New York City proper—and have a large Christmas dinner and exchange of gifts. I remember little of this house, other than its immense size, which may be a false or invented memory—I was smaller, everyone around me was quite a bit larger, and the house was far larger than the apartment which I called home. This tradition continued until I was about 7. Thereafter, my grandparents, sick and tired of the brutal Long Island winters, sold the house and moved back to Jamaica; the rest of my extended family scattering across the southern United States; California, Georgia, Florida, and the Carolinas. This marked the last time I would see many of them.

My trips to New York thence became trips to the north Bronx, where we would stay with a childhood friend of my mother's. She lived, with her partner and their cantankerous, old, white cat, Snowy, on the second floor of a 4- or 5-storey building that looked to have been built two centuries

ago—the bricks were worn and stained black from when coal-fired trains still roared down the rail corridors; many of the windows still had wavy glass which had flowed downwards with age; and in typical American fashion, cracks on the walls or in the plaster were dealt with fresh, uneven coats of paint. There were so many layers of off-white paint on the walls that they were no longer truly straight to the eye, and corners no longer met at defined or straight edges: they simply seemed to curve and blend from one plane to the next. The single-bedroom apartment itself was dimly lit, as the windows faced a tight internal courtyard, and much like the apartment which I had called home for most of my life, also smelled of a mix of tobacco and spices—with hints of cat and marijuana in this case. While our hosts never themselves hosted wanderers or vagrants in the same way that my parents had, they too, had many, many things: boxes of records; unused exercise equipment; clothing which no longer fit anyone; many picture frames.

This part of the North Bronx, while not a social housing development, or near any social housing development at all, nevertheless felt much rougher in atmosphere than the social housing project where I grew up and which I had called home: there were no lawns—everything was paved, and paved poorly at that; the buildings—all very old—were all poorly maintained, bricks had fallen from façades; storefronts were shuttered and closed with solid steel gates and solid steel doors; gunshots rang more frequently; there was a more permanent police presence; and perhaps most striking were the people—they all possessed a gaze which was more aggressive than I was used to seeing among so many people in one space. And this was something I observed with constant consistency each and every time I came back to the Bronx.

Upon reflection and afterthought, it was perhaps inaccurate and dishonest of me to say that I had visited those cities—Chicago, New York, Atlanta—because the reality was that I never visited the cities themselves, or rather the parts of the cities we collectively imagine when we think of them: the Loop in Chicago, Manhattan in New York, downtown Atlanta. The parts of these cities I visited, and where my family made their “vacations,” were merely the outskirts, the suburbs. Suburbs, much like my native Mississauga, which were all mundane in their own unique ways, but shared the same traits of mundanity—low density requiring private automotive transport to efficiently locomote oneself; an abundance of housing and mass retail at the expense of any and all other programming; and monotonous architecture whose uniformity made it all seem rather uninspired or—if I may speak bluntly—outright boring.

All in all, my entire life was spent in suburbs. I was born in North York, a suburb of Toronto. I lived most of my life in Mississauga, a younger suburb of Toronto. I spent a week in St. Petersburg, Florida, itself a suburb of Tampa Bay. I spent a few weeks in the Bronx and in Central Islip, both suburbs of New York City. I spent a week in Snellville, a suburb of Atlanta. I spent a week in Elmhurst, a suburb of Chicago. With an outside world as uninteresting and monotonous as my own, it is no wonder why I became such an internalized individual.

What *was* quite the wonder, however, knowing all this, was my decision to apply to a school of architecture. What reason did I, a boy who had grown up, seen and known nothing but suburbia, have for being interested in architecture? Where did my interest come from?

To be frank, my reasons, even today, are vague at best. Architecture was the only thing I very pompously thought I knew nothing about, and what better place to learn about architecture than at a school which referred to itself as a school of architecture? Four questions to which I could find no answers in my current collection of books and in my current environment were also on my mind: **why was “great” architecture—the stuff found in journals, canonical pieces, and the like—only generally found in cities? Why was the architecture of suburbia—the mundane, everyday architecture, which some have speculated makes up to 90% of the built fabric of the world—so rarely documented in literature, or anywhere? What made “great” architecture “great”—who decided this, and what authority did they have on the matter? And was there anything aside from the utter ubiquity of everyday architecture which made it inferior in my mind?** I—perhaps naively—thought that the best place to answer these questions was at a school whose education was dedicated—in name at least—to the study and development of architecture.

On the 29th of April, 2013, I was accepted, by some miracle—or sleight of tongue—into the sole school of architecture to which I applied: that located in Cambridge and associated with the University of Waterloo.

I started September of that year, and once again, I was eventually made acutely aware of my difference. It was not my peers or my professors this time however—mercifully, they generally possessed more tact than my peers in the public school system—this time, my difference was made aware to me by not-so-sly observation and eavesdropping.

The first thing which I noticed was my physical difference; I was one of only two people in a class of 75 to appear to be of African descent in some way, and the only such male in the entirety of the undergrad student body. No matter however: it never appeared as if my different appearance garnered different treatment—nothing overtly obvious or overtly detrimental in any case.

The second, more striking, and arguably more important thing, were the differences both in our socioeconomic backgrounds, and our life experiences. I was one of a very small few who had lived an entire life in a building type—social or public housing—which, in North America in any case, was envisioned for use by individuals without the means to live within market-rate, private units. Which, again in North America specifically, appeared to carry a certain set of connotations and conveyed a certain imagery to others. Money seemed to be less of an obstacle for others than it was for me; they all spoke freely of the activities they did as children—the sports in which they participated; the instruments they played; the many cities, countries, and places they had visited; their disdain for packaged foods, or fruits from different countries compared to others. They all spoke of these things with a carefree demeanour which was all but foreign to me—I never had the money for an instrument, or for sports equipment, or to be picky with the kind of foods I ate or didn't eat, or for plane tickets and lodging reservations beyond my own home or the home of other family members or their friends.

This was fine for the most part; as I mentioned before, I had already come to the conclusion that we are all different, in different ways, from one another. This is our greatest reality. It did however, make interaction a bit trickier—what could or what did an internalized individual such as myself have to say to such individuals who had lived such apparently uncompromisingly rich and externalized lives? Very little, I thought initially, though I eventually learned that to speak to most of my peers on equal grounds, discussion had to move beyond and away from our life experiences—we would largely be unable to relate to each other at all otherwise. This was completely fine by me—life, life backgrounds and life experiences were the things I least enjoyed discussing with others, largely due to a perhaps-undeserved shame in my own comparatively meager past, and what I presumed and continue to presume to be a lack of commonality between myself and the others.

I wondered if I was a socioeconomic anomaly—was it unusual or rare for a student of comparatively low socioeconomic standing to be admitted to the

school? Or was the 2018 class as a whole socioeconomically anomalous—was it unusual or rare for the entire student body to be as homogenous or apparently homogenous as this one? I wondered if the homogeneity of the body of students led to or was related to homogeneity elsewhere. Of course, as I had been in the school at this point only very briefly, I wasn't sure myself what "homogeneity elsewhere," was supposed to mean. Or how I was to prove it was or wasn't there.

Cambridge, the town in which the school was located, was quite similar to Mississauga in many respects: both were created in the 1970s as a result of the amalgamation of smaller, older communities—Cambridge was founded in 1973 as a result of the amalgamation of the former communities of Galt, Preston and Hespeler; and Mississauga was founded in 1968 as a result of the amalgamation of the former communities of Lakeview, Cooksville, Lorne Park, Clarkson, Erindale, Sheridan, Dixie, Meadowvale Village, and Malton. Both also felt suburban in their urban fabric; Mississauga due to its low-density, its sprawl, and its combination of an abundance of mass-market retail and housing at the expense of anything else; Cambridge due to its physically small size, its low-density, and its car-centric transportation arteries.

I came to enjoy Cambridge however—Galt specifically—in spite of its similarities to my hometown. My homes in Galt were far quieter, and generally far safer. Strolling outside rewarded me with birdsong, the ever-present sound of the Grand River, trees, and lush foliage in the spring and summer. Strolling in the Acorn Place neighbourhood of Mississauga rewarded me with shouting, lots of paving, and lots of lawn—the nearest park with trees was a half-hour walk from my home. And while both cities were comparable in terms of activities or amenities for an individual in their late teens, one could not expect very much from Cambridge, whose population never surpassed 130,000, as compared to Mississauga, whose population approached 800,000, making it the third largest city in the Great Lakes region, behind Toronto and Chicago. Boringness was to be expected. But as a man who had spent most of his days entertaining himself within the worlds created by others in works of fiction, or by exploring past worlds in encyclopaedias, or by dwelling and ruminating within the confines of his own mind, more activities or amenities would likely have made absolutely no difference at all in any case anyway.

My very different, and generally more socioeconomically privileged peers, however, wasted no time in complaining about their environs. Cambridge

was boring. There was nothing to do. There was nowhere to go. There was nothing to see. There was no one to see. While I would eventually often spend my weekends and my long weekends in Cambridge—which represented for me a welcome and much needed reprieve from the chaos, noise, and odor of my native home—many of my peers wasted no time in getting out of Cambridge as soon as the opportunities presented themselves. But of course they would—these were individuals who staved off the inherent ennui of humanity with a constant bombardment of external experience and external activity. Spending any extended period of time in a city with truly “nothing to do,” as they oft complained, must have been akin to torture for the majority.

This relentless desire to *do* nevertheless struck me as odd. The work culture at the school could best and most accurately be described as intense, especially in the first year, when we, the students, had to contend with the dual challenge of learning the dead art of hand-drafting, and acclimating to what was, for many of us, our first university experience. Many sleep schedules were ruined by the novel problem of improper time management; I myself had become more comfortable working nocturnally—sleeping during the day and doing most of my activities during the dead of night—by the end of my second year. Faces eventually lost their youthful warmth and glow, gazes saw their hopeful lights dimmed; having been replaced by hardened, dryer, more serious complexions paired with cynical, colder leers. The sudden intensity of the program, coupled with the isolationist environment, scrambled our minds, scrambled our health, scrambled how we felt and how we self-identified as individuals. Peers began to change their style of dress—which collectively generally moved to darker tones, and more neutral colors—took on new hobbies; changed—or outright abandoned—their previous beliefs. Many developed depression and anxiety, or saw their pre-existing conditions worsened and amplified by the relentless intensity of their new environment. A few gradually and eventually fell into the dark embrace of anhedonia, indifference, detachment, dissociation, and more generally nihilistic thinking as a means to cope, numb, or detach ourselves from the intense pressures of the system in which we found ourselves. And again, to reiterate, much of the pressure and intensity of the school was due to system and structure of our education.

But much of it was curiously—curiously perhaps only to my naïve and ignorant self—self-induced. Here we had a group of 75 individuals, the vast majority of whom I had perceived to be of a relatively uniform and, in comparison to me, of higher socioeconomic standing, who had been

selected out of thousands of applicants, and gone through what was for many of them, a very stressful and arduous interview process to be here. They very well may have thought themselves the cream of the crop.

Except there were 75 of them. Could all of them be the creams of the crop? Or the cream of the crops? They had gone through this arduous, and in terms of percentage, incredibly competitive process to get into this school. Just to become equal.

This problem, this dissonance between the sense of primacy accorded by passing through this admission process, and the resulting equality, gradually bred evermore competition. While initially open to share, to collaborate, to cooperate, individuals soon began segregating and separating themselves. Sharing became retention, collaboration became individuation, and cooperation became secrecy. Once we were no longer required to draft by hand, individuals began to retreat to the bases of their homes, away from the collective and collaborative air of the studio, to keep their ideas secret, to keep their methods to themselves, and to allocate as much as was humanly possible to production—so I was told.

Even the banter, though it appeared to remain light-hearted in nature, took on a very slight, very subtly competitive air. While the topics of discussion largely remained the same—the activities they did as children, their hobbies, their plans, where they had been and where they were planning on going, the instruments they did or did not play, et cetera—the purpose was no longer to share, to find commonalities, to bond. The purpose was now to boast, to one-up the other party or parties, to prove oneself more learned, or more experienced, or more travelled, or more worldly.

And for what? I imagine and understand that competitiveness is what got many, if not all of us here, and that that very same competitiveness has such early origins that it would not be entirely inaccurate to refer to it as inherent, but the question still bears posing: for what? What end did this competitiveness serve? Especially in an environment which was so intense on its own, why bother? I did not have the answer for this then, and am sure I will not arrive at an answer for this question beyond the usual, “it’s human nature;” they were competitive because they had always been competitive.

I am left however with my earlier observation; the collective relentless desire to do, especially in such an intense, high-activity environment, remained odd. My thought was that they would be more inclined to lower-energy,

more reclusive, more contemplative and internally driven activities. Despite our socioeconomic and cultural differences, I thought the constant chaos of their schooling would gradually drive them into internalization, into introversion. I thought that they would eventually become more like me. But they never did; the nature of competition, which was more inherent to them than it was to me proved too strong and too much of an obstacle to our complete homogenization. Our origins were too different to result in a similar reaction to similar external conditions or stimuli. But of course. Why had I expected anything else?

IV

A RETURN TO CHANGED ORIGINS

My first year ended sometime in May. I returned to my home in Mississauga shortly thereafter.

I had changed. My hair, hitherto—at my father’s behest—normally kept in a short buzz, had grown into an unkempt and nappy mess. Lines had begun to appear on my face, whose skin was slightly less taut. My cheeks were slightly hollower, and I had grown paler. My gaze had grown a few yards longer; the eyes, less bright and more dull. The eyelids remained drooped over the top half of the eye, obscuring part of the iris and a small part of the pupil; the bags under the entirety of the eye grew darker—indicative of a sort of perpetual fatigue.

I had changed. While I had grown less outright avoidant, less unwilling to engage with others, the distance and reservation which heretofore characterized my countenance remained, and seemed to have intensified. My gaze, which could have been described as a timid curiosity, was now an introspective and withdrawn, melancholy pensiveness.

I had changed. My parents observed the newfound frequency with which I interjected what they referred to as “big words,” in speech. They noted more pep in my movements, and a more upright, confident posture.

I had changed. The friends I had made in elementary and middle school noticed a profound darkening of my sense of humor, and echoed the observations of my parents in regards for my newfound fondness for “big words.” My laugh had evolved into something heartier and more full-bodied. I laughed more readily at more things, and seemed to embrace the meaninglessness and insignificance of things with open arms. Or rather,

my speech seemed to suggest this new train of thought—I spoke more nihilistically, but found more reason to laugh than to be upset at the state and the events which unfolded in the world before me, in my conversations with my friends in the various shisha lounges and Tim Horton’s cafes my friends and I used as hang-out spots afterhours. It was an optimistic absurdism, if you will.

I had changed, but I had grown happier for it. Dull though it seemed to my peers from the school of architecture, Cambridge represented for me a newness, freedom, and independence which I had not before experienced in my previous 18 years in Mississauga. The education was different and new. The people I met were different and came from different backgrounds than the one with which I was familiar, and the ones with which my friends from elementary and middle school were all familiar. I had, for the first time since shortly after my younger brother’s birth, a room to myself. The house shared between my single roommate and I, housed the two of us, and only the two of us; extras never remained for more than a night at a time. I could walk outside after dark without fear, or anxiety that something may happen to me. Cambridge was different. Cambridge was novel.

But I was back to where I started, Mississauga. To its credit, Mississauga had also changed. New condominium towers of the type that have been all the rage in Toronto for the better part of the past decade began popping up in earnest on the intersection of Eglinton and Hurontario streets, the major intersection nearest my home. Several stores had closed at the local plaza. Food Basics had been replaced by another grocery chain, called Ocean’s. Celebration Square had finally become a viable space of public gathering, a cheap, though to its credit, not entirely ineffective, imitation, of Toronto’s Nathan Philips Square. That same area had seen an explosion in new condo development in my 8 month absence. Square One, the central mall and nexus of activity for the city of Mississauga was expanding and being pushed upmarket. The GO bus, route designation 21, ended its rush-hour service to Union Station and to Toronto; commuters who lived north of Square One—commuters like myself—would have to travel an extra 20 minutes to use the GO trains which stopped at Cooksville Station to the south. The Mississauga Transitway, a 260 million dollar bus-only road which paralleled the 403 expressway from Winston Churchill Boulevard to Eglinton Avenue at its interchange with the 427 expressway, was opened. It was claimed to reduce commutes between Square One, and the Islington Subway station in Etobicoke by up to 30 minutes; the reality was that it rarely saved more than 10 minutes over regular bus routes out of Mississauga.

My home had also changed. My father had been laid off from his previous job driving garbage trucks, and was now working as a school bus driver. His working hours changed as a result; instead of working a full 9-5 plus commute time to Orillia where his office was found, he was now working in two 3 hour stints: 7-10 in the morning, and 1-4 in the afternoon. The change in working hours was welcome, given my father's advanced age; he was at this time 73.

Gone was my older brother, who had left to share an apartment with yet another one of his girlfriends—permanently it seemed—but my parents expressed the belief that he would be back eventually, a belief reinforced by the continued presence of the vast majority of his belongings. In his place however, was a woman—around my mother's age—with whom neither parent was particularly close, but who was related in some way to my godmother—whom I had not seen or heard from since I was in middle school. This rather large, well-endowed, and beady-eyed woman, born and raised in a rural parish of Jamaica, was also quite loud. Before I crossed the threshold into my apartment, she would oft be heard having very intense, very crude arguments with the television from the corridor of the 6th floor. The arguments and violent reactions to CNN's broadcasters—especially if they spoke ill of former US president Barack Obama—or to the idiotic responses given by members of families competing on *Family Feud* continued ceaselessly, despite our collective reminders to her that the individuals on the screen could not hear her, regardless of how loudly she screamed at them and chastised them.

Oh, and she was quite fond of chastisement. No one was off limits, not even her hosts eventually, who often received beratements for behaviours she judged as uncouth—washing one's hands or one's mouth after a meal in the *kitchen* sink, as opposed to the *bathroom* sink for example.

The woman—whom I was compelled, by a confusing, unknown, and completely nonsensical set of courtesies and customs imposed upon me by my mother, to refer as aunt—did however, have her uses. She paid a meager rent as thanks to my parents, despite not having a room to herself, and kept the common areas of the apartment largely spotless.

Still, I could not understand why her continued presence was tolerated within the apartment. At the time of my return, I could sense nothing but resentment from my family towards her. Perhaps the relationship was more cordial initially, and had simply deteriorated over time, as relationships are wont to do?

My father and younger brother both shrugged and offered indirect answers to the question; they were as clueless as I as to the continued presence of my...aunt. My mother quoted Christian values she wished to uphold; all souls in need of help are deserving of help; if she were in the same situation as this aunt of mine, she would hope that someone extended to her the same hospitality.

Admirable. Honorable. Saintly, even. My mother possessed a patience which I could only dream of equalling. But what use is any of that if the act gradually drives you mad, fills you with resentment, makes coming home a miserable prospect?

And I believe it was driving my family mad. Or, if not mad, it upset them beyond a point they could cordially contain. My father began to tease my mother, referring to her as my mother's best friend, which was met with an exasperated eye-roll on my mother's part. They both stopped answering her phone calls. My younger brother opted more and more frequently to eat dinner at a friend's place, or at a restaurant, away from home.

The members of the household began to do something which I found to be rather strange and unbecoming of them, though this was probably the method they saw as the best outlet, given the bind into which the matriarch of the home had just placed them all.

I became their confessor, the confessional into which their grievances were aired. The grievances initially involved this woman whose company no one seemed to enjoy, yet everyone felt obligated to host; her loudness, her ignorance, her constant need to interject and her constant need to reprimand, her continuous, obnoxious presence.

This was especially odd because my family had before been the type to air their grievances directly to the party responsible for their grievances. They did not, or they could not, this time for whatever reason.

The ability to anonymously vent to an individual who wouldn't dare repeat the uncharacteristically dark words uttered to me must have been a rather enticing privilege, for they soon began to complain to me about each other. My father, on our grocery runs, would complain about my mother's overbearing and controlling nature; my mother, for her part, as I shuttled her to and from her hairdresser in Brampton, would complain about my father's inability or unwillingness to save money, and my younger brother's

unwillingness to obey; my younger brother, as I shuttled him to and from his friends' houses, would complain about the lack of space, privacy and freedom given to him by my parents. Were they doing the same about me to each other? Did they have grievances where I was concerned of which I would never be made aware?

Upon hindsight, this behavior wasn't completely novel to me. I had always, unwittingly, played the role of confessor, of advisor, of confidante for my peers, my teachers, my friends, my acquaintances. My quiet, generally nonreactive, and pensive nature I suppose gave the illusion of sympathy, the illusion of non-judgement, the illusion of acceptance, of understanding. It is not a role I rejected—in fact, it was initially a role which I embraced, for I believed it revealed a trust which people had in me, which they lacked in others—but increasingly I came to see that this was the sole reason many people with whom I interacted, interacted with me at all. And this darkened my view of people, of the world, of life.

What was going on? What had happened in the past 8 months? Even in the space of home, it appeared as if there was no longer any mutual desire amongst the family to interact with each other. After their respective days of work, or school, they all retreated to their own bubbles; my father buried in a book, or engrossed in a movie he had already seen a dozen times on the now-67"-screen television; my mother captured by her iPad and her newfound hobby of window-shopping for suburban homes which she would never come to afford, or engaged in intense conversation over the phone with the childhood friend located in the Bronx; my younger brother, now 14, lost in his own world on the desktop computer, isolated from the happenings of the outside world by the rap music which blared through his VModa headphones.

The home which I had come to loathe for its constant and incessant noise and activity became its opposite. The home from which I had felt so detached because of our conflicting and contrasting qualities had suddenly become something with which I was supposed to be happy, content; a place of peace, quiet, a refuge from the chaos and energy of the outside world. And yet I felt no increase in satisfaction. Instead of peaceful, the home felt sterile. Instead of a pleasant quietness, the home felt dead. The home felt as alien as ever, perhaps even more so. Instead of a home, the apartment merely became a space which five people shared, and shared only circumstantially.

V

PAINTING; A FOIL

Like my brother, and like my parents—more indirectly perhaps—I too began to seek an escape; a means by which I would not have to engage with whatever occurred and whatever it is that so utterly changed the atmosphere of my home.

I sought employment, both to do the above, and in an attempt to lessen my dependence on loans for the upcoming school term. I suspected my address was redlined by employers—of course, I had no concrete evidence to support such a claim, but my response rate did improve drastically when, instead of using my home address, I used the address of friends who lived in wealthier, non-social-housing neighbourhoods of Mississauga, without changing any other element of my resume—so my initial response rate was dismal.

I did however, eventually find a job, with a non-profit organization affiliated with the Region of Peel that looked to employ disadvantaged “youth” from social-housing projects around Peel, most of which were located in Mississauga, to paint and repaint senior homes. This represents, oddly enough, to date, the only time my low-income roots have proved advantageous to me.

My interview was held in the party room of my apartment building—a room which hadn't been used in that capacity since the adjacent community centre was built, but I digress—on a hot June afternoon. The interview went simply and well enough; questions were asked pertaining to my experience, if and where I was going to school, if I had worked elsewhere before, so on and so forth. The usual. A job was offered on the spot, which I accepted, and I was told where to be at 9:30 AM the next Tuesday, when I was to start.

I had the impression that the interviewers—one, a tall, bald, dark-skinned man of robust build and with an east-African accent; the other, a short, square-faced Egyptian woman who wore heavy and dark makeup around the eyes, had many piercings of the nose and of the ears, and was a handful of years my senior at the most—felt surprise, or commiseration, or perhaps some hybrid of the two, about my situation. They wore not the usual straight faces or cordial smiles one expects of interviewers, no. Their brows, a perpetual slight furrow, their eyes squinting slightly, with a glimmer of sadness or pity—I could not immediately say which with any degree of certainty—but staring intensely into mine, as if they were searching for something—*how* was someone like myself here; *why* was someone like myself here? I myself was never quite sure what they expected to find in these eyes of mine; certainly not the answer, for the reasons for *why* or *how* I found myself in this situation were not, as far as I was concerned, up to me to decide—much like most of everyone’s lives, was circumstantial at best.

The next week, on my first day, as I met those who would come to be my colleagues for the next three months, I came to understand the perplexity with which my interviewers viewed me.

The dozen or so “youths” in question—teenagers and young adults, aged 16 to 23, myself included—sat in chairs in a circle, in another party room, this time in another social-housing project, also located in Mississauga, though south and west of the social-housing project which I called home. They, like me, were all from various social housing projects across Peel Region. Most were younger, still in various stages of high school—at 19, I was the fourth eldest of the group. This was for many, their first job. They all possessed an energy and an intensity to their mannerisms and to their words which I could not recall ever having possessed myself at their age, so long ago. Most of them also possessed the same intense, present, and aggressive gaze which I had remembered seeing in the individuals of the north Bronx; gazes so different from mine which, although it had also been described as intense, it was a different sort of intensity—it was a gaze of intense distance, or intense introspection, or intense pensiveness.

The purpose of this first day, was to conduct a series of team-building exercises which, when delivered with the obviously forced and faked enthusiasm of the large, robustly-built black man who was our interviewer, employer, and apparently, our supervisor, drew the ire of the now-employees present, who were quick to vocalize their frustrations.

“Stupid.”

“Pointless.”

“Childish.”

“A fucking waste of time.”

“I don’t have time for your fucking games.”

I can hardly remember such a strong series of reactions to something so minor, so insignificant. I of course agreed; I wouldn’t have worded my feelings so strongly, but I nevertheless agreed. But there was no use in being so upset about something so circumstantial, something that would take a few hours at most, and something that we would likely never have to do again.

We began the activities, in spite of the mass protestations, and very, very gradually, even the most hardened of individuals softened up. Names were learned and exchanged, and at the least, on a surface level, personalities began to reveal themselves. Jerome, the short and surprisingly muscular 16-year-old who possessed a swagger, a bravado that belied his childish face and even more child-like voice; Lloyd, the eldest, a tall, lanky man with, when compared with the others of the group, a strange and permeating sense of calm—though it is possible he was merely a fond user of cannabis; Reneice, a woman two years my senior, was intensely combative and was completely obsessed with Japanese culture. And so on.

The activities were going smoothly, until they ended. Then, our boss revealed to us how a typical working day would go: we would arrive at the senior home for the day, gather in their party room, collect our painting equipment, and go to the units and floors that needed repainting. At the end of the day, we would return to the party room, clean our equipment, under the supervision of a “leader,”—who would be a different person each day. Only when the leader-of-the-day and the supervisor surmised that everything had been cleaned satisfactorily would we be dismissed for the day.

This word—“leader”—caused tempers to flare to hitherto unforeseen heights. Most of the constituents in the room, especially those who were younger began to shout and curse towards the man who had just revealed this satanic bit of information.

“We are all equals, and I will not accept anything else,” one had declared.

“That word implies that one person will have more power than the rest of us, and I didn’t sign up for that,” quipped another, one of a set of twins.

“Ain’t nobody in here gonna be the boss of me,” announced one of the youngest, quite defiantly.

Our East African boss tried—in vain—to appease his workers, to tell them that this role of “leader,” was not one of permanence, and didn’t imply any overreaching powers over the others who weren’t leaders for the day. Of course, no one was listening; everyone was too upset about the imagined possibility of further subjugation to reason that further subjugation wouldn’t actually be happening. People began to shout over each other, point fingers, so on and so forth. I half expected a fistfight to break out.

Curious, isn’t it? By applying and accepting a job offer, they had already willingly subjected themselves to outside leadership. Why did *this* piss them off so much? Was it not more of the same?

In an attempt to quell the uproar—or to satiate my own curiosity about how the others would respond—I quipped that this whole issue had to do with the use of the word, “leader,” and the odd grip the definition of the word had on them; had our boss described the role of this individual without making use of the word “leader,” or any of its synonyms, there would be no uproar, there would be no problem.

To this, I got more shouting and cursing and anger, most of which, however, was unintelligible and otherwise impossible to understand. I, however, was able to make out one comment in the miasma of noise:

“Shut up, Shanne. You’re different. You wouldn’t understand.”

Fascinating that such a proclamation were being made about me, only after having known me for a few hours. No elaboration was made as to what was meant, or what specifically he was referring to when I was called out as “different,” and in light of his demonstrated temper and short fuse, I didn’t ask for elaboration; I may only guess what was meant.

Not that I disagreed; even after this one day, several hours of team-building exercises, and arguments about the meaning and use of the word “leader,” I felt different. My sitting posture was more upright, and took less space—I

sat on the left side of my chair, whereas the others tried to fill theirs; I spoke differently; I had not the anger or intensity in my eyes that they shared; my clothing was more form fitting; and while they seemed to have reacted to their circumstances with rage and resentment, I instead reacted with a sort of resigned indifference.

The shouting continued, now all but incomprehensible and unintelligible; our boss, as a mark of defeat, shook his head and sighed—manifestations of defeat with which we would come to be all too familiar over the coming months—and dismissed us slightly early.

I took the two buses, and roughly an hour later, I was home. I recounted my experience—somewhat angrily—of the endless nonsensical shouting, and complete contempt for authority to my parents, who offered sympathetic words of condolence: “it’s only for a few months;” “you’ll never have to do this again after this summer,” for example.

The acquaintances from elementary school with whom I still spoke, as well as the few friends I had made over the course of my first year of school were generally less sympathetic; they laughed, didn’t understand why I was bothering, and suggested I do what they would where they in my place; leave.

Part of me agreed, and wanted to leave. I felt more different, more detached, more of an “other” to this group of individuals than I had towards the group of individuals which constituted the student body of my school, even though I had much more in common with this group than with the latter. Another part however, was curious to interact with, and try to understand more intimately this group of people who, in generic terms, I had earnestly avoided for most of my life.

I saw them, from the lofty vantage point of my 6th floor dining-room window; loitering by the entrances of the two apartment buildings—Weaver’s Hill A, and Weaver’s Hill B—acting as impromptu, vigilante security guards. I saw them harass the occupants of cars they did not recognize, harass guests with whom they were not familiar. I heard them catcall the women who left and entered the buildings they were supposedly guarding. I heard them holler at each other, and argue, in various patois and creoles mixed in with the slang that is now euphemistically referred to as “African-American Vernacular.” And while I never saw them fire, I did hear, and I did often see the guns which many claimed to tote.

These people scared me. They seemed to act without restraint, which I could not understand. There was much about them I could not understand.

At the age of 9, after a day of school, I had chosen to take a set of fire-stairs to my floor, having been trapped in the elevator twice in the two days prior. As I climbed the first flight of stairs, a very dark, and very bald man entered the stairwell from the bottom floor, and looked at me with bloodshot eyes. He asked me if I was afraid. I paused on the landing of the second floor, puzzled by the question. Why would I be afraid? And why was he asking me? I of course didn't answer, as one musn't speak with strangers. He answered for me however, declaring that I should be, before pulling a rather large flip knife from his hind pocket, and racing up the stairs after me. I did manage to outrun this man, by running up to the third floor, cutting across the corridor to the other set of fire stairs, running up to the fourth floor, and then hiding in the apartment of my then-babysitter.

This experience had completely puzzled me, and had completely scarred me. Why me? What had I done to this man, this stranger? Why did he chase me up the stairs with a knife? What had I done to deserve that?

He was one of the individuals I often saw loitering outside the entrance of the apartment building. Acting as a guard where one wasn't needed—both buildings of the complex had security guards—to defend against hostile intruders. Except I, a long-time resident of the building, and a 9 year old child, was seen as a threat. Why?

But of course I never understood any of it; I never made any attempt to engage with any of it. Even prior to my experience with the knife-wielding man, before my fear of them was cemented as such, I had no desire to engage. Despite our similar—and in many cases, identical—socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, I had very prematurely judged them to be inferior; their lack of restraint was proof of their barbarism, and proof of what I imagined was rote stupidity.

Even so, who was I to judge? Was a lack of restraint—or rather, simply what I *perceived* to be a lack of restraint—reason enough to discount them as a people entirely? Even if they could be proven to be objectively stupid or barbaric, was this reason enough to disregard them? They were still of the same stuff of which we are all made, and they still possessed a voice with which they could express things, inarticulate at times though that voice may have been.

I elected to continue working, to better understand those with whom I shared the commonality of a socioeconomic experience, to perhaps dispel some of my own prejudices, and because I had no other work.

The next day, I was to report to two publically-funded senior homes at the intersection of Queen Frederica Drive and Dundas Avenue in Mississauga. Though I had driven and been driven by this area many times, I had never been aware that they were senior homes. The buildings took on the form of generic 8-or-9-storey brick-clad apartment buildings, circa 1970 or 1980. They were regular in their shape, rectangular, and had protruding concrete floorplates which acted as regular balconies at every floor. There wasn't very much in the sense of landscaping, or ground-treatment; the buildings were set back just enough to allow space for small off-ramps from the street upon which the buildings faced—Queen Frederica Drive. One building, on one side of the street, was adjacent to a large parking lot; the other was surrounded by lawn and a few stunted and malnourished trees.

The buildings appeared to be in poor condition, or at the very least, poorly maintained; brick was coming off their façades, especially near and around their bases; efflorescence abounded. The concrete of the pillars which supported the overhangs over the driveways in front of the main entrances was flaking off, revealing rebar which had rusted a brilliant orange-red

The decrepit conditions continued inside; paint flaking off the walls, blown lightbulbs, very dimly-lit spaces, cobwebs in corners, mold here and there. A very strong, very odorous combination of tobacco, sweat, and age hung strongly in the very still, very heavy, very humid air of the main lobby space. We showed up in the party room, as instructed—though many were as much as a half hour late—and were split into groups of between one and four people, depending on how much of each apartment was to be painted; certain individuals wanted just touch-ups, others wanted their entire apartments repainted.

I was first paired with two younger individuals, to paint the kitchen and bathroom of an elderly gentleman, who was confined to a wheelchair, and breathed with the help of an oxygen tank. He seemed to be a quiet man, no longer blessed with the energy of youth.

I introduced myself, while my colleagues did not. The man shortly thereafter retired to his bedroom, which allowed us to work without interruption.

I told the two that I would paint the bathroom; they could work on the kitchen. I often came to do this, as it allowed me to work alone, in my own confined space, in my own little world, which was generally my preference.

Before I go on, I must mention that we had received no training as to how to properly paint; some of us had prior painting experience, but most of us had none. We were told what our equipment was, how to open cans of paint, that the paint should be stirred before its application to walls, and where to go to clean up after we had finished, but no more.

It was not surprising then, to see the scene before me as I left the bathroom two hours later, having finished my portion of the painting job.

The two individuals with whom I was tasked to work, were outside on the balcony, smoking cigarettes and joints—this at the apartment of a man who had to breathe through a nasal cannula—and had left their painting not only half done, but poorly done.

No tarp had been laid down before the painting began, allowing paint to splatter on the sink, the faucets, on the counters, on the cabinets, on the floor, on cutlery. Instead of using the rollers, paint was applied to the wall in thick, uneven coats using the paintbrushes. The paint dripped in an unsightly manner down the walls as a result. The scene was nothing short of appalling but again, not surprising given the complete lack of training.

A few stern words, tinged with a feigned anger dismissed the two youths, who, while angered by the reprimand from an older, larger stranger, seemed happy that they no longer had to work; they weren't to be seen for the rest of the summer. I then attempted to complete the work the two had carelessly and poorly begun, and tried to clean paint from where there ought to have been none.

This is how many of my working days went; we would be grouped up, sent to various apartments to paint for the seniors, finish, clean up, and on to the next. On occasion, the elderly citizens would converse with us, or attempt to, rather—the versions of English spoken by the two parties was not always mutually intelligible—sharing stories of their youths when a post-secondary education could be had for pocket change; complaining about their conditions, and the lack of care they felt they were getting. As they aged, as their ability to be of use to society waned, they felt they were being forgotten entirely, left to rot along with the building which wasted away

around them. Melancholy always permeated the words they spoke; whether they were speaking longingly of the past, or worryingly about the present.

On occasion, they would ask questions which were generally broad and vague in nature; how was life, what our plans were for the future, what we hoped to become, so on and so forth. We often answered in anger, our words filled with resentment; discrimination made it hard to get anywhere, poverty made it hard to think of anything else—much less plan for a future—we hated our feelings of inferiority, not having anything.

Melancholy and anger. Worry and hatred. Sadness and resentment. It was in this atmosphere where I worked, and spent my first summer after my first exposure to university. Five days a week for the better part of three months, this was the atmosphere in which I spent my life.

Our first three weeks came and went. And we received our first paycheck—for many, this was the first sizeable sum of money they had ever received at once. The following week, many of my coworkers had new things. New phones, new shoes, new jewelry, new hair, new clothing. Much of the conversation that day based itself on the new things everyone had purchased with their money.

“Didn’t you get paid?” I was asked on this day, when I showed up to work with no new things.

“No, I did,” was my customarily curt answer.

My opposite raised an eyebrow, expecting an elaboration. When none was received, a squint, a shrug, and a departure.

The things I *wanted* to buy, the *only* things I wanted to buy—an automobile; perhaps a Honda Civic Si, or a Volkswagen Golf GTI; a single-bedroom, or studio apartment; a parrot or a pigeon maybe—were all far too pricey to purchase after a single paycheck. And these were purchases I had decided would have to be made in the very distant future; after I had finished school, after I had paid off loans, after I had paid for braces for my prodigiously gapped teeth. In addition to this, the intent of this money, and the reason for why I got the job, to acquire spending money, and money for rent over the coming school term, where I would not be employed, and where I would be existing, in essence, at a financial loss.

I had come to understand over the years, that most goals for most individuals; most things people strive for and desire, and work towards, may be classified in one of two groups: *needs*, and *wants* or *desires*. I found myself classifying my desires into needs—food, clothing when it ceased to operate properly as clothing, not much else—and things which would be nice to have, but not absolutely necessary. But of course: “things which would be nice to have, but not absolutely necessary,” is one way to define a “want,” one way to extend the word beyond the word and into a phrase.

The reason for why I make the difference, the distinction, is because when an item or goal is thought of as a *want*, it typically incites the necessary work and money and time require to get it, even if it is acknowledged as unnecessary. Something which is thought of as *nice to have, but not absolutely necessary*, will not incite the work or money or time, to get it. It would have been nice to get a new phone. Or new clothing. Or new shoes. But I didn't want any of it—I completely lacked the desire to get those things, even when I had more than enough money to acquire said things; I was never able to rationalize them, as they were never necessary.

This was noticed by my parents, and several peers as I ascended through the ranks of my career, making ever more money, yet continuing to live as cheaply as ever, as they would have put it—I myself preferred the term avaricious. It was seen as a flaw, a manifestation of my inability or unwillingness to “treat myself.”

I suppose this was true. I'm not even entirely sure what the phrase meant—is one supposed to gift oneself with objects periodically as a reward for working in a system which is designed as a necessity for a comfortable existence? It didn't make any sense. Then again, very little does. But I digress.

And this behaviour—the stockpiling of new things—among my peers continued, like clockwork. Every two weeks, with every paycheck, new things would be displayed, new things would be discussed. The novelty of the new never waned; it continually provided a drive, a pull to return to the work which quickly became mundane and repetitive.

In addition to the regular painting job, I eventually came to be used as a mediator of sorts; I became the one to resolve complaints or grievances between coworkers, to address the complaints of the elderly as they pertained to my coworkers, and the one who redid and corrected the poor

painting jobs of my coworkers. I suppose my comparatively placid, non-confrontational and non-combative nature lent me well to this role. My peers initially seemed quite wary and untrusting of this—most thought my being this way was simply an act to gain favor of some sort from our employer. There wasn't any possible way that someone from the same background, with a similar taste of violence, a similar experience of squalor, a similar feeling of resentment, a similar feeling of inferiority, could genuinely outwardly express as much peace or calm as I did: it had to be a front, a façade, a mask. I suppose in a sense they were right; it was a bit of a mask I wore, and continue to wear. But the mask was not donned to incite favor from my superiors; no, it was a result of a continuous repression of the same anger and resentment that my coworkers were far more willing to express and air openly. Continuous repression that resulted eventually in a numbing, permanent indifference, or learned helplessness in regards to the situation I then found myself in, and situations I would come to find myself in. The mask was not so much something I wore, but something which was grafted onto the skin.

They eventually would come to realize that my nature, my persona was not an elaborate ruse to become a favorite of my employers, though they never quite understood how or why I was the way I was. Did it have something to do with my sexuality? Was I not as poor as I had claimed to be? And so on. Theories came, and theories lingered. Maybe my calm, which they characterized as unusually effeminate, was because I was homosexual in some capacity. Maybe I had some sort of hobby, or did some sort of activity through which I could effectively channel my inherent masculine rage—dance was, interestingly enough, the most common such activity, to which my movements and my gait, which were at once upright, graceful, and fluid were pointed as proof. Maybe I had experienced some severe trauma that had blunted my ability to be as assertive and as aggressive as they might have expected.

In addition to the physical work of painting, every couple weeks or so we were to attend seminars at different party rooms at different social housing projects around Mississauga. These seminars were on issues thought to—and statistically do, on average—plague individuals of the same low socioeconomic standing of which we were part; money management, anger and temper management, conflict resolution, career planning, teamwork, and the like. These were not issues universal to all of us, but of course, which issues ever are?

August came to an end, and we were all interviewed again. What for was not immediately clear. We were stood on the left side of the vestibule of the building I called home, in the lobby which had since been modified to explicitly prevent “illegal” loitering—ledges and other places upon which to sit had been removed, and no fewer than three signs warning of the fines for the heinous act of standing idly had been placed on walls in their stead. But I digress.

We were asked about our experiences. We were asked what we learned. We were asked how this experience would lead to a positive outcome on our futures, on our lives. We were encouraged especially to be honest, but positive. But what if our honesty was not positive? Brushed off. I was being semantic, I was told.

Our interviews, along with photos of us painting in buildings, were hastily assembled into a short video, which was then posted on *YouTube*; which is still up for anyone’s perusal to this day, if they so choose. I stood awkwardly outside the vestibule, hands held behind my back, wearing a shirt which was slightly too small. While my then-clean face faced the camera, my eyes turned down and to my left, speaking slowly and clearly, very obviously choosing my words very specifically. The others faced the camera, speaking more fluidly, more confidently, more loudly. They eschewed what I would refer to as Standard English for the slang they used amongst themselves.

Who was this video for? It certainly wasn’t for us—though we were all copied in the email through which this video was distributed; we all knew what work we did and what we thought of it.

Was it to convince someone? To convince whomever was spearheading this project that it was useful, leading to positive change—worth the money, to put it bluntly? As with all things monetary, I presumed the investors would want a means by which to ensure they were getting a good return. And this video was supposed to act as proof of that.

The program was scrapped the next year, after a single summer.

VI

GRAND-OPULENT THEORIZING

September soon came round, and I was back in Cambridge, to begin my second year. The faces I saw, all familiar, had all generally lost the hard edge they had gained over the 8 months prior to the preceding summer. Gazes had regained some of the light possessed of intellectually curious and creative individuals. People overall seemed happier. A classmate of mine even went so far as to suggest that I looked as if I was glowing—a choice word which, while appreciated, is probably not the word I would have used myself. I suppose I was happier in a sense; I did prefer this environment to the prior. I wondered if others felt the same way; were they happy to be back, or were they happy because they had been away?

As classes began and as studio commenced, my answer was received. Faces soon returned to their prior state; hardened by work, hardened by improper maintenance. In addition to the natural stresses of the program, of studio, the other courses, and all their collective deadlines, this was also the term prior to our first co-op work term. Co-op here is simply a word employed to denote a term—four months—where, instead of learning in an academic environment, we would learn in the workplace. A job, in layman's terms.

This would be the first job for a surprising number of us. The newness alone added a level of stress which would not otherwise have been there. Time was taken off of studio, off of other courses, to perfect our portfolios, tighten-up and update our resumes, to compose individualized cover letters, and to apply to as many firms as possible. I myself applied to around 60 firms; most applied to more.

Classes continued. And with a full year of architectural education under our collective belts, we felt more comfortable questioning what was being

fed to us, even if we had subconsciously come to already accept many of the tenets and values of our professors. We were no longer the open vessels, indiscriminately receptive to any and all information and opinion poured into us. Eyes were no longer as wide, silence was no longer absolute; intense interest had been replaced by a more reserved curiosity.

Familiar names were thrown around; Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright. Tadao Ando, Aldo Rossi, Adolf Loos. Familiar concepts were throw around; modernism, rationalism, formalism, the grid, urbanism. We talked about the “honest expression,” of architecture. We spent much time looking at the cities of Europe, at their Roman, or their medieval origins. We talked about *genius loci*, of the emergence and persistence of suburbia, of the impact the car had on cities themselves. We spoke of Jane Jacobs, and her criticisms of slum clearance and other phenomena now universally characterized under the umbrella term of gentrification, as well as the notion of gentrification itself. We spoke of the character of urban spaces, about the *feel* of certain streets and neighbourhoods compared to others, and what specific variables and aspects contributed to these individualized feels. Toronto was studied extensively, more than any other city except perhaps Rome, as were the developments which, while then considered suburbs, are now considered part of Toronto proper.

More contemporary figures were also discussed, namely and most especially Rem Koolhaas and the works of his firm, OMA—Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Other contemporary names were thrown around; Norman Foster, Renzo Piano, the pair of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. We were told—generally despairingly—of postmodernism, as postulated by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in their works, *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. We learned to reduce the functions of buildings and spaces and the events within these spaces into abstracted “program,” the relationships between whom the character of our spaces were to be derived or driven. We were taught of the importance of the interstitial—spaces between spaces, or negative spaces. Ornament was discussed here and there, here or there. Other names were cited because their work was generally seen as exemplary, if not exactly influential or revolutionary—Peter Zumthor, Lina Bo Bardi, Kengo Kuma, Toyo Ito, Shigeru Ban, Olson Kundig. There were others, probably.

We spoke, comparatively briefly, of the failures of architecture; both moral—in the example of the structures built to carry out the Holocaust at

such frightening efficiency—and practical—in the example of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis.

Attempts were made to teach us of more practical, more pragmatic, more physically applicable aspects of building and construction; passive design, solar orientation, wall details, R-values, and thermal insulation in general, though I questioned how much of this less interesting stuff was retained by anyone—it appeared to me as if we knew as little about detailing a foundation, for example, by the end of our fourth year as we did at the beginning of our first. And this was no fault of the faculty's; it appeared that many of us simply did not find the actual act of physically building a building to be interesting enough for information on the subject to be retained, despite what many of us told ourselves, and told others—buildings as ideas were simply more interesting than buildings as objects.

The class had begun to consolidate into different social groups; we had each more or less defined our circles of acquaintance—who our close friends were, who our more distant friends were, who our acquaintances were, and who would remain strangers.

My own circle remained small—a direct result of both a lack of desire to expand, and a general social ineptitude on my part—my innermost circle never amounted to more than three people, and was more commonly just two. The rest were in the outer two circles.

And even within this inner circle of mine, a distance was maintained between myself and the other two or three. I remained detached. A perpetual distrust of the sincerity or genuineness of the actions and the words those around me—a perpetual distrust whose cause I cannot exactly pinpoint—remained. There also existed a wariness, a constant worry about the temporality of the connections being made; I was different—insurmountably so, it felt at times—our values, our backgrounds, were too different: how permanent could any connection be?

And how real could any connection be? Much as I questioned and distrusted the validity of the sincerity or genuineness of the actions and words of those around me, my own sincerity or genuineness could not so easily be ascertained. It was as if I had forgotten what lay behind the mask which had long been grafted onto the face; was I being truthful with myself, if not with others?

This was one of, among the many, things I would think about on weekends. I had taken the habit of going to Victoria Park, a short 15 minute walk west of the school, on weekends whenever it was sufficiently warm to do so. I would smoke, lay on the grass, stargaze, and think while I did so.

Thinking was something I much enjoyed doing. It allowed me to return to the palace of my mind which, from a very early age, was the sole place I felt most at home. It was the one space where I consistently found respite from the world in which I found myself, which I always found to be uncomfortably chaotic and busy. It also allowed me to think and reflect more carefully about the events that had transpired that day, that week, and in days and weeks prior.

I would think about the names which were dropped and mentioned frequently; Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos. All individually great men, conceptualizers of great projects, borne out of their collective singular genius. Who were these men? What were they like? From which environments did they emerge?

We were never told. We would never know unless we possessed the curiosity to investigate ourselves. It was never mentioned that Mies and The Corbusier were Nazi sympathizers. Or that Frank Lloyd Wright was a world-class philanderer—who wasn't, at the time? Or that Adolf Loos was involved in trials regarding child pornography and molestation. Or that these men—and the vastly overwhelming majority of men whose names would come to be mentioned over the course of my undergraduate architectural education—all came from the same middle, or upper-middle class origins.

None of that mattered. We were architects-in-training after all, not architectural historians or architectural biographers. The individuals from whom great architecture was borne did not and do not matter; their names were merely means by which their works and ideas could most easily be identified. The architecture that they created was objectively great, great on its own merit, and would be great regardless of the creator: greatness and genius is embodied within the final object and exists independently of the mind from which that genius and greatness emerged; the Seagram building would be a masterclass of Miesian modernism, and massively influential regardless of if it was designed by Mies van der Rohe, or myself.

Or, this is what I believed to be the overarching, underlying metanarrative of what I was being taught. I brought the glass pipe to my lips, and inhaled deeply, drawing white smoke through the brass mouthpiece. My lungs filled with the products of burned cannabis, I removed the glass pipe from its location, and let the white smoke slip from my lips, slightly ajar.

I began to think again. How could a work be understood in isolation from the individual from whom it was conceived? Or, more specifically, what was the use in looking at works in this way? Was it not more useful to understand works in relation to their creators, and the environment in which the creators existed, and in which the creations came to be? Would we not come to a more holistic understanding of the works we studied if we understood the individuals from whom these works came? Their struggles? Their environments? Their lives?

I had the impression I was singular in this thought; my peers at the school seemed oddly fond of speaking of things in isolation, or at the very least, with less attention paid to context than I would think necessary. Modernism, postmodernism, rationalism, formalism, grids, *genius loci*, *tabula rasa*, “program.” These concepts were all looked at and thought of as individualized abstractions, almost Platonic in their purity, as detached as possible from the gritty reality from whence they came. I can tell you that modernism emerged as a response to industrialization and the taylorization of said industrialization, and I can tell you that postmodernism emerged reactively to the austerity and formality of modernism which themselves were results of a pursuit of efficiency. But what of the rest? Where did that all come from? Why did we reduce the happenings within a built space to “program?” Why was it—in the words of a professor of mine—still better to be called a modernist than a postmodernist, despite the shortcomings of the former? And so on.

I repeated the motion with my glass pipe. Above me, not a single cloud; the sky was utterly clear, the air was utterly still. Specks of light, some brighter than others, littered the vast and dark expanse before me. I couldn't name any of the stars, nor could I name any of the constellations the ancients thought they formed. I also cannot recall when or why I picked up the habit of stargazing; my hometown of Mississauga was plagued with far too much light pollution for any celestial body to be seen at night, aside from the moon, and the brightest star. Or planet. I wasn't sure; astronomy was not a subject in which I ever found much interest. I returned the glass pipe to my lips and pulled.

Perhaps I was being overly naïve. Perhaps I wasn't paying enough attention. Perhaps I wasn't as intelligent as I had believed myself to be up to this point. Perhaps these subjects, these concepts, weren't being spoken of, or explained in isolation. Perhaps the contextual relationships of what was being taught was more implicitly explained than explicitly. I wasn't sure.

Another pull. There was much about which I was unsure. I was, however, sure of what bothered me: this insistence that works of architecture can be studied and understood in isolation, that their genius existed solely in the object itself; the altogether vague metrics by which an architectural work was judged to be successful or not; and an eerie absence of discussion on how the end users interpreted, and reacted to, these so-called masterpieces of architecture.

This last thought stuck with me. I was among the many—the probable majority, in fact—who preferred discussing the ideas of architecture, the rhetoric behind and before the buildings, to the actuality and the physical reality of the buildings themselves. But these buildings existed, and had a physical reality with which they had to contend; they were objects to be used by people other than the designer, and in most cases, other than the client for whom these buildings were oft commissioned.

We did design for the end users, didn't we? We were supposed to be designing with an end user-group in mind, were we not? I became increasingly unsure this, which I had previously taken to be fact, a dictum of architecture and architectural work.

I sat up, and relit my glass pipe which, after a few minutes too many of disuse, was out. Another pull. I laid back on the grass.

We were judging architecture by its own merits, almost as *objets d'art*, ignoring altogether the opinions of the people. This increasingly struck me as elitist, exclusionary, and detached. And increasingly I felt this was not in our best interest as architects, as a field, as a profession. If we wanted to build a better world—a goal many of us professed to share, myself included, at least initially—why exclude the people of whom the world was constituted? What purpose was there in treating architecture as a form of High Art? We decried and avoided speaking of the architecture of the mundane; the strip malls, the simple, single-family homes, the glass condos which were being built in droves, driven by a greater demand than for any of the great architectures which we held so dear, and which we viewed with

such esteem. There seemed to be an almost stubborn refusal to engage with any of it, in spite of its utter ubiquity, its complete commonality. Was it any wonder, then, that there was such a stark disconnect between the aesthetic views held by members of the public about architecture, and the aesthetic views held by architects themselves? I thought not; what other outcome was there?

I lifted my left arm over my eyes, and made out the position of the minute and hour hands through the scratched face of my watch. It was nearly two in the morning.

VII

THE PRIVILEGE OF SUBSERVIENCE

Sixty applications through the school resulted in two interviews. A three percent conversion ratio. Not very good, but not surprising; my experiences with job hunting over the previous summer had led me to expect this as a reality moving forward. Some of my peers had better ratios, but most of us had similarly dismal results. Which was to be expected; the vast majority of us had zero working experience, we would be working for just four months, and we were competing for the same positions with students in their third year, who had much more experience, and would be working for 8 month terms—much more advantageous and palatable to employers.

The conversations of weeks prior to the infamous “Toronto Interview Day” centered on portfolio presentation, interview preparation, and how to answer questions; yet another instance where we collectively became unusually and intensely preoccupied with a single thing, at the expense of everything else.

The bus we were to take to arrive at the location of the interviews—1 Yonge Street, in Toronto—was to leave the school at about 6 in the morning, a time I thought was hideously early, but understandable given the usual traffic caused by the sprawled nature of Toronto’s workforce.

I arrived at the bus parked in front of the school just before 6 in the morning, appropriately overdressed; a bright shirt was paired with a dark sweater, which was stuffed beneath a blazer I last wore two years prior at my high school prom. The pants I wore were part of this same prom set. The shoes were new, however. It being November, and cold, the whole was stuffed beneath my old and now tattered winter coat. My peers all appeared to be equally overdressed; donning clothing more formal in their supposed use than any they would ever wear while on the job, so to speak.

I dozed in and out of sleep; I never counted myself among early risers or early birds: in the days of my earliest youth, as my parents both began work before daybreak, at 5 or 6 in the morning, I would have to be dropped off at a babysitter at 5, sometimes even 4 in the morning. My mother often recounted stories of my refusal to eat, or do anything at such early hours, and how it made getting me ready to leave a nigh impossible task. It was something I struggled with then, and is something I continue to struggle with now.

Sleep did not come easily however; the noise generated as the brick-shaped bus struggled to plow through the air at highway speeds was immense; the intake whine of the old and turbocharged diesel engine ahead of me, as it ran near its redline was constant; the enormous and blocky tires which spun beneath me, crashed against imperfections on the road surface, and vocalized these imperfections with a clock-like regularity; the long and exposed iron driveshaft which spun the wheels droned through the plate-steel which acted as the floorboard. And the stiff leaf-springs which supported the body of the bus, and the seats contained therein above the frame meant that every imperfection in the road was felt, as well as heard.

And there was the constant chatter. Researching the firms with which interviews were to be had. Rehearsals of answers to expected questions. General conversation about their moods, how they felt going into the interviews. Efforts to calm the nerves which grew collectively more anxious as we approached the Torstar headquarters where our interviews would be held.

Eventually, I gave up on trying to fall asleep. The maelstrom of noise around me reminded me too much of my home as it was during my youth, and I was reminded too much of the child who, while always in the middle and always in the midst of this storm of noise, never knew how to interject, never wanted to interject into it. I always felt detached, but it was never sure if that was because I was detached, or because I wanted to be detached.

I picked the cheap earphones from my right coat pocket, plugged them into my phone, and placed the earpieces into their respective ears. I slumped slightly into the bench seat, and gazed lazily beyond the window pane. Cars flew by the bus, propelled by the same energy conversions which propelled the bus in which I sat. Buildings scrolled in, then out of view, as the bus rose atop the elevated expressway which passed through the heart of Toronto. The regular double-“thwack” of the bus, from the front and

then the rear axles, marked the locations of the regular expansion joints on the road surface. Strongly syncopated, and strongly arpeggiated electronic music blared through the drivers of my earphones, drowning out the uproar around me, and filling the space between my ears with a rhythm I could follow, a rhythm I could make sense of.

I had removed, detached, myself from my environment, and retreated once more—as I had done countless times before—into the empty palace of my mind. Not for long, however.

We had arrived at 1 Yonge, and disembarked from the bus. Before me, a squarish tower, roughly 20 storeys in height. Each floor was externally divided into five bays on each façade, each bay containing a large floor-to-ceiling window. Where there wasn't window, there was a greyish-brown stone which clad the structural members. On the top, below the parapet, an illuminated sign, one storey in height, spelling out "Toronto Star," in that newspaper's signature blue. The building was altogether unremarkable in my eyes.

The music stopped, and I replaced my earphones into the right coat pocket from whence they came. I made my way towards and up the pink granite steps which lay before and ascended towards the glass revolving doors which marked the entrance of the building.

"Are you nervous?"

I turned around. A classmate. A light brown or mane fell beyond her shoulders, and framed a pale face whose cheeks had been nipped red by the cold air. Top-framed glasses perched upon a short nose. Beyond them, a pair of hazel-green eyes, bright and warm. She was smiling broadly—exposing the top row of teeth—her eyes crinkling as a result.

In response, I offered only a smirk and a shrug. "Kinda," I replied.

We began to speak. About the firms with which we had interviews. About how we were to answer certain questions which were sure to come up. About how we felt. About the firms from whom we hoped to receive job offers when all was said and done. About strategies to calm the nerves which continued to increase. I was drawn into the conversation in which I had no part, in which I wanted no part, the conversation which I had before made efforts to avoid.

She spoke, I listened. We ascended the steps and passed through the rotating door in tandem.

She spoke, I listened. We passed through the lobby and entered—along with a large portion of the class—the elevator, ascending to the 13th floor.

She spoke, I listened. We were herded into a room with too few chairs, and too little space for the fifty of which we were numbered.

She had gotten four interviews that day, the first of which was to begin at 9 that morning, which was by that point a mere five minutes away. I wished her luck, and bid her a temporary farewell as she left the room for another, unknown, where her interview would be held.

I stared into the space where she once stood a while before I retreated into a corner of the room, and replaced my earbuds into my ears. The music resumed, the outside was once again silenced. My first interview was to be in roughly an hour.

I looked around. My peers were much quieter here than they had been on the bus; perhaps they were now finally tiring. Faces were buried in their screens—mostly smartphones, some laptops, fewer tablets—doing what, I may only guess. Were they still researching the firms with which they had interviews? Perusing social media? Working on studio or one of the many other classes we had for which work had to be done?

I reached into the tattered canvas messenger bag which I had brought with me, and pulled out a printed copy of my portfolio. I flipped through the glossy pages, the smell of ink still fresh on the unusually-sized B5 pages. I remarked on my consistent use of a blue—100 Cyan, 25.1 Magenta, 0 Yellow, 0 Key—throughout the pages and throughout the drawings on those pages. I studied the very simplistic nature of those drawings, and of the designs they attempted to communicate. Even then, my design aesthetic would best be described as reductivist and utilitarian; I generally designed without extras, without luxuries. And when I did, I did so mockingly—a double-doored penthouse unit, placed on a pedestal within a mid-rise apartment building, with two Jacuzzi tubs, and three separate balconies, for example.

Why was I doing this? I was already more than intimately familiar with the projects within the pages of the portfolio—a more than considerable

amount of hours had collectively been poured into those projects over the past year. Passing the time perhaps? Was I engaged in this activity because those around me were also engaged in this activity? Perhaps this was how I was dealing with the nerves which I had hitherto denied.

I heard the lady at the front of the room call my name. Mispronouncing, of course. Who would have thought that my mother's desire to give my fairly common name unique spelling would give so much trouble to native speakers of the English language?

I replaced my earbuds into the pocket of my coat, which was left on the back of the chair on which I sat. I stood up, portfolio in hand, and advanced towards the front of the room. As I walked, a few heads lifted from the screens in which they were engrossed and smiled, nodded, or mouthed wishes of good luck to me. Most however, kept their heads down, completely focused.

Another classmate of mine was waiting at the front of the room. He had just finished his interview with the same firm, and was to escort me to the room in which the interview was to be held.

We left the room, and walked into the elevator, and descended. I made polite conversation; I asked how the interview went, what the interviewer was like, if this was a firm for whom he was interested in working. In response, curt answers—well, alright, not really.

We arrived at the room. He wished me luck before leaving.

I knocked the door, which was slightly ajar. A gruff voice invited me in.

A man sat in an unusual position; his laptop was perched on the edge of a deeply-colored wooden desk. The desk itself was placed unusually close to the corner nearest and to the left of the door. In the minute space which remained between the desk and the wall, a black office chair—the chair in which the interviewee was to sit, I presumed.

The man stood up and faced me. He wore an old flannel shirt, washed out and wrinkled around the elbows. The shirt was tucked into and equally old and washed out pair straight-cut denim jeans. The ends, which were tattered, fell onto boots of some kind.

He stood a few inches taller than I. He bore a cleanly shaven face, with prominent wrinkles on the forehead, on the edges of the mouth, on the corners of the eyes—which were an icy shade of blue, and seemed to be set deeply into the skull, under prominent and bushy eyebrows. His thin and arrow-straight hair was parted on the left side. It was a light brown, and greying around the edges. I estimate he was in his 50s or late 40s. We shook hands and sat down.

This gentleman was a senior member of a firm based in Oakville, a city to the west of, and even more suburban in character than my own. The firm specialized in building the same suburban homes which were so decried at my school, the so-called “McMansions” which were contributing to the proliferation of suburbia, and the accompanying toxic sprawl and toxic expansion of “car culture.” The homes built by this firm were not exactly, however, the same typical suburban single-family homes found in suburbs surrounding Toronto on all sides but the south. No, the homes designed by this firm were generally far larger, with far more rooms, far more garage space for far more cars, on far larger lots—ostensibly serving a far wealthier clientele.

That aside however, I had thought this hatred for suburbia—and the typologies emergent therein—was inherent and universal to all architects. To see that there was, at the very least, one firm engaged in this very same active construction and proliferation, was a surprise. The continuing proliferation could neither be attributed entirely to the mysterious and mysteriously vague and abstract entity, “the developer,” nor white-flight, nor decisions made by the American Veterans Administration and Federal Housing Administration to house veterans in the immediate postwar period, nor could it be attributed to decisions made by the Department of Defence to influence future development to mitigate the damage of nuclear attacks, in the aftermath of the USSR’s 1949 nuclear test—if things were further apart, nuclear strikes would do less critical damage; perhaps it was simply a function of public demand, which most of the architectural public had decided, on more or less personal grounds, to ignore.

The interview commenced, and continued largely predictably—I was asked about my competence or lack thereof with certain programs; what I hoped to be working on, and what I hoped to learn on the job; what I aspired to do within the field of architecture; what I wanted my compensation to be. I, at his behest, then walked him through my portfolio. I explained my projects, as I had done so many times previously, before professors at my

studio desk. His arms were crossed across his chest, and his legs were crossed at the knees. He peered intently at the drawings as we went through them, nodding during and after my explanations and pontifications.

We finished, and both leaned back into our respective chairs. There was a silence. A smile curled into view on the corners of the mouth of my interviewer, and he closed his eyes.

“Your portfolio is quite good. However, there’s nothing in there that is at all similar to what we do.” A chuckle followed. “Why do you want to work for us?”

It was an odd question. Did he expect architecture students to be working on suburban homes in their undergraduate programs? Was this something which was actively pursued in architecture schools when he was studying, however many decades ago? Was he even an architect?—that had never been confirmed.

I decided after a couple of minutes, to run my answer off of his question; I wished to work for them because it presented a unique experience—I was unlikely to ever design a suburban single-family home for any reason in my undergraduate studios, and most firms in general, as far as I could tell, didn’t *specialize* in suburban single-family homes. It was a partial lie, of course. I didn’t *want* to work for the firm; I still wasn’t sure exactly where I *wanted* to work. But I couldn’t tell him that—brutal honesty is a huge no-no during interviews and the interview process after all, for whatever reason.

My opposite chuckled and nodded, apparently pleased by the answer. As there were a few minutes left in this interview, he asked if I had any additional questions.

I used the opportunity to ask, why. Why suburban homes? What was the appeal for him, or the firm, there? What was his goal?

He seemed as puzzled by my question as I was by his. The question, to him, was not one of appeal, or higher social goals. The firm specialized in suburban homes simply because there was a vast market, and a vast demand for them. Period. Nothing more.

I was almost shocked. I wasn’t used to hearing such a straightforward answer; I was expecting resplendent rhetorizing, theorizing, an answer

based on morals, or ethics, or aesthetics—non-ethics. To hear such a simple answer; we design suburban single-family homes because people want them, and we want to exploit the demand—I didn't know what to make of it. I nodded, we shook hands, and I left.

I returned to the elevator, ascended, and returned to a familiar scene in the room in which we had all been gathered since the beginning of the day. Though there were fewer people this time around—they had presumably left to explore the city after their morning interviews—those that remained were evermore engaged and engrossed in their screens.

I scanned the room, looking for the classmate with whom I had conversed earlier in the day. She was nowhere to be found—finishing up her second interview, or beginning her third presumably.

I strolled over to the chair where I had been seated, and sat. I pulled the earbuds from my coat pocket, and the music resumed. I slumped in my chair, and pulled out my phone. Sixty-six percent remained of the battery life. I opened the Wikipedia app, and began reading about the Ethiopian Highlands to pass the time.

My classmate returned to me reading about the Lotus 49 Formula One racing car, the first car to use the engine block—the then-ubiquitous Ford-Cosworth DFV (**D**ouble **F**our **V**alve) V8—as a stressed member of the chassis, which was raced from 1967 to 1971, by several greats of Formula One racing: Jim Clark, Graham Hill, Mario Andretti, and Emerson Fittipaldi.

Her three interviews went very well, and all over-time. We decided to get lunch at a pub across the street, where she continued to elaborate on her interview experiences.

We got dressed; I wore my coat over my blazer, tied my scarf around my neck, and placed earmuffs onto my ears—my voluminous mess of nappy hair made finding a tuque that both fit, and covered my ears, impossible; she wore her blue coat, and wore her mittens. We left the building and crossed the street to get to the pub.

Cranes were all around us, extruding condos of various shapes from the ground. They were growing everywhere, like stalagmites in a cave. Cheap

glass adorned the facades of these growing scrapers of the sky, tinting them various shades of blue and green. Other buildings shimmered and were reflected in the glass facades of their neighbours, creating an illusory, multiplicative effect akin to a celestial hall of mirrors.

The roar of engines and tires could be heard from the nearby Gardiner Expressway. Idling engines, the screech of brakes, and the squeal of tires from Lakeshore Boulevard and other adjacent streets harmonized with the noises from the highway, echoing and amplified by the ever-increasing number of condominium towers around us.

Above it all however, was the voice of the classmate who sat opposite me. Not only did she appear to have a relentless desire to share, she had a seemingly equally relentless desire to draw from me, to get me to share. It was odd.

She was—from my perspective—an odd person though, and if not odd, at the very least, quite different: like the majority of my classmates, she came from a family of comparative wealth; she lived in a large suburban single-family home; she had a single sibling to my two; while her home was a host for guests, it was never home to an ever-changing number of vagrants; the neighbourhood she called home was a low-crime neighbourhood; she often went outdoors, and she often interacted positively with others from her neighbourhood; she traveled often and to a vast number of places with her family. I could go on. The net sum of these experiences, this background, was someone who had seen more of the world, who was more willing and interested in interacting with it directly, who had less reason to fear it, and who lacked the paranoiac distrust and skepticism I did.

Why then, was she drawn to me, who was none of these things? I never quite got it, not with her, nor with any of others who expressed different affinities towards me. I was not ungrateful for this—just the opposite. I just thought it odd; here I was, in an environment of individuals so uniformly different from myself, seeking someone who was different from them, and perhaps more similar to myself; they on the other hand, sought something that was just different. We all seemed to want difference. And none of us seemed to be getting enough of it.

We had finished our lunches—mac & cheese, and a burger respectively—and returned to 1 Yonge Street for our final interviews of the day. My final interview of the day, was with the real estate division of a bank. It

went much the same as the first; a series of questions answered, a series of questions asked, a review of my portfolio, and then a farewell.

Thus concluded the day of interviews. The school bus which had dropped us off at the building that morning returned at about 7 in the evening to retrieve us. Half of us remained—the rest having decided to remain in Toronto for the day and for the weekend.

The ride back was not quite as eventful; the engine whined, the chassis groaned, the tires roared, cars flew by, as they did before. However, on the bus, the cacophony of chatter from before was utterly absent. Instead, the regular breathing of bodies at rest, the soft tapping of fingers against glass touchscreens, and quiet whispers among those who had not succumbed to the angel of sleep.

I rested my head on the glass of the window and gazed. Dusk fell away to darkness; the dense buildings of Toronto gave way first to the sprawl of suburbia, which gave away to farmland and artificially replanted wilderness.

VIII

AGAIN

The term resumed, not quite in earnest, the following Monday. Studio resumed, as did our other courses, both mandatory and elective. That Friday, we were notified on if we had received offers or not. I had been ranked by both parties with whom I had interviews; ranked being a sign of interest, though not quite an outright offer—a position would be guaranteed to me only if the individuals who had received offers declined them. The next Monday, the employer-employee pairings were finalized. I would be working at the bank come January.

The term ended the next month, and I was back home in Mississauga. I had decided that I would commute from my home—how bad could it be; thousands do it every day, after all. This decision was also reinforced by my parents—we believed that I could not afford to rent in Toronto.

My first day of work was the first Wednesday of that January. I was woken up by the frantic chiming of my phone-alarm at 5:30 in the morning. I pivoted from laying on my back to sitting, legs hanging over the edge of the bed, being sure to avoid the bunk above me that served as a storage shelf. The sky beyond the thin curtain to my left was a deep blue, suggesting no trace of the sun beneath the horizon. The air was absolutely still, and not an inch of movement could be detected in the bald branches of the maple trees which clustered around the entrance of the apartment building. Not a single sound was heard; no songbirds—all of which were enjoying vacations in the warmth to the south—no people, no cars.

To my right however, beyond the closed door of the bedroom, bright light shone. Loud footsteps could be heard beyond the threshold. I slipped my feet into my slippers, and shuffled out of the room.

My mother was in the bathroom to my left, door wide-open, dressed in her uniform, applying a vibrant red to her lips. I mumbled a good morning before turning right and walking down the hallway, turning sideways to avoid the table and the luggage bags on the right. My father sat on the left side of the couch in the living room, near the glass-topped side-table upon which sat a lamp, an ashtray, and miscellaneous loose papers, bills, and empty envelopes. He sat, legs crossed at the knees, fully dressed in multiple old sweaters, a worn pair of jeans, and thick wool socks. The lamp was off, illumination being provided by the large television on the opposite side of the room, as well as the Christmas tree, which was still up.

I squinted at the TV, eyes still adjusting to the light. CP24 was on, and I peered at the weather. A predicted high of eleven below zero. I sighed heavily, before mumbling a good morning to my father and proceeding towards the dining room—which doubled also as my workspace in evenings—and pulled a not-quite-ripe banana from the bunch. I walked into the kitchen, peeling the banana in its entirety as I did so, and dumped the shell of the banana into the trashcan, before walking back towards the living room. I sat in the middle of the chair, next to my father, who was now putting on his heavy boots, and nibbled away at the banana. The boots, as well as the multiple sweaters he wore, could be argued to be overkill. It seemed that my father never quite got used to southern Ontario winters, despite having moved to the region around 40 years prior.

My eyelids, still heavy, fell over my eyes as I ate. This elicited a chuckle from my father, doubtless reminded of the child who, so many years ago, would sit in that same spot at that same time of day and stare blankly into space, half-comatose. He offered to drive me to the bus stop, which I declined.

Banana finished, I took a shower, and got dressed. I was outside just before 6:30 in the morning. The air was unexpectedly frigid, making me flinch. Mercifully, there was no wind to drive the cold air into and through my clothing. The sky, though lighter than it had been an hour earlier, was still a very deep, very pure, shade of blue. The streetlights were still on, illuminating pockmarked tarmac which had been bleached white by several weeks of regular salting.

I turned left and continued along the southeast side of my apartment building. I passed along the lightly manicured greenspace in its immediate adjacency. This was where many of the illicit to outright illegal activities of the neighbourhood occurred—drug exchanges, fights, forced deaths—

the like; the dense canopy of the conifers provided perfect cover from streetlights, and shrouded the area in a more total darkness, rendering the many security cameras mounted on that side of the apartment building all but useless.

I continued to walk down that sidewalk, to the intersection of Acorn Place and James Austin Drive. A right turn was taken, across the street, and into a new world.

The social housing project which I called home and all that entailed, disappeared and was replaced. Narrow two-storey townhouses on shallow lots first; identical, all clad in the same light-brown brick, and possessors of lawns barely more than two studio-desks in width. These gradually gave way to duplexes, or semi-detached houses as they were referred to now. The lawns grew wider. Cars grew larger, newer, more expensive, more numerous.

Finally, as the hill flattened out and the road along which I walked did a 90 to the left, the semi-detached homes became large, single-family, fully-detached houses. Lots grew wider still. Gardens—yes, gardens—appeared, their unique layouts attempting to display the eccentricity and individuality of the homeowners for any curious passersby. There was more variety in the form and external presentation of these houses as well. Or rather, there seemed to be—bricks changed colors, bricks were replaced with stone veneer, shingles appeared in many colors; reds, blues, blacks, greys.

I passed the fifth house, and came across a paved bike path that connected James Austin Drive, to Laurentian Avenue. The slope was rather steep, and this path had not been salted to the same extent as the road and the sidewalk on which I walked, meaning I slipped on occasion as I walked down.

This new neighbourhood was different. Older. The houses were lower, sporting smaller floor-to-ceiling heights. The roofs were squatter. The trees were larger and taller, the lots much deeper. I continued down this street until arriving upon a main street, Central Parkway. I crossed the street and took a left. Traffic was picking up, the sounds of cars beginning to permeate through my headphones which doubled as earmuffs. I passed beneath a wide bridge which carried the 403 expressway, as well as a newer bridge which carried the Mississauga Transitway over me; the noises from the road to my right got louder, echoed by the suddenly tightened space, and mixed with the tire roar of the cars above. Pigeons ruffled their feathers as much as

they could, roosting on the flanges of the concrete beams which stretched the length of the bridge, and huddled shoulder-to-shoulder in an attempt to stave off the cold. Their heads pivoted to and fro, peering curiously at this black-clad fellow who passed beneath the bridge in solitude.

Both bridges behind me, I turned right and turned towards the bus-stop which was, quite bluntly, an immense structure.

It opened onto a massive plaza; a massive expanse of featureless concrete. Next to it, was an equally large expanse of asphalt, seemingly large enough for a truck to go round without having to engage a reverse gear at any point. Large though it was however, there was parking-space for but 6 cars.

The structure of the bus stop—if it could be called that—towered several storeys in height, first to the height of the bridge, and then two or so storeys beyond that. Though it was supposedly open and in use, it—like many buildings with which I interacted—appeared to me to be unfinished. Dark-grey panels of an indiscernible material clad the base of the structure, adjacent to the parking lot, in a rather ad-hoc manner. Where the panels were missing, fiberglass insulation was seen in the gaps between galvanized steel studs. This same insulation was also visible around the entirety of the parapet structure, which rounded the structure above the extensive glazing above the dark-grey panels. It too was missing all of its cladding panels. I ventured a bit around the structure; there was nothing. No stacked panels, no construction equipment, nothing. Surely the intention was not to leave the structure in its currently unfinished state? No matter.

I walked through the large double-sliding doors into the space, and at once wondered why insulation was used at all. I expected a warmer space; instead I got a large atrium which offered nothing but shelter from a non-existent wind. The space was dark; the only light source on this dark morning was from pot-lights on the roof of the structure, several stories above me. Light-grey cast-in-place concrete abounded and was found everywhere; the floors, the walls, the extremely wide staircase which led to the level on which the buses ran above on the transitway. To the left of the staircase was an elevator in a glass shaft. By all accounts, the space was far larger than it had any reason to be.

I scaled the many steps of the grand staircase, and got to the second floor. Here, the space was much smaller, much of it reduced to a wide landing for the very wide stairs, and much of it taken up by a mechanical system of

sorts which lay behind two large vending machines. There was less concrete here; just on the floor. The side facing the street was clad in glass, some of it colored, tinting artificial light from the outside lampposts in patterns of the primary colors. On every other surface—the walls, the intricately angled, peaked, and hipped roof—a wood veneer, whose lack of grain variability belied its status as a cheap imitation. I let an ungloved hand drift along one of these surfaces. I was welcomed with a gritty texture, not too unlike the cheap plastic on economy car dashboards, or the linoleum floors in a cheap fast-food restaurant. Cheap, attempting to look pricy or premium, summed up the bus station quite nicely.

The vast bus stop housed two other individuals, two very thoroughly bundled women, one gloved hand clutching store-bought beverage cups, presumably carrying some sort of caffeinated beverage; the other hand—ungloved—tapping or scrolling away at a bright screen on a large handheld device. Bags were deep, eyes looked weary.

I peered through the glass, and looked at the LED readout which hung from the overhang of the roof. Seven twenty-two. One-oh-nine express to Islington Station. Due. Except there was no bus. None could be heard or seen in the distance. Which of course, was no surprise; the due-times of the Miway—Mississauga's transit system—were best thought of as suggestions rather than arrival times set in stone.

I paced a while. Peered through the scratched face of my wristwatch. Seven twenty-five. A slight wave of anxiety rushed over me. Though I was not to start work until nine that morning, which was 95 minutes away, it was nevertheless possible I may be late. And while I was never one to hold punctuality to a particularly high standard, I still thought it best if I did not arrive late on my first day.

The two with me began to lift their heads from their screens with increasing frequency. They sighed, shook their heads, and rolled their eyes in disappointment. Doubtless they had experienced needless, unexplained, and unnecessary delays such as this before.

Seven thirty. Headlights were seen peering over the horizon. Wind noise could be heard growing louder, as the un-aerodynamic bus plowed through the air. The laden bus came to a halt, nose diving as it did so.

The single-decker, low-floor, rigid bus was packed; all seats were taken, as was most of the aisle between the seats. As we attempted to board the bus, the driver shouted at his rear-view mirror, urging people to move back as far as possible, which people did, albeit reluctantly. As the bus began to pull away from the stop, I looked around. Many had their eyes closed, taking advantage of the darkness which still lingered outside. Others stared distantly into the same darkness beyond the expansive windows. Some had their heads down, engrossed in screens or in paperback novels. A few ventured a gaze in my direction, seeking my eyes.

Of the people I could see, perhaps a handful were younger—university and college students perhaps. Most were older, middle-aged; reflective of the population as a whole. Mercifully, there were no children or infants present.

I was puzzled. The bus traveled from Winston Churchill Boulevard on the west end of the city-suburb, to Islington Station in Etobicoke, beyond the eastern limits of the city. With such a long route, probably serving what I would have thought to be a busy route—it was one of only two bus routes running to Islington Station north of Square One—why not make use of an articulated bus, especially at a peak time such as this? I was sure that the many buses out of Mississauga and into that very station indicated that there were a large number of commuters who made use of public transit. But I digress.

A hand firmly grasping the many bars which strategically littered the bus, reaching between the many other standing bodies and their many bags, the bus rolled along, stopping occasionally, carrying more and more people, stuffing us like sardines in a can. Fortunately, this bus sported a more sophisticated suspension—independent multilinks—and was newer overall, meaning the ride was both quieter, and less brash than the ride of the old school bus on which I rode a couple of months prior.

Roughly an hour, and a dozen stops later, the bus arrived at Islington Station, and those who remained on the bus—many preferred to exit on the previous stop and walk the five or so minutes to Kipling Station—poured out of the open doors of the bus in a torrent. A few grabbed free copies of the *Metro* newspaper, which was being silently offered by two warmly-clad individuals. It was still dark out.

The swarm raced down the first set of stairs, through the turnstiles, and then down the second set of stairs to the platforms. There was a rhythm to

the motions which occurred to me as far too regular. Habitual. Robotic. Ritualistic. They raced down the stairs, went to their chosen spots on the platform, and stared ahead expressionlessly, advancing forward to the yellow line when the headlights of the train appeared.

Shaken by the wake of the subway train, everyone raced in, immediately scouting for the nearest available seats. They planted themselves, and stared. Aimlessly. Endlessly.

I too soon fell into this same robotic ritual those around me had fell into. I raced down the stairs with the rest. I stood and waited in my usual spot on the platform with the rest. I went in through the same doors of the train when it came, and if possible, sat in the same seat. Most days, like this first day, I read the *Metro* newspaper; on others, I attempted to sleep, lulled into a repose by the lullaby of the regular thwack of the train wheels passing over joints in the steel rails beneath. The individuated carriages swayed gently to-and-fro, buffeted by the compressed air of the tight subway tunnels.

The train passed by several steps, growing more packed as it did. So packed in fact, that getting off at St. George station, where I was to transfer to another train, was a difficult and several-minute process. The journey up the flight of stairs to the platform for the Yonge-University line subway trains was more a slog than a race or a trek. We slugged upwards, four-abreast up a stairway designed for two-, perhaps three-abreast at most. Any notion of personal space had to be suspended, at least for the time being, as we waited for the southbound trains. But of course, this is something we were all used to. Something we all did and all had to do on a regular basis. High-density mass transit. This was the urban dream, after all, was it not? The superior, the necessary, the preferred alternative to mass suburban sprawl, such as it was praught to me. This was of course, an unfair judgement to make; the subways were built at a time when Toronto's population was but a fraction of its current, and the systems had not been updated or upgraded to match or meet the increase in demand. But it was nevertheless a judgement many of us made; we did not excuse the inefficiencies of the systems we had to use, and we did not ignore the comparative miseries these inefficiencies wrought unto us.

The train was, predictably, very packed. On certain days, we would have to wait for the next train, and even the train after that before we could board. And even in instances as these, where multiple, stuffed trains had passed, too full to insert even one additional person, the trains we did get on were

also invariably very packed. Coats and suits were compressed as we squeezed in, many of us giving up entirely on reaching for the many bars which others held for stability. There wasn't much point; it wasn't as if there was any opportunity for movement upon deceleration and acceleration anyway.

Thankfully however, the train soon began to empty as it stopped at, and passed through the six or so stations beneath downtown Toronto before my terminal station—Union.

The train went around a tight turn—the smallest radius turn the wide-gauge tracks could tolerate—from due south to due east, eliciting squeals of protest from the train wheels, which filled the train, and penetrated through the space, piercing through even the headphones I wore. It pulled smoothly to a halt, and the vast majority of those that remained on the train made their way out, snaking between the cracks of the throng which wished to make its way in.

The station was still under construction; there was little room to stand on the platform itself, and bright incandescent bulbs hung freely from the same cables which powered them. There was a persistent earthy smell from the exposed concrete of the tunnel and the earth it held back beyond.

I walked up the steps which were covered in a sort of grooved tile. The concourse above was more completely finished; white tiles covered the floor; a different, shinier tile covered the square columns, walls, and the ceiling. The round columns were clad in an anodized aluminum, and the whole space was brightly lit with linear fluorescent lamps.

Outside was still dark however, light still being provided mostly by streetlights and headlights, drawing me up the final flight of stairs and into the fresh air of downtown Toronto.

Behind me was the surface-rail-station-portion of Union Station, the third building to carry that name, and the first in its current location; a proud limestone building, and one of my favorites in my admittedly small experience of the world.

It was large, but not tall, as was the trend in building in Toronto at the time. It was not a pure color, not a white, or a black, or some primary. It was a sandy brown, the native color of the Indiana and Queenston limestone with which it was constructed. This limestone had been stained darker in parts,

both by years and years of rain and other precipitation—the building was completed in 1919, making it nearly a century old—but also by years and years of exhaust: coal and diesel from the trains; diesel, leaded gasoline, and finally, unleaded gasoline from the cars which crawled along Front Street, immediately to the north. The building had acquired a sort of patina over the years, wearing its history, and the history of Toronto on its sleeves.

I wouldn't call it an elegant building; it lacked the lightness of touch and the airiness of material of something I would refer to as elegant. That's not to say the building was ugly however; I would simply refer to it as robust before referring to it as elegant. The colonnade at the centre featured 22 Tuscan columns—smooth, unfluted stone monoliths which were simpler and more reductive than even the Greek Doric columns from which they were derived. The capitals of these columns were completely bare and largely unornamented. Atop these columns was a simply ornamented entablature. Simple, square, geometric patterns, which could have been Moorish in origin, could be seen beneath the ensemble, if one stood alongside one of the columns. But otherwise, it was bare. The levels of the architrave, of the frieze, and of the cornice revealed themselves via changes in depth from the plane of the face. On the central portion, etched in the capital letters of a serif font, the name of the station, the main railways served at its construction, and its year of completion—Union Station: Erected by the Toronto Terminals Railway Company; The Canadian Pacific Railway and Grand Trunk Railway; and MCMXIX respectively.

It had a sense of permanence, of continuation, of stability which stood in contrast to the light airiness of many of the newer buildings being erected all around it. It was also a building I admired because it stayed out of your way when you wanted it to; it never demanded attention, it wasn't raised in any way on a podium above the people for whom it was built to serve, it wasn't built out of ostentatiously priced materials, nor was it covered in exemplary craftsmanship and sculpture which begged for closer inspection. Though it was obviously built by wealth and power—what architecture of any significant scale isn't—it never shouted this reality to its users. It seemed to exist with the awareness that regular folk—those without wealth and power—would make use of this building for years to come.

Of course, none of this could be seen at the moment. Most of the façade was covered in a series of white tarps and scaffolding as part of a multi-year, multimillion—multi-billion at this point perhaps; I had read that this project was being plagued with cost overruns—dollar restoration project. The tarps fluttered lazily in the air, moved by their own wake drag.

I moved ahead, and turned left towards the easternmost wing of the building, home of the office in which I was to work for the next four months. I ascended a flight of steps, past a few construction workers who were having their last cigarettes before their shifts began, and walked through the tall, brass, double-doors which marked the entrance to this wing of Union Station.

The interior was altogether fairly unremarkable. Large windows would have allowed ample natural light, if there was any natural light to be let in—that morning, and for much of the mornings of that winter, there *still* wasn't. There were many light browns and beiges to be found in the sparse interior finishes. A pair of plush chairs were placed opposite each other with an ornately carved wood table between them, all near the single elevator.

A tall, cleanly shaven, bald and smartly dressed man paced the lobby haphazardly. Security, presumably. After a brief inquiry, he informed me that while the bank owned all floors of the building, the area concerning itself with architecture—the real-estate department, he called it—would be found on the top floor. So up I went.

The elevator doors opened to the sixth floor of the building, and I was immediately slammed with the putrid smell of hot tar, inciting a reflexive wince. A migraine—of which I suffered chronically—could be felt flaring up, above and behind the right eye. Lovely.

I stepped out, from the tile of the elevator onto the carpet of the office space. Large fans could be heard whirring, and seen spaced at regular intervals along the makeshift corridors between the desks. I reckoned the fans were in place to deal with the smell, though I could not surmise how they would help at all.

The large and expansive office was mostly empty, which was not too surprising given that it was still a bit before 9 in the morning. Light conversation could be heard emanating from one direction, the click of keyboards could be heard emanating from others. I took some time before my official start to explore the space a bit more.

The room seemed to split into two halves; one half—which contained the kitchenette and the washrooms—was arranged into a maze of individuated cubicles. This was where the “accountants,” and the “marketing team,” worked, though some “architects,” bled into this space. Most of the

individuals who worked here were older, and most were portly, and not in the archaic sense. Most dressed in suits, regardless of what the actual temperature or weather was outside, necessitating a constant conditioning of the air to a perpetually consistent temperature, one which I always found just a bit too cold.

The other half of the room was more openly planned; the desks assigned to workers formed sets of two, with a shared table between the two. These desks were messier than the cubicles of their mathematically-inclined counterparts inhabiting the other half of the office, covered in sketches, rolls of trace-paper, and other unidentifiable miscellaneous sheets of paper. While also of the older variety, they appeared to be younger than the accountants. They also dressed less homogeneously, less monotonously, less consistently; sweaters, shirts with odd patterns, flannel pants were seen from time to time.

They were also more vocal. While the only sounds to emanate from the accounting-wing of the office were the silence which harmonized perfectly with the regular striking of fingers against keys, and the occasional one-sided conversation as the accountant-types spoke with whomever it is accountant-types spoke over the phone.

The old woman with whom I had my interview, Barbara, sat awkwardly at her desk; her chair seemed to be set at too low a height and so, instead of looking straight ahead at her screens—one of which was oddly oriented vertically—she peered up, neck craned at a 45 degree angle.

She possessed two tics which I had not picked up on during our interview; the first, was a regular, minute, back-and-forth shaking of the head. I compared the motion mentally to the motion of the eyes as they glide along the lines of text on a page. Her second tic was the continual rotation of the mouse in counter clockwise ovals, a motion she did before making every selection with the cursor.

It was fascinating to observe; this woman, who looked to be of the same generation of my father, who was born during the war, CAD-ing more quickly and efficiently than I had ever seen anyone do so before.

I unceremoniously cleared my throat to alert her of my presence behind her left shoulder. She jumped a bit in her seat, and sighed heavily upon seeing it was just me who had caused her fright. I was shown to my workspace,

which was directly across from hers, and predictably, it left much to be desired.

My space was more cubicle-like than the spaces in which the other architects and designers worked. For one, it was far narrower—two people would have struggled to fit in this space, were they to be seated shoulder-to-shoulder. There was a single screen—which looked to date from the previous century—as opposed to the two which were standard elsewhere. There was also a column immediately behind the chair, and in the middle of the workspace, meaning that to get to the chair, I had to squeeze sideways, between the column on one side, and filing cabinets on the other, to get to the desk. Again, none of this was surprising in the least; the runt, temporary worker could and should expect no more than a runt, temporary workspace. Still, the difference in relative levels of luxury were more stark and extreme than I had been expecting.

As I took my bag off and made myself comfortable, Barbara, who had revealed to me that she would be my supervisor, handed me a set of pamphlets and showed me a website link where I would have to walk through a few things. She informed me that much of my first week would be spent reading the pamphlets and doing “the online thing,” as she had called it.

I bent down and powered the computer on; the fans, laden with dust, whirred loudly. The old screen eventually and very gradually sputtered to life, revealing a Windows XP start screen. I looked around; of the computers I could see, they all seemed to be using Windows XP as well. The use of such an old operating software—Windows XP was by that point nearly 15 years old—initially struck me as odd. I then recalled something an acquaintance of mine from middle school, who was at that point studying computer sciences at Brock University, told me; Windows XP was still, by far the most secure and most stable of the operating systems released by Microsoft at that point in time—surpassing Vista, 7, 8, and 8.1, which had all been released since. I don’t recall the metrics by which this security and stability was measured—or even if I had ever asked—but as he was the one studying computer sciences, which was one of the few subjects in which I never professed having an interest, I took his word for it. It also provided a neat explanation for why this bank, Canada’s third largest by deposits and market capitalization, was still using the same operating system with which I had my first exposure to personal computers several years ago; security and stability did seem like important qualities for the operating system used by a bank in the management of its billions of dollars in assets.

Taking hold of the very sticky, very old mouse to my right—it still used a ball, as opposed to an exposed laser as was the standard by that point in time—I perused through the programs installed on the computer; Internet Explorer was the one internet browser; the adobe suite version was CS4, which was released in 2008; SketchUp was the lone modeling software, and its version was 7. I made a mental note to inquire about the presence of these, let's say...legacy...versions of programs on my computer: were they there simply because my computer was old, or did this represent some sort of office-wide standard?

Outlook was opened and emails were checked as Mozilla Firefox was installed. I had already received two; one, containing the link to a series of workshops—the aforementioned “online things” to which Barbara referred—I was to complete over the following week; the other instructing me to open an account with the bank if I was to receive payment. Noted.

Firefox now installed, and made the default browser, I clicked the link in the first email, and was brought to a page that appeared to have been even older than the machinery on which I worked. I received a prompt to allow Adobe Flash to run, and upon granting that permission, I was greeted by many white, smiling faces, all smartly dressed in simple suits, all with pristinely maintained and pristinely engineered, straight, white teeth.

They were everywhere; on the page explaining dress-codes, they were there, smiling in their ethereal netherworld of white purity. On the page explaining and describing the history of the bank, they were there, ever present. *You should be happy to be here, to have this opportunity*, they seemed to whisper at every possible instance.

There were further webpages and flash-animations explaining the “perks”—which were, if I recall correctly, provisions mandated by law; a certain amount of time off, definite overtime pay beyond a certain point, et cetera. And there were webpages on the topic of certain things, the applicability of which I questioned. Things such as the ethics of trading with the money of clients; and information disclosure; and practices enforced by the bank which were intended to eliminate, if not at the very least reduce financial mismanagement and malpractice among employees. All things which, in my young, naïve, and relatively unfettered mind, had nothing to do with architecture, nothing to do with architecture, or design.

“Don't worry, we all have to do this.”

My head panned to my left, to the direction of the voice. A tall black woman stood, smiling warmly in my direction. She held in one hand a large cup of very aromatic coffee, and in the other, a large bottle of what I assumed to be water. She must not have recognized me, and surmised that I was new there. We exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes, before she went on her way; she worked within the accounting wing of the office. Our future interactions over the following four months were similarly short, she waking me up on occasion as I dozed off in the first mornings.

My first day ended. I left the office, the sun had just about set; the only light I had seen that day came from the artificial fluorescents which illuminated the office from above. I rejoined the throng of workers outside, walking into, and out of the subway station lurking beneath the Union Station superstructure. People moved briskly; motivated at once by the brisk cold, and by their drivers, their comforts—their homes, their hobbies, their partners, their children. Faces were stony, gazes determinedly fixed forwards, unmoving, emotionless. So very unlike the faces on my screen that day, and every day for the rest of that week. Outwardly at the very least, they did not appear to be happy to be here, or happy to have their opportunities. They wanted an end, a reprieve, to return to and to spend as much time as was possible with their drivers, their comforts.

I wondered if I would ever come to view my life, my existence the same way.

I arrived home shortly before 8 in the evening that day; this would be among my earliest of return times—on most days, I was home by nearer to 9.

My family was all there, each in their own world; my father, on the left side of the green couch, engrossed in some sort of book—normally one which he had read dozens of times before; my mother, on the left side of the couch, either perusing homes she would never come to afford on her iPad, or engaged in intense conversation with a coworker or a friend over the phone; my younger brother, in the computer room, glass door slid shut, watching YouTube videos on car-modification, or playing a video game of some sort; and my “aunt,” seated on one of the two chairs which faced opposite the couch, and engaged with the entirety of her being in active debate with the CNN pundits on the TV screen at the front of the room.

As I removed my headphones, and my scarf, and my boots, and my coat, and the jacket which I wore beneath my coat, and the knit sweater beneath

this jacket—my parents preferred to keep the interior temperature at a balmy 27 degrees Celsius, regardless of the exterior temperature—they each individually greeted me, and then promptly returned to their original activities. My mother and my father would, every now and then, inquire about my day, but aside from this inquiry and my customarily short answer, there was rarely any further interaction between the inhabitants of the apartment.

I walked beyond the living room into the kitchen, opening the many lids of the many pots and pans which were left on the stove, still in use from the 1980s, and sporting exposed electrical coils as was the fashion at the time, whether they were in use or not: there was little other space available in the kitchen—or elsewhere for that matter—for their storage. A lid was lifted from a pan on the forward right burner: chicken drumsticks, bathed in their own juices, spices, and chopped vegetables. The pot on the rearward right burner had rice. Chicken and rice. Again. This meal was a bit of a staple here; it was cheap, easy to cook, filling, and offered a near limitless variety of flavor, depending on the seasonings and their concentrations used. I didn't complain; it did the job and tasted good.

I filled a bowl partially with rice and chicken, making sure to drizzle the whole generously in gravy before turning to the glass dining table to eat. I pushed my laptop aside—the dining table doubled also as my work-desk—before eating in silence. I was the only one that used this dining table; the other inhabitants of the household preferred to eat there where there was entertainment; my parents ate on the couch, where the TV was found; my younger brother ate at his computer desk, in the solarium.

Food finished, I washed my bowl, as well as the other bowls, plates, and other such tableware in the sink. I thereupon returned to the dining table and returned my laptop to its prior location. I checked my watch. It was nearly 9. If I wanted a reasonable amount of sleep, I'd need to be asleep by around 11. A chuckle. Two hours to myself. Lovely.

And thus went life, more or less without variation, for the following four months. An hour to wake up and prepare followed by a two hour commute in the morning, an eight hour day, a two hour commute in the evening, two hours of free time, and seven or so hours of sleep.

The others I saw on the one-oh-nine bus. The throngs I saw on the Toronto subway trains, heading eastbound from Kipling station, did they live similar

lives? Did those without the wealth to live in the city, nor the wealth to engage in the luxury of personal transportation, did they all embody a similar existence? Was I being childish in thinking this way of life, this distribution of time was somehow wrong, or unjust? My parents—neither of whom had ever had to dedicate four hours of their days to commutes—thought it was completely fine; weekdays were the days of and for work after all. Recreation could and should be left to weekends.

And besides, as they often said, retorting to my gradually increasing bemoaning as I felt myself growing evermore hollow, my life becoming ever more consumed by work, what did I care for free time? As I myself had admitted before, I was never one to *do* anything. Even on extended holidays during my schooling days, the most time-intensive activity in which I would engage would be the endurance races on *Gran Turismo 4* for the Playstation 3. Most of my time was spent reading, and did I really need more than two hours in a day to read?

It was hard to argue with or against. Perhaps I had been, as my mother had put it, been around too many “other” people while I was at school, and had subconsciously adopted their desires, their values. Perhaps. They did seem to have lived more full, more interesting lives, while I was never convinced that I had.

Actual work, much as I bemoaned its consuming qualities, was in and of itself, not terrible. It was however, altogether unremarkable. Milquetoast. My days were spent working more with the members of the marketing team than the architects with whom I shared the office space. I produced renderings for them—renderings meaning Photoshop alterations of photos of existing bank branches—where I was generally tasked with plastering the bank logo on every blank surface; every wall, every window, every parapet. I also spent some time, less time, designing interior layouts of future bank branches in SketchUp.

Every Friday, there would be a meeting, between a team of what I had termed “accountant-types”—accountants, businesspeople, marketers, advertisers, so on—and architects and erstwhile designers. Every Friday, the businesspeople would lambast my designs—they were not mine of course, even if I had thought them up, they were Barbara’s—for being too radical, for being too expensive, for not having enough advertising; there were too many blank faces, too many empty walls, not enough examples of the name of the bank, in case, perhaps, the clients were worried they had walked into

an entirely incorrect bank. My designs were too different from what the clients were used to, and would scare them off into the very familiar arms of an entirely different bank.

I was normally present during these meetings, as I was the note-taker. I was often puzzled by their words, as were the other designers. We wanted “interesting” spaces, “attractive” spaces, spaces where clients would want to linger, spaces about which the clients would speak—brag, I dare say—to their friends, to their families, to their colleagues and other peers, to encourage a conversion from their current banks to this one.

Of course, none of this ever worked. We couldn’t objectively define an “interesting” space, or an “attractive” space, of course because there is no objectively interesting or attractive space, despite what we may want to believe, and despite what we are told and taught. We whispered sweet nothings as far as the accountants and other businesspeople in the room were concerned.

This isn’t to suggest that what the businesspeople said made any more sense; that familiarity, mundanity, repetition bred a sense of comfort and safeness, which is what brought people back to repeat business. It was as nonsensical an assertion, if not more so.

And that was the problem with this. With design. With architecture. We were all clueless as to what constitutes “good” design, the public and architects alike. No one knew for sure exactly what an “interesting” or “attractive” space meant, beyond their own desires, and the consensus of their immediate peers. It hadn’t ever been tested, it hadn’t ever been studied, even on a fundamental level. As far as I was aware, no one had done a rudimentary survey of this, to establish even a rough, more general consensus. And how could we? Trying to objectively define inherently subjective terms, such as “interesting” or “attractive” was an endeavor doomed to failure.

I was taught over the course of the first year-and-a-half of my education, for example, that good spaces have naturally sourced light. Windows, skylights, clerestories. It’s a sensible assumption—and it is just that, an assumption. Studies have shown that hospital patients recover more positively and more rapidly in spaces with more natural light. Vitamin D is good—most glass blocks the wavelength of light required for the body to synthesize vitamin D, making this a moot point, but I digress. Our ancestors, before we had

developed permanent shelter, before we had architecture, dwelt outside, exposed to the sun. And perhaps most importantly, the peers with whom I was receiving this education all agreed; good spaces have ample natural light.

But I for one, never seemed to enjoy natural light. If I could draw the blinds in a room, or close the curtains, I would. Natural light was hard to control, produced glare on reflective surfaces, and introduced much unwanted heat into my normally balmy home. I suffered migraines, of which one trigger was intense light. There always seemed to be too much of it. And I know I am not alone in this sentiment; the people of the world are too numerous for this opinion to be entirely unique.

And of course, I cannot design the way I wish to design, with less of an emphasis on light, because of my personally avowed belief that natural light is just *slightly* overrated. It would be short-sighted and presumptuous of me to do so, to presume that there exist enough people, enough potential clients who want spaces like this. This however, never appeared to stop architects from wrapping their beliefs in rhetoric, and presenting them to the world—or to their clients at the very least—as objective. But I digress.

This battle of opinions in the meeting room of the office attached to Union Station—and a battle of opinions is all it was, all it could be—generally ended universally in favor of the businesspeople, the accountants, the people controlling the money. They were our clients in essence, and the final decision was made, after all, by the vice president of the real-estate division, a haughty accountant himself.

That however, never stopped the architects and designers from trying. We continued to propose radical designs, exposed wood joists, aquaria, exposed brick and exposed stone, so on. Materiality. Texture. Difference. And they were shut down at each turn in favor of the same things. Acoustic ceiling tiles. Drywall. A slightly off-white paint. Grey carpets. Sameness. Homogeneity. Safety.

I soon began to wonder why the designers on my wing of the office continued to try for difference. I was able to surmise—after 4 meetings and a month of being in the office—that the design ideas the designers wanted to implement, the design ideas those on the other side of the office referred to universally as “radical,” would never be approved, and would therefore never see the light of day.

AGAIN

It seemed to be taking a toll. Explosive outbursts, bemoaning the mundanity of the work, the rote repetitive nature of it, were on occasion heard from the design-side of the office. They felt like workers on a production line, confined to a single task, with so little variation that they felt their minds—their creative engines—wasting away, atrophying from disuse.

Such outbursts were never heard from the cogs on the other side of the machine.

IX

RECREATION *OR* TOOLS

Weekends were spent at my ancestral home, the sixth floor apartment of the second of the Weaver's Hill buildings of Acorn Place, Mississauga. Weekends were the days the elder members of the family referred to as days of recreation. Recreation of course meant chores. Errands. Doing the things which needed to be done, but which no one had the energy nor the time to do over the course of the week.

These days began early, if not quite as early as the weekdays. The first person to awake would prepare breakfast for the rest, and we would each, individually thereafter, go about our usual morning routines. My mother, who could not drive—and, for various reasons, refused to learn—was shuttled either to her hairdresser, on the north end of Brampton, another suburb located to the north of Mississauga, or her church, also located in Brampton, but not as far north.

My mother, despite her best intentions, had found herself in an odd predicament in the household—if it can be referred to as such—which she had helped build, though this predicament was no fault of her own.

She had come from a poor family, poor enough that to refer her economic situation as lower-middle class would not only be euphemistic, but entirely inaccurate. She had lived her first few years in a neighborhood of central Kingston, Jamaica; Jonestown, a neighborhood she called a ghetto. She lived with her mother, her father, and an older sister in a small, single-bedroom home. Her parents died in a car crash when she was six, leaving her and her sister to live with their grandmother in the northern part of the rural St. Elizabeth parish of Jamaica, who—if the words of my mother, and her descriptions of her grandmother are to be taken seriously and at face value—did not seem entirely enthused about having to raise children *again*.

She left St. Elizabeth, and Jamaica entirely shortly after she had first child at the age of 20 in the early 1980s, for Queens, New York, where she lived a few years, before, for reasons not entirely known to me, moving north to the Toronto area.

In the midst of this instability, this turmoil, this near constant displacement, she turned to religion, to the church, for stability, as did much of the island nation of Jamaica, which boasts more churches per unit of area than any other independent nation on earth.

My mother then, was a devout protestant Christian; she went to church as regularly as she could, read the bible as regularly as she could, and generally tried to live by and instill Christian values into those who populated her circle. She appreciated the stable community accorded to her by the religion more than the dogmatism of the religion itself.

The same could not be said of the rest of her current household; my younger brother, though he described himself as Christian, never cared to read the scriptures of the bible, or to attend services at all; the same could be said of my older brother. I was a self-ascribed deist—the universe was created by something other than itself, but that that thing did not intervene in this universe—having become disenchanted with Christianity at a young age. My father was the same.

He too had grown up in Kingston, Jamaica, though his family was upper-middle to outright upper class. He was the eldest of 3 siblings: two sisters, and a brother. His father after the war had become harbor master of the Kingston Harbor, one of the largest in the Caribbean. The newfound wealth was used to build a large home in the suburb of Havendale which was nestled on the mountainside which bordered Kingston on the north. They employed servants to tend to their gardens, to clean, to wash diapers—disposables had not yet been invented—to clean, and to do many of the more labor-intensive chores around the house.

He had to however, leave that life. His first son, was both deaf and mute. And Jamaica did not, at the time, have any means or facilities by which deaf and mute individuals could be taught; there were no schools for them. So he moved to the United States in the 1970s, landing first in Miami, before moving north to the coast of Virginia, and then New York. America was not a fine place for people of color in the 1970s. It had been worse, of course, and was better, but it was still bad, objectively speaking.

And as a man of color, he was no doubt discriminated against while in the states. He spoke fondly of the periods before moving to the U.S., and spoke—albeit less fondly—of his time moving away from the U.S. But America remained curiously absent from the self-narratives he told.

He had heard that Canada was a better place for people of color, people such as himself. So he moved north in the latter part of the decade. And it was better, though still not ideal. He could not secure work in the area in which he had trained, and received most of his education: accounting, being told repeatedly that “people would not respect [him],” or that, “[he] would have to know how to deal with people.” He decided to drive. Trucks. Buses. Subway trains. It got him away from the people that he had been told would not respect him, that he had been told he did not know how to deal with.

My father lived a different life now, many years, and many miles removed from the concrete, white-stucco and vine-clad home in Jamaica. There was no large, single-family house. There were no servants. There were no gardens or grounds which needed to be tended to. He sat next to me, in the driver’s seat of his car, a 2005 Honda Accord sedan, a far less glamorous car than those in which he would have sat in his youth.

The radio had stopped working several years ago. There was no way to connect your phone to the car in any way. The transmission sported five forward gears and one reverse, each of which had to be engaged manually. There were three pedals. The mirrors needed to be adjusted manually. The intake and exhaust manifolds were independent of the engine block. The gauges in the dashboard were all analog, save for the odometer. The parking brake was still actuated by a manual lever with a mechanical linkage to the rear drum brakes. The throttle pedal was still linked to the throttle with a cable. The steering was powered by a hydraulic pump which was powered by the engine. It possessed a tape-deck, in addition to a CD player. It lacked all the safety features—lane keep assist, collision mitigation assist, hill-keep assist, other such assists—that had all but become standard by that point in time.

When underway, all that was heard was the whine of the intake, the growl of the exhaust, the roar of tires, the whoosh of winds beyond the side mirrors, the mechanical chatter of valves opening and closing, the clunky engagement of gears. Imperfections in the road surface, deformations in the tire sidewall, the lean of weight over the front wheels through corners,

could all be felt through the steering wheel, as these changes at the level of wheel translated minute changes in pressure in the hydraulic system. It was a wonderfully anachronistic, wonderfully simple thing.

Much like my father. He still used a flip-phone, because all a phone is required to do is to make and take phone calls, something a flip-phone does perfectly well. He had managed to go most of his then seventy-three years of life without using a keyboard, or a mouse, or for that matter, a personal computer in any capacity, because they were not necessary. He still filed his taxes by hand, because it worked, and there was no need to change that which worked.

He spoke longingly for a life which he had never lived. He spoke often of wanting to move away, to raise animals. Pigs. Chickens. Pigeons. To farm. He wanted simplicity, peace, and yearned for it, nearly to a fault.

On these Saturday drives, from grocery store to grocery store; from one vast parking lot to the next, our voices became the music which would have erstwhile blanketed the mechanical sounds from the nearly-analogue car around us.

We were very similar in many respects. We were both quiet people, preferring first to observe and listen than to speak and declare. We both appreciated and preferred simplicity in the things we used, in the spaces we inhabited. We both lived lives of necessity, unable—or unwilling—to unjustifiably engage in luxuries. We were both fairly leftist in our political ideologies: he fashioning himself an anarchist in thought; I, more of a socialist. We were both fond of cars, of internal combustion engines, and of the personality that emerges in the presence of immense complexity, where these cars were concerned. In light of our origins, and our current situations, we were both very interested in inequality, what it looks like, what it does, how it is manifest, why it is there to begin with, and if something should be done about it at all.

He backed into a parking spot at a Food Basics, and instructed me to take two reusable bags from the rear seat, to accompany us into the store. He went ahead and fetched a shopping cart, which I pushed through the store.

Ceilings were dozens of meters above, sporting exposed open-web steel joists, painted white and often sprayed with something; fireproofing, I presumed. Exterior walls were built with concrete masonry units. There

were no windows, light instead being provided by the many fluorescent lights which hung low, just beyond arms reach above us. These spaces were intensely air conditioned—I am almost inclined to refer to them as refrigerated—to preserve the exposed vegetables and fruit and other produce for as long as possible.

My father did his shopping methodically; prices on flyers were compared, and different stores would then be visited for different things. Ocean's for meats; No Frills for fruits; Costco for larger items that were to be bought in bulk; Food Basics for microwaveable TV dinners and vegetables; Freschco for baked goods.

He was generally silent during these excursions, sporting a gaze so distant he seemed to be staring into an entirely different time, instead of off to the distance. On occasion, he would quip about the price of one thing at one location in comparison to the price of the same thing at a different location. "Ninety-nine cents a pound for bananas? When I can go to No Frills and pick up the same bananas for fifty-seven cents a pound? Can you believe it? And then when no one buys the expensive bananas, they'll throw them all out. Wasteful," he'd say with a disappointed and dismissive shake of the head.

I generally offered no response to these quips; I didn't know how to respond or with what. Was it believable that stores would price the same things differently, instead of as cheaply as was possible? Of course. I wasn't sure why anyone would expect anything else. Was it wasteful? Of course. But low prices didn't eliminate waste, and didn't preclude the possibility of waste. I wasn't sure why anyone would think anything else.

Instead I watched. I watched the other blank faces pick their fruits, bag their vegetables, argue with their children about why they couldn't buy or couldn't afford the ninety-seven cent Mars bar before unloading their carts at the conveyors before the cash registers. I often had the same argument with my parents in years past; my mother always resisted, my father always caved.

We unloaded our cart. We paid. I bagged the groceries. My father returned the cart, and retrieved his quarter. I carried the bags to the car. He drove off. Down a main road. Off to a side-road. Into another parking lot. Another cart, through a vestibule, and into another supermarket. More groceries. More bagging. More of my father's quips about produce prices. Rinse. And repeat.

Sure, the many warehouse-type buildings that housed these various grocery stores and other department stores had different identifiers. Different exteriors, different colors; Food Basics employed a generous use of a deep, pine green on its façade, on its signage, on the small tags which listed prices of products within the store, and on the metal framing systems which constituted the aisles of product; Freshco preferred to use a lighter, brighter green; No Frills made ample use of yellow; Costco had its blues and its reds.

Beneath the different colors, the buildings were all the same of course. Same tall ceilings, same white, exposed open-web steel joists, same concrete masonry units, same fluorescent lights. In addition to their accent colors, these buildings differed only in their scale; Costco being the largest and tallest, Freshco generally being the shortest and smallest.

On only the rarest of occasions, my father and I would venture into Square One, the largest mall in Mississauga, and one of the largest in Canada. He generally avoided it because he didn't like crowds—in spite of the crowd that was normally present in his home. It was surrounded by acres upon acres of parking lots and wide roads, much of which was often rammed full for most of the day with cars.

The mall was impossible to describe. Even as I type this today, I cannot remember how the structure was clad, what style the cladding tried to replicate, or the materials used; there was too much going on. The mall was a disjointed, discordant cacophony of colors, of materials, of styles, of smells. Curtain wall for an anchor-storefront here, precast concrete covered in crawling ivy for a different anchor-storefront there, painted plaster for some other store elsewhere.

The interior was similarly discordant. There was white tile throughout, and large skylights provided ample sunlight at regular intervals. There were cut-outs in the floorplate, also at regular intervals, which revealed the floor below. Many of the storefronts sported tall glass, with tall glass double doors, to better reveal the precious merchandise inside and to entice and encourage consumption. There were many lights, in addition to the sunlight being fed in via the skylights.

There were many smells: the sweat and odor of the many people who leisurely perused the interior streets of the mall; the many perfume and cologne booths; the plastics and vulcanized rubber of shoes and clothing; the particularly synthetic smell of makeup stores; the aroma of spices drifting up from the food court on the bottom floor.

There were many noises, shoes skidding on the tiled floor; the endless maelstrom of voices of the hundreds upon thousands of people who shopped; the radio music which was just loud enough to be heard over the voices, but quiet enough as to not drown them out entirely.

When my father had bought everything he thought the house was missing—groceries, cleaning supplies, clothing if someone needed new shoes, or a new pair of pants—we returned home. The car was navigated into the underground parking garage where it was stored in times of disuse, and the many bags were unloaded, to be brought up the seven floors to our home.

The rest of the day was mine. Naturally, it was mostly spent at home, sleeping or reading some article—about physics, the nature of happiness, millennial burnout, dating, or consciousness—on the internet on my laptop; I was normally too tired after shuttling several heavy bags of groceries up the elevator, or the stairs, to want to do anything else afterwards.

Occasionally however, friends, and acquaintances from high school would invite me to hang out with them. Normally this meant going to a Tim Hortons, and talking over our hot beverages of choice until close—two or three the next morning.

Or, we'd go to a shisha bar, talking over billowing shisha smoke until close—which was also normally two or three the next morning.

Or we'd go to someone's house, and hang out in their basement, chatting, making music on Ableton, playing video games, watching sports, and smoking until late hours of the night—often two or three next morning.

This was architecture. This is all it amounted to for me, for us, and for doubtless countless other suburbanites.

There were other buildings of course; the famous Monroe Towers being the most obvious and well known example to those not from Mississauga, but those were condos. And unless you lived there, or knew someone who lived there, you had no reason to visit, and no way to experience the building beyond what it offered on the exterior—which, to be frank, wasn't much.

Wide, multi-lane, higher-speed roads; vast parking lots; mundane, insultingly simple supermarkets and department stores; repetitious single-family houses. This was our built fabric. Our built form. The embodiment of our values, as some urban theorists would say.

The other suburbs I had visited, to which my parents took “vacations,”—Snellville, Mt. Vernon, Central Islip—presented different, American flavors of the same experience: wide streets, vast parking lots, small or non-existent parks, repetitious single-family houses.

My parents abhorred cities; they were far, difficult to get to via mass transit, offered nowhere to cheaply park if we were to drive, crowded, and expensive. So we seldom visited them.

My father especially, never saw the appeal of cities, never understood why so many younger people wanted to move to cities. Dwellings, if they were to cost anything—and he believed they shouldn’t—should be priced according to what the dwelling itself offered. Buying a small condo in Toronto for a million dollars or so, therefore made no sense, when one considered that the same amount of money would get you a large house with several acres of land out in the middle of nowhere. Sure, the city had restaurants, and bars, and museums, and galleries, and performance spaces, and arcades, more services and other things that the middle of nowhere had not, but my father was 77. He no longer had an interest in doing any of those things. If he wanted to visit a museum or gallery, or watch an opera, he would happily drive there, tolerate the city for a few hours, and then retreat to the quiet solitude of comparative isolation. Cities contained too many caveats to make any sense, as far as he was concerned: the noise, the price, the people, everywhere, all the time.

I had, over the course of my undergraduate architectural education to that point, been taught to think of suburbia, and the typologies inherent therein, as non-architectural. Yes, it was built form, it was urban, but it was not architecture; it was seldom designed by architects—no self-respecting architect would ever willingly design such wasteful, mundane, uninspired... things...such as they were often present in suburbia universally. Whether or not of course architects can ever design in the real world *willingly* is another question entirely.

And even if the suburbs, and the single-family homes, and the department stores, and the supermarkets, and the malls, even if they are designed by

architects, what they design is still not architecture. It cannot be architecture because the resultant built form is acultural—deprived entirely of any semblance of culture. And it is acultural because it is ahistorical—deprived entirely of any link to history.

It was a curious assertion, based on an even more curious train of thought which I heard repeated by many of my peers—especially those who had lived more travelled lives, who had visited *actual* cities, who had come from, or visited, or otherwise spent time in places which were old enough to accrue the prerequisite history required for a culture. Because, this of course, is how culture works: culture is not culture and cannot be referred to as such until it is old. Culture then, I presume, must operate much the same way as the laws which dictate when an individual moves from being a minor, to being an independent; there is a very specific moment of time, a very specific amount of years before which a culture is not a culture, and after which, it most certainly *is* a culture.

How does culture work? What is culture anyway? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defined it as, “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time.” Under this first definition, it also said, “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or an organization.” Another phrase, “the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic.” And, “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.” No mention of history, no mention of time. All a culture appears to need—according to this dictionary—to be a culture, is a bunch of people doing the same thing or believing the same thing, or living the same way, which suburbs very obviously do. Anthropologists and sociologists may have a different definition of culture, one which includes history as a prerequisite; I don’t personally know any anthropologists or sociologists, so this dictionary will have to do.

I didn’t like Mississauga, nor did I like the many other suburbs which my parents seemed to enjoy so fondly; they sprawled too much, lacked destinations, didn’t seem to reward wandering. I had no car, and could not ever afford a car, in spite of my absolute love for them, which meant that getting around was more difficult than it ought to have been. It trapped me more than I would have liked. It contributed to my ever-increasing internalization. What else was I to do?

And of course, there are legitimate reasons for why one might abhor suburbs; their inherent low-density necessitated personal automotive transport, which necessitated more roads, which increased distances between things, which further reinforced the need for personal automotive transport—it was dreadful negative-feedback loop. And the whole was, and is, entirely unsustainable as a model for urban development.

But this was only ever mentioned as an aside: the main issue was not that suburbs were unsustainable from an energy consumption, or spatial, or urban, or social point of view; the main issue appeared to be this aforementioned lack of culture. If only we had studied the great cities, the great cultural progenitors and cultural centres, of Europe, of the Mediterranean Middle East—all cities which were far older, which had been founded, had grown, developed, matured, well before the current and near-current context of cheap energy, neoliberalism, consumerism, and a relentless promotion of suburbia as an aspirational lifestyle (but again, I digress)—we would have avoided the current mess that is Western suburbia. Of course. Our problem—my problem—was a lack of culture.

I am reminded of a conversation that occurred in the apartment, years ago. My father, my mother and I were seated on the couch, nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. Culture came up as the topic of conversation, I don't exactly recall how or why. My mother said something, between hearty chuckles, which for some reason, stuck with me.

“I don't even know what Jamaican culture is. We have a specific way of cooking, which is not even universal among Jamaicans. And we have our music. But beyond that, what else is there?”

X

AGENCY, *OR* A LACK THEREOF

My first co-op continued and ended. I returned to Cambridge as another term of school started. And ended. I was back in Mississauga, back to commuting four hours a day to work in Toronto, for work at a different firm, one which specialized in adaptive reuse and in restoration. This firm was a smaller one, and I spent much of my time not doing anything at all to do with adaptive reuse, or with restoration. This soon ended. And I was back in Cambridge. Chugging away.

Unlike many of my peers, I always came to look forward to when I would be back in Cambridge; working late nights, reducing buildings to their absolute essentials, spending hours tinkering on a 3D model of a building in Rhino, fussing over its structure, over its presentation, its massing, its relationships—or lack thereof—to its surrounding context. I came to enjoy the hours spent injecting more and more atmosphere into renderings, into envisioning and imagining new spaces, letting the palace of my mind spill, in digital form, onto paper for others to see. I looked forward to the nights I would spend in Victoria Park, smoking and stargazing. I eagerly awaited the freedom of being to wake up and sleep when I saw fit—barring of course, the infrequent classes. Cambridge for me, was freedom. Independence.

Another term ended. And off I went to New York to work for four months. I lived on the border of the Bronx, and Mount Vernon—a city in Westchester to the north—and worked at a firm that focused primarily on the high-end interiors of the multimillion dollar penthouses of old brownstones littered around the lower parts of Manhattan, which itself was located in midtown, one block north of the Empire State Building.

I came to think of work as a blip, a chore of sorts that needed to be done, both as a means to recharge my funds, and as a necessity required by the degree with which I hoped to eventually graduate.

I never quite enjoyed work, and was never quite sure why. Perhaps it was the routine of having to wake up at the same time every day, the routine of commuting, the routine of checking emails, of working, of commuting back home, of sleeping at the same time, and repeating the lot again. Perhaps the lack of intellectual and creative freedom was a bother for me. Perhaps it was both, which collectively reminded me of the stifling lack of freedom, the mundanity, the rote repetitiveness of the suburban city which I had to call home.

This co-op term soon ended. I told myself, half in jest, that I would not return if Trump was elected in the upcoming election. He was.

Many spoke of the co-op terms providing its own kind of freedom; the freedom to have a “life,” to do things outside of school, beyond architecture, to pursue interests, hobbies, to see and interact with other people. It was not as intense as a school term often was, and had no reason to be as intense.

I wanted this intensity however. This single-track mind of mine was at its most content when it engaged with the entirety of its being with a single task at hand, and when it had reason to do so. A “life” was an interesting proposition, and it was nice at times to engage in other interests, to explore. But I repeatedly found myself unable to throw the entirety of the weight of my mind behind any of these other hobbies, or interests, or explorations. And so I repeatedly grew bored of them.

Another term began. And intensified. Resin fumes, the smell of stagnant air, of unwashed bodies, and unwashed clothing mixed in the still air of our studio space. Spray paint could be heard being applied to a model, or to a board. The soft hiss of insulation foam being cut and carved by a hot-wire cutter, a distinct smell emitting from the characteristic smoke of burnt polystyrene. I switched to a diet consisting almost entirely of fruit—fruit being easier to prepare than actual meals, while still remaining fairly healthy. I loved this. Being able to ignore everything else, being able to disregard my sanity, my health to a degree, in the pursuit of that which I was working on.

And yet, I felt myself growing more indifferent about the architecture itself. I cared increasingly little for the aesthetics and appearances of my designs,

and I cared increasingly little for the outward presentation of architecture in general. This is not to say that I grew more unopinionated, or less opinionated about the question of beauty or aesthetics in architecture—I still had my preferences, and these preferences were borne out in the consistency of the language of the forms I designed. I simply found myself less willing to argue or defend any one position as far as my aesthetic direction or choices were concerned: I thought what I thought, and it was completely fine if you agreed, and equally fine if you disagreed. These preferences amounted to mere opinions after all, and I had little reason, if any, to believe that mine were better than anyone else's.

The buildings mattered less for me now. I gradually found my horizons lifting, to larger questions. Why did architecture matter at all? Where did mere building end and architecture begin? Could such a distinction be made? And if it could be made, was such a distinction even useful? I found myself wanting to engage in the processes of architecture, rather than architecture itself. What was the thinking that went into architecture?

I was gradually losing faith in architecture's ability to do anything. The social, quasi-utopian ideals of modernists and of their successors struck me as increasingly short-sighted, increasingly shallow—and how could it be anything but? The fathers of modernism and their successors waxed poetic about building for the workers, building collective spaces, removing the alternatively “elitist” or “barbaric”—depending on if one referred to Gropius or Loos—iconography which had come to plaster capital-A Architecture in the period since the fall of Rome. But yet none of these individuals were workers. None of them had come from working-class families. None of them ever spoke to, or consulted those of the working class when they built. And so I came to question my ideals of architecture, and what I wanted architecture to accomplish. Good architecture alone wouldn't and couldn't prevent the further perpetuation of individuals such as me; individuals who have come to resent their homes, resent their neighbourhoods; individuals who feel a profound detachment from their environment, and who feel an inability to attach to any place at all. Architecture could not eliminate outcasts. Architecture alone would not and could not solve the social ills of the disadvantaged; minorities, those of lower income, of lower social status or class, the homeless.

This was increasingly reinforced by my experiences in various workplaces. The firms, the offices, the ateliers—the frontlines of architectural production and architectural conception—never spoke of architecture in terms of what

it did *socially*. If that was ever the point, it was no longer the point anymore. If there was anything, any word, any remotely esoteric concept applied to architecture that had nothing to do with the formalism or materiality of the architecture, it was *culture*. Architecture was valued more for its cultural than its social contributions. And even then, this was something which was mentioned rarely at best. Architecture was simply a request by a client, and had to serve the purposes outlined by said client. Architecture was nothing more.

This was a pessimistic, if not sobering and naïve thought. I loved architecture for the near infinite ideas contained within the processes which led to the conception of the objects, and the near infinite possibilities and routes accorded by these many ideas and these many processes. But that didn't matter. All that mattered in the real world—in the world in which I would eventually have to engage fully, without the comforting retreat of an academic environment, and my mind—was the deterministic, fixed, end product.

Another co-op term began—the longest of my undergraduate career, at 8 months—again in Toronto. This time however, I had endeavored to live within the city. I lived alone, in a basement unit of a large house located in an older suburb of Toronto, which had been amalgamated into the city itself. The bachelor unit sported very low ceilings; anyone taller than my 5'8 would have found their heads rubbing the acoustic ceiling tiles constantly. The two windows were tiny, located where the walls met the ceiling, on the west side of the apartment only. The bed, the deep and very plush armchair, the desk, and the television all sat on a very deep, very shaggy carpet. The kitchen and bathroom were on tiled floors. Overall, the space was small, tight, and dimly lit. My mother described the unit as shabby; my father, as was his usual, offered no comment.

I quite liked the place however. It was cave-like, a sensory-deprivation chamber of sorts, a perfect retreat from the noise of the world outside.

The immediate neighbourhood provided a similarly reclusive experience from the bustling chaos of downtown, which was just a few streets and a few subway stops immediately to the south. The trees which lined the streets were old and matured; they created wooden arches over the streets, their leaves filtering the sunlight beautifully during the summer, rustling and muting the tire-roar of cars and buses as they rushed up and down the main streets to the east and west; Avenue Road and Yonge Street respectively.

The lots were narrow and deep, the individual and large single-family homes set back from the street rather substantially. The cracked and cratered sidewalks were generally empty when I roamed them; late nights, and early mornings to get to work. Nary was a soul seen or heard, excepting the schoolchildren and their parents who walked to the local public elementary school in the mornings.

The firm for which I worked over the course of these 8 months was more well-known than any of the firms for which I had worked prior. Their work was primarily public and institutional in nature—libraries, community centres, university buildings, government edifices, et cetera. It was also, at about 50 or so people, the largest. These people were generally younger than the individuals who worked in the firms I had worked at previously, though I was still, by far, the youngest at the office. They dressed casually, far more so than those at the firms I had worked previously. Conversation was also generally more lighthearted; their children, their vacations, something interesting they saw on a show on the television or on Netflix, future vacations, comparatively comedic mishaps with their spouses, the like. This was an easy crowd to get along with.

And the office was an easy one to like. A slight flight of steps marked the threshold from the outside to the inside. Koi fish swam idly in a square pond to the left, a manufactured waterfall-feature acting to silence and hide the sounds of the outside. The office itself was large and expansive, spreading across the entire bottom floor of the building in which it was located. There was a grey carpet which covered very modicum of floor space, muffling and muting the otherwise heavy footsteps of the designers in the office. An orangey wood was exposed in the beams, which spanned beneath the wooden joists of the exposed ceiling; stainless-steel ductwork snaking beneath the beams, and around the wires from which the linear fluorescent bulbs were suspended. Piping for the sprinkler system, painted an uneven coat of brilliant white paint, slashed across the roof, making no concessions, no alterations to their directory for any other system. The same orangey wood of the beams was exposed in the many posts which supported the roof, spread at regular intervals around the office. Walls were painted either the same brilliant white as the sprinkler system, or a hitherto unseen bright shade of green. Large windows and large clerestories surrounded the office. So, while we generally did not have much to look at—the windows looked out onto the street, onto a parking lot, and onto the backsides of adjacent buildings—the office was usually well lit with the natural sunlight of which designers are naturally so very fond.

The office was organized roughly into five sections, each separated and identifiable by their different physical configurations. Nearest the front entrance, in 4 rows, a group focused on pursuing competitions. Further in, beyond the phone rooms and the sample-room, organized in four open clusters of four desks each, and where I sat, were those tasked with the conceptual and schematic design of projects for which we had already been awarded contracts. Directly to the south of this section, a group of 6 desks, focusing primarily on the master planning of new cities and new subdivisions to be built within the oil oligarchies of the Middle East—the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, among others. To the east of the former section, organized in two rows, were those tasked with details; wall details, bespoke connections when needed, and other such construction documents. And finally, the section which lined the east wall of the office was tasked with marketing; award applications, submitting projects for publication in various architectural publications.

We got on fairly harmoniously. We went out for drinks, to bars, to eat out, to clubs. We made the effort to live “lives,” as some would have put it, to convince ourselves that it did not in fact, begin and end with architecture. We sought to prevent the consumption of our selves by our work. This created a sense of community, and in me, a sense of belonging which was stronger than that which I had experienced in previous places of employment.

Consumption could not always be staved off however. Many of those in the office, especially those working primarily on competitions worked outright ridiculous hours that would best be described as absurd; upwards of seventy hours a week. Weekends were often worked, and appeared almost to be an expectation, something we all knew we would have to do on occasion, eventually, here and there.

On our excursions outside the office, conversation would often find itself back on the subject of what we were working on in the office, how our projects were going, challenges and annoyances we faced, as far as our clients were concerned. And there were many. My coworkers often complained of the lack of vision, of an inability, or unwillingness to see what they saw in the potential of potentially beautiful architecture. They were too concerned with upfront costs, with speed and with expediency of construction. Or so my coworkers claimed. Architecture was not something we could escape, despite our best efforts.

“If I had known this would be so difficult, I would never have accepted the job,” was something my project manager, and one of the partners of the firm had told me, on one of these late nights, as we were taking a “break” from work in a bar—he was hunched forwards, both hands coddling a cold glass of Alexander Keiths, opposite me, reclined in the seat, and twirling a finger around the rim of a shorter glass, containing ice cubes, rum, and Coca Cola therein.

It was a situation with which I tried to sympathize, and with which I could empathize somewhat. Architects—or specifically, the architects with whom I worked, and with whom I interacted on a more-or-less daily basis at this point—thought of themselves as a distinctly unique group of individuals, forced to work with and among people who, in their collective perception, just could not understand them at a fundamental level. As a black male from a low-income background operating within a field of individuals of nearly universally greater wealth, and also of fundamentally different experiences, I could relate. Wholeheartedly.

Where the complaints and grievances, and the situation as a whole was lost on me, was the language which was generally used to speak of those outside of architecture, without a command of the “language,” or “values,” of architecture. While I generally saw the issue, for lack of a better term, as one of differences—differences in perspective, in education, in values, in background—which together combined to make the language and desires of the layperson mutually unintelligible with those of architects, my colleagues appeared to be of the belief that it was one of *inferiority*. The clients did not see what they saw, did not understand what they understood, had misplaced values and priorities when compared to theirs.

Was it not possible, that the reverse was the case? That the *architects* did not see what the clients saw? That the *architects* did not understand what the clients understood? That the values and priorities of the *architects* were the ones which had been misplaced? It never seemed to have been considered. Or at the very least, the consideration wasn’t ever vocalized.

In any case, perhaps the more pertinent observation made, was that these people—my coworkers—cared and cared greatly. They truly believed not only in the services they provided to their client, but to the world at large. In spite of the conditions of which they often complained, and of which they often threatened to leave, they persisted and persevered. Where I was generally more than happy to compromise on my aesthetic ideas, my vision,

where architecture was concerned, and did so without much of a fight—I perceived my role as that of facilitator to my client in bringing *their* vision to fruition, and not my own—my colleagues at work and elsewhere fought. They had to. Their ideas were the best ideas, and it was their moral and ethical obligation to at least attempt to get these ideas out in the world.

I could never quite understand it, this innate desire held by so many of my peers to defend and fight for their architectural beliefs. I had gradually come to believe that architecture itself was without agency, and on its own, could not amount to much, and could not—on its own—accomplish anything; I had seen nor experienced any architecture of any sort at all until that point that would have led me to believe otherwise. Perhaps my colleagues had, in some other, older, far-flung city.

XI

ROME: ARRIVAL

Immediately following this, my 8-month co-op, was a term to be spent at the school's off-shore campus in Rome. It provided a unique opportunity for us to study architecture, the Western Canon of which we studied at school.

Though it wouldn't be my first time on the other side of the pond, in the Old World—I had spent a week split between both Brussels and Marseille the June of that year—this would be my first time spending an extended period overseas. Just under ninety days, to be exact.

People—my peers, my family, my coworkers, my friends within, and without architecture—all inquired about my presumed excitement for this new experience, this new adventure as some had referred to it. I could not with honesty say that I was; it as a city, like the countless many others found the world over. Its buildings were different, to be sure. Older. And the people spoke a different language, and presumably dressed differently, owing to their largely warmer and drier climate. But otherwise, they were the same as people elsewhere: children played, teenagers rebelled, adults worked, and the elderly reminisced. The prospect of spending three months in Rome did not fill me with the combination of giddy happiness, mild anxiety, and intense curiosity, the combination of which I had come to know and term as excitement.

While I was not excited, I was curious. I was curious to experience the city as an idea in one of its most original forms. I was curious to see the architecture first hand, to see if the experience would fill me with the same awe which had inspired so many others over the years. I was curious to see what exactly made Rome so great, aside from its age, if there was anything else, any other reason for its greatness.

My flight was to leave at 7 in the evening. My parents and my younger brother accompanied me, and my two bags of luggage to Pearson International Airport. Before I crossed the final threshold—the security checkpoint—they all hugged me long and tightly; they wouldn't be seeing me for three months, after all.

I waited in the very aptly-named waiting area, as I gradually downed a glass of overpriced white-wine, after having removed the metal bits from my person for the security scanners.

I did not like planes very much. As I hadn't the prerequisite wealth to seat myself in the more generously acquainted sections or classes of planes; I was regulated, both by necessity and by monetary limits to the 'economy' or 'base'—for the less tactful of airlines—classes, which were always uncomfortably cramped. The idea of flying at high speeds several thousand meters in the air, away from the safety and security of the ground was also something I found consistently unnerving.

Flight, was however, regardless of my protestations, the only affordable way—affordable of course being a relative term—to cross that great widening ocean, the Atlantic, which separated the new and derivative from the old and original.

I was seated in a window seat of the rearmost row of this plane, a large, wide-body jet—a Boeing 777 if I recall correctly. The curvature of the rear of the fuselage meant that instead of nine-abreast, this final row was just seven-abreast, meaning I had more room than would have been expected given the price paid for my ticket. Despite it nominally being a window seat, I did not have a window; the same curvature and tapering of the fuselage towards the rear which gave me some extra room meant that I could not have a window.

To my left unfortunately, sat a large man whose extra weight spilled over his seat and his armrest and into mine—as appeared to be customary—and who spent the eight-odd hour flight watching various iterations and installments of various *Batman* series.

The flight was long, and I tried to rest, to sleep, but could not, even after the lights of the fuselage had been dimmed to a soft, blue glow; the very upright seating position, the frigid air-conditioned air which blasted directly onto my head, and the ever-present roar of the turbofan engines, all conspired to

make sleep a nearly impossible task, as far as I was concerned anyway; the unsynchronized snoring which was eventually faintly heard over the engines served as proof of that.

The sun rose again, and as it did so, the western coastline of Italy came into view through the window assigned to the row ahead. Rome's airport was not located within the city proper, but several kilometers to the west, nearer to the shore. The plane banked slightly to the left, and a towering thunderhead came into view. The plane circled it a few times, each circuit bringing us closer to the billowing behemoth.

The plane plunged into the cloud. I braced, clenching the armrests tightly, expecting turbulence from the violent updrafts and downdrafts which were sure to be found in this cloud. The plane began to buck slightly as the pilots took manual control to land the plane.

We descended beneath the base of the cloud and through a heavy rainfall which obscured the wet runway beneath us. The mechanical and hydraulic systems actuating the control surfaces of the plane could be heard operating frantically, shuffling drag and lift from one side to other, as the plane slowed and fell gracefully from the sky. There was a slight bump, then a jerk to the right as the plane landed and slowed on the runway. There was less drama than I had come to expect, given that we had just flown through and beneath a thundercloud.

The process and procedure of the exiting the airport was followed, without much fuss. I was soon left, with my two bags of luggage, in a long, corridor-like space. People bustled all around me, names were called, directions and orders shouted in a language which I presumed was Italian.

I looked outside. Beyond the glass, beyond the vestibules, beyond the sliding doors were many higher-end cars parked in parallel next to the broad walkway which bordered the building on this side. Rain still came down in sheets. Generally impeccably dressed men stood outside these cars, some holding white signs with place-names scrawled onto them in red or black ink. Some boldly approached individuals who waited outside, who generally brushed them off with a dismissive shake of the head or wave of the hand.

These were the shuttlers, or taxi drivers who moved people from the airport to the distant city of Rome proper. In Canada, at Pearson, the airport most local to me, these shuttlers opted to drive Lincolns and Buicks. Here, they opted for BMWs and Mercedes.

I approached a shorter man with coarse black hair which was greying around the edges. His wrinkled face sported very thickly-rimmed glasses, and an equally thick and coarse mustache. Though he was not shabbily dressed, he did not look as sharp as the others; his pants sagged more, his shirt sleeves were longer, and the vest he wore was slightly baggier, perhaps to hide the bulk and belly which come nearly universally with age. He leaned forward slightly, like a heron, as he slowly paced to and fro, in front of what I presumed was his car, a black BMW 3 series wagon.

I don't recall why I went to this man as my chauffeur, and not any of the many others who lined that walkway. Was it that his slightly shabbier dress made him more approachable? Was it his eyes, which reminded me of the eyes of my father, both in their extremely distant gaze, their feeling of warmth, and the undefined edges of the iris, the limbal ring of which had been eroded by age? Or was it the complete lack of forwardness and the comparatively complete reservedness with which this man presented himself, when contrasted with the others who aggressively pursued travelers to shuttle away from the airport?

I asked him in broken Italian if he would be able to drive me to my address in Rome; I had taken an intensive Italian language course my last term in school—which was by that point roughly 8 months ago—and while I had begun to grasp the written part of the language, speaking it still escaped me, as it so often did even in my native tongue. He responded in the affirmative, with his own version of broken English: I suppose he surmised that this was my mother tongue based on my accent and the slowness with which I spoke the words which were foreign to me. We went back and forth for a bit, gesticulating with our hands where necessary to communicate whatever it is we needed to get across to the other.

We eventually came to an agreement, and he helped me load my bags of luggage into the carnivorous trunk of his car. We went both to the left side of the car—the driver in front, myself in the rear—and buckled ourselves in. He fired the car up with a push of a button, and pulled out of the airport area along the dizzying array of ramps which carried cars into and out of the airport from the various highways which surrounded it.

The man asked me to repeat where I wished to be dropped off.

“Dodici, Vicolo de' Cinque,” I said, doing my best to roll the words together as was appropriate and to emphasize the proper syllables.

“Ah. Trastevere,” the man replied nostalgically, holding the second syllable of the word for an extended period of time.

The ramps ended, and we found ourselves on an open stretch of straight, flat road. The seating position of the rear was oddly low, which, combined with the high beltline of the car, made looking outside through the side windows more difficult than I was accustomed to. The view ahead was fairly clear, however.

Endless green meadows rolled away on either side of the road. Coniferous trees—mainly a pine I could not immediately recognize—occurred here and there at irregular intervals. The grey and rain of the skies quickly gave way to clear blue and a scorching Mediterranean sun. The speed signs were different from those in Canada and the United States. These were circular, encircled by a thick red ring, and had a single number in a thick, black, sans-serif font in the middle. 90. Ninety kilometers an hour was the posted speed limit.

But we were surely doing more than ninety kilometers an hour on this highway. It felt as if we were travelling at ninety miles an hour at the least, if not more. The wooden posts to the right, which supported the length of steel acting as a guard between east and westbound traffic blurred into a single, transparent brown mass as our forward velocity continued to climb.

The driver began to swerve around traffic as volume on the highway picked up as we got closer to Rome. His left hand remained on the steering wheel, at the 7-o’clock position, his right operated a rotating dial on the center console which controlled menus on a large screen mounted centrally on the dash. Climate control, vehicle chassis settings, and others were adjusted on the fly, all while the driver’s eyes never left the road in front of him. Air conditioning was turned on. Sport mode was engaged, the springs stiffened, throttle response sharpened, the mechanical roar of the car grew louder. And our speed continued to climb.

The operatic Italian singing which poured into the cabin from the speakers was replaced with Italian speech. A conversation. The menus of the central screen were replaced by a single scene. Two men in suits were engaged in conversation, ahead of a blurred scene depicted with a brownish hue. The whole aesthetic of the scene now on the screen brought to mind episodes of *The Young and the Restless*, and *General Hospital* my mother would often watch on evenings after work. I felt my eyebrows furrow, and the corners of

my mouth droop into a frown. *This man was watching a TV drama on his car infotainment screen, while traveling at extralegal speeds.* I closed my eyes and shook my head. Dangerous as the situation seemed to me, there wasn't very much I could do, trapped as I was as a passenger.

Our forward speed eventually plateaued, and then dropped, as the car neared Rome's historic core. Smooth asphalt and tarmac gradually gave way to flattened cobblestones, which gradually gave way to a rough, black cobblestone—*sampietrini*—made of roughly hewn, brick-sized blocks of basalt. Streets curved here and there, more and more, almost haphazardly. Buildings grew progressively older, covered in the soot and dust of age, in tightly packed rows and columns, casting the streets in a perpetual shade, before exploding apart, leaving large, bright, and densely peopled piazzas in their wake. There ceased to be any separation between different levels of traffic, as I had come to expect from my life in North America; there were no separate sidewalks for pedestrians, no separate lanes for cyclists, no separate roadways for motorized traffic. They all shared the same space, weaving amongst each other, seeking space, and creating their own individualized pathways. Everyone was reduced to the speed of the pedestrians, who walked and positioned themselves as if they alone owned the roads between the buildings.

The road had narrowed to just over a single car in width, and we pulled to a stop ahead of a browning building, three-storey building which had earlier been an orange or a yellow. Tall, vertically oriented single-pane glass windows were arranged infrequently, but regularly across the top two storeys. This building, as well as its neighbors were unadorned, wearing graffiti and an assortment of cables pinned to their faces as their only accessories. Streetlights, suspended proud of the faces of the buildings by ornate ironwork occurred sporadically. These buildings, while undoubtedly several centuries old, were almost modernist in their barren presentation. Above, a simple clay roof sloped down onto overhanging wooden joists. The sky was a pale blue, bleached by the intensifying September sun.

My chauffeur stepped outside his car—being careful not to open his car door too wide—and helped unload my luggage from the car. I passed him fifty euros, and puzzled him when I declined to accept the change he attempted to return to me. He passed a business card, and offered his services for when I would inevitably need a ride back to the airport. He then sped off, leaving a dark-grey cloud of soot and smoke in his wake.

I faced the building which had the number 12 over its only set of doors; brown, tall, narrow, and paired. And oddly, centrally-placed brass doorknobs.

There was a buzzer system to the left of the left-most door, containing a list of five names. The name of the individual from whom I was renting the apartment was not among the names listed. I looked around—hoping I suppose—that she would be among the many, the throng of tourists and locals who strolled to and fro along the streets and in between the buildings. Of course, she wasn't. I returned to the door, to the list of names, and checked again; perhaps I had missed it. But I hadn't.

I checked my phone, which had been in airplane mode for the better part of the past day. Was she going to call me? Was I supposed to call her? I had given her my estimated time of arrival, and we both had our phone numbers. I deactivated airplane mode, and my phone immediately began to ring.

“Look up,” a bright and unexpectedly deep voice called out with an accent. The call was then dropped.

I followed the instruction and ventured a gaze skywards. Near the corner of the building, on the second storey, a woman in a vibrant red sundress had waved vigorously with her left hand in my direction. Though she had just dropped the call, she still held a phone to an ear with her right hand.

“I'll let you in!” she screamed down at me, before disappearing from the open window. Shortly thereafter, the locks and bolts of the front doors of the building could be heard in motion, sliding and unlocking. One of the doors was pulled inward, and the woman stepped out. She was tall, easily towering head and shoulders above me. Her skin had been naturally tanned a deep golden brown, presumably from years of exposure to the fierce Mediterranean sun, and sported, in addition, many freckles. She had a piercing gaze, and fierce hazel-colored eyes, the corners of which sported very prominent, very deep crows-feet. Her head was capped by very curly, dirty blond hair which was held in a loose ponytail. Behind her, a very dark, and a humid, earthy scent. A broad vending machine selling an assortment of items—energy drinks, soft drinks, condoms, tampons, pads—was to my right, tucked away in a corner, providing the only light in this lobby space.

I was led up a flight of stone steps, worn to a dull polish by the many steps many took over innumerable years. There was a dull light provided by a small lightwell at the head of the unusually long flight. The lightwell was completely open—amounting to little more than a miniscule courtyard at the center of the building—and the voices of other building residents could be heard, intermingling and rising through the gap between the walls serving as the lightwell.

A heavy door with many locks on its right side marked the entrance to the apartment. The lady from whom I was subletting the place—Alessandra was her name—pushed the door, leaning in with her shoulder and heaving audibly. The door eventually swung to an open position.

“The door’s really heavy!” she turned and told me, wide smile ever present on her lips. I offered a smirk in response.

She proceeded to lead me around the apartment. Most of it was painted a bold and cool red, close to magenta. The ceilings were very high, ending in deep, exposed, wooden joists which emerged as if by magic from one wall and disappeared into the next, and had acquired a dark brown patina. The kitchen was tucked into a corner between two walls in the main space. There was a sink, and a stove, but no oven. Where the oven ought to have been, a mini-fridge was instead. There were shelves above the whole, and on those shelves, a few plates, a few bowls, and a few pots.

I was shown the living room. A futon and two fans were the only furnishings, which, I was told, was because when the futon was folded out, it filled most of the room. Fair enough.

“A prince used to live here!” she told me excitedly.

I nodded. Was I supposed to be impressed by that piece of non-information?

The bathroom was next. From left to right, clockwise around the room: a sink, a radiator, a toilet, a bidet, a washing machine, the shower stall, a water heater, and a water tank. The walls and ceiling were coated in several coats of white paint, obfuscating any and all sharp edges, a phenomenon with which I had been familiarized during my stays in Mount Vernon, New York. The washing machine didn’t work—though she would be very appreciative if I fixed it for before she returned—but everything else in the bathroom worked, as she put it, “excellently.”

The final room I was shown was the main bedroom. Double doors, with frosted glass lites opened into the roughly pentagon-shaped space. It was painted the same near-magenta red as the rest of the apartment. A flat queen-sized bed was tucked into one corner of the room. Upon this bed sat far too many pillows. At the foot of the bed, along the longest wall of the room was a dresser, and a mirror, built in a dark wood. There were other pieces of furniture in the room; a side-table, a lamp, a fan, a bin filled with towels and clean linens. I was instructed to not rummage or do anything to contents of the drawers, the contents of which belonged to her daughter. I nodded affirmatively.

I was led back to the living room, where I was offered a container of raspberries and saltine crackers, to “replace the electrolytes [I] had lost on my long flight,” a statement I found slightly puzzling. I however accepted my host’s offer of hospitality, and took the container of raspberries—despite not being not at all a fan of raspberries—and the saltine crackers, which I gingerly nibbled.

“You’re from Canada, yes?” she asked, quite suddenly.

“Yes.”

“What part?” she asked, more intently now.

“Toronto,” I responded after some hesitation—I gathered that most outside of southern Ontario would not know of Mississauga.

“Would you be able to get me a place there? A job?”

I squinted, puzzled. What was she asking me?

“What kind of job?” I wasn’t sure why I didn’t tell her the truth: no.

“I teach at Montessori schools,” she said. “Italy’s really bad. There are no jobs for anyone here anymore. I need to leave. And I’ve heard Canada’s a really good country. Much better.”

She proceeded to pull a small picture from the small purse slung over her left shoulder, and leaned over to show it to me. She was in the photo smiling. Her left arm was held protectively around the shoulder of a shorter, younger girl—wearing a white and blue sundress—who was smiling timidly.

The girl's skin was darker, though the darkness had not been acquired by exposure to the sun. Her eyes were a bright brown, and her frizzy hair, a darker brown, was unkempt in a rough afro.

“This is my daughter. They're not very good to us here.”

I nodded, I imagine sympathetically. While I could not say first-hand what being a person of color was like in Italy, having only been in the country for a few hours at most, I could relate very strongly to the palpably overwhelming hyperawareness of one's own difference, and the unease brought to oneself by this hyperawareness, even if it isn't amplified or confirmed by outsider comments.

She repeated the question, an intense look in her eyes. “Will you be able to help me get a job in Toronto?”

I avoided her gaze. “I'll see.” I still couldn't understand why I did not just tell her no. Did I feel I owed her something?

The smile on her face returned, wider than ever, crinkling the crow's feet to hitherto unforeseen depths. She then proceeded to pull out several sheets of paper which were stapled together and folded into a small square, from her purse.

“I was destined to go to Toronto,” she declared as she unfolded the sheets of paper, a statement which caught me off guard. What the sheets revealed to me was arguably stranger still.

The front page had as a title, in a capitalized serif font, “GEOGRAPHIC ASTROLOGY.” Immediately beneath this was a Mercator projection of the world that looked to have been scanned from a book. Many lines crisscrossed the outlines of landmasses on this map; time zones were indicated, as were select lines of latitude and longitude. Several curved lines, whose origins and termini clustered around specific points on the map—cities, most probably—featured more prominently. Five-pointed stars were placed roughly in the locations of Toronto and Rome, with their respective names featured prominently in a smaller version of the serif font in which the title was written. These were the only names on the map.

“See? My ley lines all align in Toronto!” she exclaimed, tracing her finger back and forth between Rome and Toronto.

Ley lines? I had read about them in fictional novels; lines which carry supernatural energy between important places all over the globe. But I had been sure that these lines here were just flight paths.

I looked at the woman next to me. She was beaming. Full of hope. Proud. Lost in the intoxicating allure of an imagined future where most, if not all, of her current problems would be solved. I had unexpectedly and unwittingly come to serve as a savior of sorts for this woman, a harbinger of her expectations. I wanted to question this sheet she had presented before me: what did she mean when she said her ley lines aligned in Toronto? Where did she get this from? Why was she so convinced? Was she aware that the ley lines of which she speaks are just flight paths from major airports? I wanted to challenge it, to bring her from the lofty heights in which she found herself down to the depths of the earth in which I often found myself. But she didn't deserve that. I had no reason to bring upon her the effects of a sobering reality. Instead my eyebrows were raised, and I nodded.

She refolded the paper and replaced it into her purse, and grabbed a few things from the chests and drawers which littered the apartment, placing them in a single duffle-bag, before handing me a few sets of keys waving me goodbye and leaving.

I was left alone in the apartment. Exhausted, I slumped onto the futon in the living room, and fell into a deep sleep.

XII

ROME: URBIS ÆTERNA

I was woken by a series of vibrations from my left pocket. Messages on my phone. I pivoted upright on the futon. The light outside was weaker, the sky, darker. Dusk was leisurely approaching; I had been asleep for a few hours at least. There were several things I needed to do—buy groceries, acquire a phone plan for my stay in Italy, find out where laundry could be done, among other things—but seeing as I had slept most of the day away, these were things which could not immediately be done. Instead, I endeavored to explore the city, or whichever parts I could access by foot within a reasonable time.

I stepped outside, locking the door behind me, into a dimly lit space, the smooth, eroded staircase falling away into darkness before me. As I descended, using my phone flashlight as a guide, a roar grew louder.

I left the dim lobby, the heavy front door slamming behind me. On the street, a massive crowd, a mix of locals and tourists, a constant fanfare of noise and voices, of movement and commotion. Some took photographs. Others, with limited success, tried to snake through the stream of people on their bikes and motorized scooters. The restaurants and shops which lined this street, which upon my arrival had all been closed and barred, were now all open and bustling with activity, both from patrons, and from waiters and waitresses, all dressed in slick black. Some ventured into the torrent of bodies flowing down the street, in an attempt to entice the curious, the spendthrifts, the wanderers to take a seat and eat with them. The city—or rather, this street in particular—appeared to me to be far more alive than the suburbs which had made the near entirety of my urban experience until that point. Those suburbs were of course however, not major tourist destination, not as populous, and not as dense; mass pedestrianism on this scale of course would never occur, and never made much sense.

I continued along this street, until it ended at Piazza Trilussa, one of the smaller piazzas in the city as I came to learn. People, mostly of a younger age, stood and sat idly, sipping on beverages—mostly alcoholic—and speaking a spattering of languages, none of which could be recognized as English.

At the rear—or southwest side, to be more exact—of this piazza, as was the case with many other Roman piazzas, was a large fountain, several people in height, the Fontanone di Ponte Sisto, its once-brilliant-white marble stones having acquired the characteristic stain and patina of greys and browns associated with age. More people sat idly on its steps, alone and in observance, or in small groups and in conversation. Pigeons, feathers ruffled, sat along the cornices, edges, parapets, and other flat outposts on the top of this fountain, watching us with indifferent curiosity. Some found themselves in the bowl of the fountain, which, like the vast majority of the minor fountains in Rome, had been shut off indefinitely in response to drought-like conditions, mass wildfires, and fears of water shortages as a result.

I stood in front of this fountain a while, looking at it from the opposite end of the piazza. Fountains in Rome, back when Rome was still an empire, had traditionally marked the arrival or terminal points of the many aqueducts which fed the city with pure water. None of the grander fountains currently in Rome dated from this period of course; most were late medieval and renaissance reconstructions, revivals of an old memory, attempts to reanimate Rome's former glory, to usher in a new era of greatness, a hope for an empire-like future.

I looked at this fountain. There was no roar of water to drown out the vehicles which roared down the Lungotevere Raffaello Sanzio, the road which paralleled the left bank of the river Tiber through the center of Rome. No crash of water to muffle the noise and chatter of speech, or the noise and clatter of feet. The mist which would have erstwhile dampened the clothing of those who sat on the steps was completely absent. There was no triumphant arrival of water from one of the many aqueducts occurring here.

I looked at this fountain. Rome was not as great as it had once been, and though I had been here less than a day, I knew almost instinctively that Rome would never be as great as it had once been ever again.

I turned away from the fountain, and crossed the street towards Ponte Sisto, a late medieval bridge commissioned by its namesake, Pope Sixtus IV—

etymologically, the fourth polished pope. The brown River Tiber flowed several dozen meters beneath me, a larger, older, more mature analogue to Cambridge's Grand River. The shear concrete walls on either bank of the river also reminded me very strongly of the infrastructure around the Grand River as it passed through Galt in Cambridge.

Many buskers littered the sides of the bridge, some playing guitar, others performing rather acrobatic tricks with sticks and balls. There were merchants, who beckoned at the mostly touristic throng of individuals who crossed, displaying their wares on flimsy, foldable tables. Merchants of darker skin beckoned at me specifically, referring to me as "brother," as they did so, in an act of false comradeship, only to turn sour when I elected not to return the same warmth.

I turned right at the end of the bridge, along the Lungotevere dei Vallati, the road which paralleled the right bank of the river Tiber, and sister street to the Lungotevere Raffaello Sanzio. The streets were treated quite differently here. The *sampietrini* which was generally ubiquitous in Trastevere—based of course on my brief drive through the city—was not as frequent on this side of the river. In fact, it appeared to be completely absent. The street was paved in black asphalt, and was separated from asphalt and slightly elevated sidewalks on both sides by white stone curbs. A concrete barrier, embroidered with graffiti and stains of dirt, snaked along the sidewalk nearest the river, to my right, acting as a deterrent to jettisoning of the self. To my left, seemingly erupting from the asphalt of the sidewalk at regular intervals, were tall trees. Oriental planes. Their canopies, still lush and green, provided a consistent shade from the intense Mediterranean sun, their camouflage-like bark providing welcome splashes of pale greens and pale browns in the sea of greys and blacks offered up by the ground treatment. To the left of these trees were many cars, most of them older, silver hatchbacks, parked in parallel along the side of the street.

I continued along this street a while, as cars shuffled along in the opposite direction, motorized scooters made quick work of the gaps left between, and deftly used these gaps to scuttle ahead. Rome had its problems with congestion, much like the other cities with which I had made my acquaintance over the years. But that was to be expected; Rome was an old city which had largely matured and developed well before the problem of the automobile and the postwar wealth which made the automobile ubiquitous.

The other side of the street was boarded by neoclassical blocks, three to five storeys in height, in a state of pristineness which belied their age, sporting spotless beige and white stucco, lacking generally the patina and the graffiti which was common on buildings found on the left side of the river in Trastevere. These buildings had a certain charm, a beauty, an easiness on the eyes which I could not quite put into words. Looking at the blocks on this street did not leave me with a feeling of utter mundanity and boredom, feelings I got routinely from the barefaced modern and postmodern architecture of the cities and suburbs in which I spent most of my time—Mississauga and Toronto. And I wasn't entirely sure why. These buildings were more interesting to look at. There was more grain to their faces, more in which I could lose myself. The individualized and sculpted sills beneath the windows and the false pediments above them; the way each level was treated differently, to mimic roughly the sections of a classical column; the craftsmanship and care present in the way the balconies were sculpted and the false entablatures between the different levels. These were all things those who self-identified and were identified by others as modernists argued were unnecessary, and that those who self-identified and were identified by others as postmodernists argued were just whimsical additions.

But to me, they felt as though they were neither. These were embodiments of soul, of the souls of the people who built the building and of the time in which the building was conceived and built. What did that mean? I wasn't sure then and I'm not quite sure now. Why did these qualities have such an allure to me? Was it embodied entirely in their novelty? I hadn't experienced architecture like this before, and so it attracted me? Was it the contrast, the difference with that with which I had come to be accustomed? This architecture was interesting simply *because* it was different? Would any different architecture have engendered a similar reaction?

The road was by this point called the Lungotevere del Pierleoni—the “Tiber waterfront belonging to the sons of Peter Leo,” roughly translated. Gaps in the built street frontage increased as the street continued, revealing fenced-off spaces, lush with uncontrolled and unmanicured overgrowth, covering partially fallen and decayed ruins of times past. This was another thing which I found peculiar about the city; the abundance of open spaces occupied by ruins which could not be torn down, could not be restored, and could not be occupied by anyone.

Here and elsewhere in this city, were constant reminders, mementos, to Rome's imperial past. Collapsed ruins. Eroded fragments of temples. Half

a column here. A column which had been reconstructed with exposed steel ties elsewhere. Fragments of a foregone past that could not and must not be forgotten.

I crossed the street. I was now on Via del Foro Olitorio—the way of the vegetable-sellers' market. The *sampietrini* returned, though the clear separation between paths to be used by pedestrians and paths to be used by motorized vehicles remained. There were fewer pedestrians on this side of the river, though there were more vehicles. The people walked more rapidly, with more direction, with more purpose, as if they had destinations, as opposed to their counterparts in Trastevere, who walked more slowly, with an absent leisure, mindlessly and mindfully taking in the sights around them.

I walked to the next intersection, and crossed the street again, this time heading due west along Via del Teatro di Marcello—the way of the theatre of Marcellus. And on that street, next to a church which had been built into a medieval tower, were the ruins of the theatre of Marcellus. Not that one would have immediately been to tell.

Atop what appeared to be brick buttressing, built at a later date, several storeys above the level of the street were brick homes. Further along, the newer buttresses continued and abutted an old, marble, two-storey stacked arcade reminiscent of the Colosseum. Brick residences had been built atop this ruin as well, obscuring its former function as the largest theatre of performance in Rome at its time of construction. As the road curved to the north, the building façade arched away to the south, leaving a grassy knoll in its wake. A roughly paved path, boarded by temporary fencing circled the temple, an opportunity to experience the ruins and the rubble more personally. On the topic of rubble, there was quite a lot of it scattered across the knoll, rather haphazardly in my eyes. Column pieces were strewn everywhere, as blown to their current location by an explosion. They certainly did not belong to the theatre; their detailing and their fluting did not at all match the detailing and fluting of the columns of what remained of what I presumed to be the original structure.

The buildings along this street had a very different character from the buildings on the lungotevere which bordered the Tiber River. The entirety of the built fabric was older, much older, and noticeably so. The smooth, pristine stucco, and the varied ornamented grain of the neoclassical buildings along the river were replaced by rough plasterwork, and an

almost modernist bareness and simplicity to the treatment of facades in these what I presumed to be medieval buildings. Blank faces rose from the street, punctuated by windows only where they were needed, the punctures of which revealed the incredible thickness of the stone and rubble walls. There was no sense of occasion to the punctures, nothing to demarcate where they began and where they ended, no shading devices, or otherwise embellishments of the openings, the thickness of the walls themselves providing the requisite shading. The structures were capped with visually paper-thin roofs, overhanging only modestly over the buildings they halfheartedly attempted to shade. Single cylindrical downpipes, which disappeared into the faces of the buildings just above the first storey, offered the only embellishments, garnishments of necessity, on the facades of these buildings.

These buildings did not elicit the same response in me as the neoclassical buildings had before. And, as with many things in life and elsewhere as I came to eventually realize, I wasn't quite sure. These structures before me were as interesting, though more so in their stark simplicity than in any grain or variety of detailing provided by its surface treatment. Like the buildings on the lungotevere, I had never seen architecture like this in person before.

These buildings were embodiments of soul, as were the buildings before. But the soul was different. Before, there was an idea, a clear concern with aesthetics, with how the building would be presented, and with how the building would present itself. There was a symbolism present which spoke to the people of the time, and which continued to speak to me, in the present day. There was an obvious concern with aesthetics, with beauty in the disinterested sense, present in the later, neoclassical buildings along the lungotevere. I thought of these buildings as beautiful, because they were designed with the intent that they would be perceived as beautiful.

Here however, I saw a soul concerned with other things. Concerned with necessity, and the necessity and brute reality of habitation, concerned with function, and concerned with being a building first. These buildings were interesting, but they were not beautiful. Or rather, more appropriately, they were interesting to me, but did not arrest the eyes in the same way that a sensuously sculpted Italian automobile did, the way a masterfully composed painting did, or the way wonderfully shapely bodies did. And perhaps that was the point. These were buildings first—edifices for inhabitation—before they were pieces of art.

I wondered what it was that separated architecture from mere building: why some within my field— my colleagues, other architects, designers, those who concerned themselves with some ideal aesthetic in general—haughtily turned their noses up at certain buildings, declaring them to be beneath architecture. I wondered if it was beauty. Or an objective ideal of beauty, which separated building from architecture. Or was it, as some of my peers had suggested in their condemnation of the typologies generally associated with suburbia, a lack of culture, a lack of historicism. Was the involvement of an architect in the conception and construction of a built work all that was necessary to differentiate architecture from building? I wasn't sure of the answer myself, and increasingly found the distinction not one worth pursuing or making at all.

Men, clad in bright shorts, or bright slacks, and t-shirts or polos, Italianate hair slicked back by generous helpings of hair product, strolled along the asphalt sidewalks, eyes half-asleep, perhaps deep in thought, perhaps not. Women, alternatively in accompaniment, or alone, strolled along in a similar fashion. There was a café carved into the corner of one of these older buildings: the Antico Caffé del Teatro di Marcello—the ancient café of the theatre of Marcellus. People sat in chairs around small tables in a permanent shade provided by white parasols, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, drinking various caffeinated drinks. They sat relaxed, legs crossed at the knees or at the ankles, engaged in leisurely conversation.

The opposite side of the street sported a lush mix of vegetation, a large variety of conifers and flowering plants, species which were all foreign to me, behind a wall which was not quite imperial-Roman in age. The plants ascended away from the wall, up a hill—the Capitoline.

As I craned my head around, something at the end of the street—or rather in the distance, as the road curved out of view—caught my eye.

A brilliant white structure, towering over the rest of the cityscape, could be seen in the distance. It sported columns, like a temple of some sort, but its condition and pristine whiteness belied the age which it tried to imitate. It stood atop a massive podium of white stone and was capped by a massive, winged, bronze equestrian statue, the details of which beyond its scale I could not make out at this distance.

I continued up the street, my walk becoming more of a gradual climb as the slope of the street increased. The street narrowed slightly, and the

older buildings on the west side of the street gradually gave way to newer, Romanesque, renaissance, and neoclassical façade treatments. Two sets of steps appeared on the east side of the street; the former and shallower of the steps, leading up to a square, a piazza on the top of the hill; the second, and steeper set led to a Romanesque church.

The street opened up to a relatively bustling piazza—Piazza d’Aracoeli, or, in English, the piazza of the Altar of Heaven—which appeared to be little more than a large, distended roundabout around a park. Here, the sidewalk transitioned from black asphalt to a worn, pockmarked marble, contrasting more strongly with the *sampietrini* of the roads. The crowds densified measurably and quite suddenly; though not quite to levels seen on the other side of the river in Trastevere. The increase in foot traffic brought with it a decrease in foot-speed as congestion intensified.

Tourists—the source of much of the increased foot traffic and intensified congestion—donning backpacks filled with supplies for their daily excursions; wearing hats and caps to protect their pink, pale skin from the Mediterranean sun; sandals or flip-flops to vent their swollen feet; cameras strapped to their dominant wrists, or dangling from their necks, congregated like pack animals around points of interest: ruins, benches, bus stops. They took photographs copiously; gawked, mouths agape, at sights hitherto for them unseen, and exclaimed with a child-like wonderment.

Tourists. They were another thing with which I had little experience, and had seen little of. I imagine tourists had little reason to visit suburbs such as that which I had to call home. But it was also possible that the tourists back home blended in more effectively with the local population. Here, tourists were almost obnoxious in their utter conspicuousness. Their dress was different, generally looser, generally geared more towards comfort than towards appearances or any erstwhile presentation. No attempt was made to mask their differences, their foreignness, and their exoticism. They loudly declared that they did not belong where they were.

The structure which had originally caught my eye was now immediately in front of me. The part of the structure I had seen before was in fact only the top-most section. It stood on an enormous podium, the perfectly cut, brilliant white blocks of which nearly equaled me in height. The immense structure abutted directly against the relatively narrow sidewalk, making it impossible to see in its entirety. Deep, ornate, and varied cornices rounded the building at regular intervals, visually breaking up its mass. Soot, and

dust, and other fine particulates gathered in the crevices and carvings of the cornices, darkening and muddying their purity in a way which escaped the massive flat blocks of the exterior walls. These cornices, darkened more severely by age than the rest of the building, created bands on the building. Monumental prison stripes. False square columns were shaped into some faces of the exterior of what I could immediately see of the building, which framed bays into which windows were placed. What lay beyond those small windows, pierced through impossibly thick walls, I could only guess—I still wasn't at all sure what this building was supposed to be, what its purpose was, or why it was here.

I continued along the white stone sidewalk to the along the side of this massive structure. Piazza d'Aracoeli rolled seamlessly into Piazza Venezia—the venetian piazza—which, like the others before it on this side of the river, amounted to little more than a distended roundabout around a parkette.

Foot traffic here continued to be very heavy, and the vehicular traffic suddenly so. The complete lack of traffic signage or traffic control systems was remarkable. The roadways were as wide as the arterial roads in the automobile dominated cities and suburbs of North America, with sometimes as many as 7 cars travelling abreast. And yet there were no traffic lights. No stop signs. No posted speed limits. Cars merged together fluidly, peeled away onto perpendicular streets effortlessly, and weaved in and out of each other in a way which invoked the image of a dance. People crossed the wide *sampietrini* streets at designated points, demarcated by dirtied and worn paint, or by lengths of concrete paving which interrupted the *sampietrini*. They crossed, placing faith I thought blind into the fact that the automobiles would stop for them.

The whole had a wonderfully organic, somehow natural feel. But I also had a feeling which remained steadfastly, that the whole remained a mere moment, a minute inch, away from a fall into total chaos. The city as a whole gave me the same feeling. It felt wonderfully organic, buildings placed where they fit, and not according to an example of rationalist logic found in the grids of many—if not most—newer cities. The city itself was human, in the way it shifted, in the apparently chaotic way its streets were arranged and in the way its buildings related to each other. It possessed a nostalgia in the way it steadfastly allowed its ruins to remain and decay naturally, rather than restore them completely to their former glory, or replace them with something new, as many other cities would doubtless do if they found themselves in this position. Rome uniquely found beauty in the memory of what it once was.

These same traits resulted in a palpable tension however. A tension between what Rome once was, and what it needed to be going into the future; between progression and between stasis; between being a city, and being a living museum. No building, no structure embodied this tension more than the one before me.

I was now finally in front of this structure, the same which had caught my eye, several dozen minutes ago. It was wider than the piazza in front of it, and taller than any other structure I could see. The whole seemed to be organized in stages, or steps; each occupying a podium which towered above its predecessor, and growing larger and more ornate as one moved rearward. The first consisted of an ornate, cast-iron gate spanned between two massive marble pillars, capped by monumental bronze statues depicting winged figures in heroic poses atop a marble podium, polished to a near-mirror finish, which was set a triplet of steps above the white-stone sidewalk in front of it. The two flanking pillars alone stood at least five times taller than the average person, the statues triple. The gate was closed, and so I could not closely explore the rest of the structure. A monumental staircase led beyond the gate, beyond more monumental bronze and marble statues, and beyond two massive flags of the modern Italian republic to an enormous, and beautifully and ornately carved frieze. This too was capped by a massive, bronze, equestrian statue sitting atop a large marble pillar. Beyond this, was a massive colonnade flanked by two equally massive propylaea. These were capped with immense entablatures, and more bronze statues, which by this point had their details obscured by distance.

I could not help but chuckle at the sight before me. Though this was not the largest building I had ever come across—the skyscrapers of New York and of Toronto counted but a few of the buildings which dwarfed this one in size—it managed to be among the most imposing. Its scale far exceeded anything else I had seen that day, modern, ancient, or otherwise. It seemed out of place, contextually completely anomalous. And I couldn't quite figure out what it was. It appeared to be a monument, but why make a monument so large? What was important enough to deserve this?

The sun was by this point descending from view, the sky was darkening, and the temperature was dropping, so I decided to make my way back to my place of temporary residence. Even as nightfall approached—perhaps because nightfall approached—people continued to pour onto the streets, to enjoy the many restaurants which were in no short supply, to drink of the wine which flowed boundlessly, recalling the image of the water which used

to flow similarly endlessly from the thousands of fountains found across the city.

I was home in a short half hour. The streets of Trastevere were at their most packed, most animated, and many the bars which were closed throughout the day were now opened. These bars operated as the nodes of highest activity, large crowds forming immediately beyond the limits of their thresholds, the people taking advantage of the still-warm evening air. These crowds persisted well into the morning the following day, just before dawn, my night being punctuated by passionate and patriotic chants in the tongue of this nation, which was not a tongue with which I was at all familiar.

It took me a while to get used to the noises which came from the ground at that corner of Rome. I had slept through noise before—automobile traffic; newscasters miles away, presented on a TV screen; subway trains; snoring family members—and thought myself quite adept at it. I always had a harder time falling asleep to voices, so many voices. And never with such predictable regularity did I hear them.

At around 2 in the morning, the crowds finally died down, and the crowds vacated the streets. Blessed silence graced my ears, for a few minutes. Then came the gulls, several times larger than the gulls found in southern Ontario, crying their territorial cries, fighting over scraps, tearing into the black bags of trash which were left on the streets next to the buildings every night. Cleaning crews came by at this time to collect the trash, and to clean the streets of the broken glass, of the spilled wine and liquor, of the improperly disposed-of food, of the vomit which was found more often than not. The soft and familiar rumble of idling diesel engines of trucks which crawled along the streets, workers in step behind, tossing the black bags into the back of the trucks accompanied the soft whoosh of water being sprayed onto the *sampietrini* as other workers washed away the immediate memory of the night prior.

As I lay in the bed, waiting for sleep to take me, I decided to identify the massive structure I had studied briefly that afternoon. It had several names—the Victor Emmanuel II National Monument, the Vittoriano—and as the name suggested, it was a monument to the man under who's rule the Italian peninsula was finally reunited after centuries of fragmentation and what could be referred to as foreign occupation.

This was Rome. More accurately, this was the gist of Rome. This was how the contemporary roman experienced architecture, experienced the built world. Their city was a cacophonous, discordant mix of different built forms, relics of the present, of different periods of the past, of concessions to Rome's present reality as a tourist hub, and one of the most sought after tourist destinations in the world.

I wondered what native, naturalized romans thought of their city. I wondered if they viewed Rome with the same glowing eyes, and if they spoke of their city with the same beautiful nostalgia with which the city presented itself to foreigners, and with the same exultant voice we at Waterloo used when we spoke longingly of the great ancient architecture of Rome. I had a feeling they didn't.

XIII

ROME: A CITY LIKE ANY OTHER

Over the next few days, I settled in, got used to Rome, to my impressions of Italian life. My two roommates moved in; I sourced and acquired internet for the apartment—a fruitless exercise, as the thick rubble walls were nearly impervious to Wi-Fi signals—and a chip for my phone. I shopped for groceries, and came to terms to the necessary dietary modifications I would have to make while living in Italy: namely no more premade, microwaveable, TV dinners—the absence of microwaves in most kitchens precluded this—and fewer fruits, which were generally more expensive here than they were in North American supermarkets.

In the days leading up to the formal opening of studio activities, I continued to explore the city by foot, crossing new bridges, venturing into new piazzas, stumbling upon new restaurants, always acutely aware of the incredibly eclectic combination of architectures from different eras, coexisting precariously within the same space.

Studio and classes did eventually begin, as they did every other term. The building in which our studio and our classes were held, was a six-storey, clean, relatively unornamented example of renaissance architecture which had recently been painted a very, very pale shade of blue, faced onto a piazza, the piazza di Santa Maria in Trastevere. Its clean exterior belied its age, which was more than apparent on its interior; the main marble stair had been worn to a dangerous polish, its steps individually sloping and slumping under years of use; paint and plaster peeled from the walls in this stairway, and on the dimly lit ground-floor atrium.

The rooms in which our studios and classes were held were in much better condition, an intermediate of sorts between the clean restored nature of

the exterior and the comparatively decrepit condition of the corridor and circulation spaces inside. They sported tall ceilings, which revealed exposed wooden joists and beams, many of which had to be reinforced or replaced outright with steel members. The thick walls—a ghostly blue on the outside and a brilliant white on the inside—were punctured periodically by tall and proportionally narrow windows, which opened onto the piazzas which uniquely surrounded this building on nearly all sides. The windows all had operable wooden shutters, painted either a mud-brown, or a greyish-blue, which opened in the opposite direction of the windows themselves. This meant that, when they worked, one could allow entrance to cool outside breezes while at the same time restricting access to the hot rays of the sun. Unfortunately, only some of these shutters worked; some were permanently open, others were permanently closed, others still would not stay in a single position, victim to the whims of outside forces.

The floors were a mixture of different tiles and woods, set at different heights in the different rooms; those absent the habit of lifting the foot with each step had their toes stubbed repeatedly.

There was much chatter these earlier days; we as a class had been scattered around the world over the past 8 months on our co-ops; there was consequently much catching up to do. The discussion of what we had done over our co-ops, where we had been, about the past in general, eventually died down however, and was replaced by the current; discussions of what we were to do then and there, how we were to exploit our relatively limited time in the beautiful city of Rome.

Our first day of classes began with an introduction of our professors: a cohort native to Italy; Rick Haldenby, the former director of the school, and a teacher's assistant who was based in Cambridge. Rick began by presenting to us a short synopsis of Italy, and its position compared to Canada, the country which most of us called home. Italy had an area of roughly 300,000 square kilometers; Canada was about thirty times larger. Italy had a population of roughly sixty million; Canada, at thirty-seven million, numbered a bit more than half that. Canada's population was growing very slightly; Italy's had either flat-lined, or was decreasing very slightly. Italy's GDP was nearly 2 trillion USD; Canada's GDP was less, at 1.7, though was growing quite a bit more rapidly, and had far lower youth unemployment. Canada's immigration rate was also quite a bit higher than Italy's. Italy had an architect for roughly every 400 inhabitants, the highest such ratio in the world; Canada had roughly one for every 2,500.

This comparison was supposed to illustrate the differences between our home country and the new one in which we found ourselves. I was puzzled some by this odd emphasis on economic similarities and differences, especially as our education never seemed to concern itself too much with economics in such strictly numerical terms.

From there he moved backwards, to a brief history of Italy, spending a curious amount of time on the date he himself believed to mark the end of the Roman Empire—its epoch event—AD 300, thereabouts. He remarked on a very subtle, but marked change in the way the Romans treated and approached art, and seemed to use this as evidence or proof of the decline of the Roman Empire, and one of the changes leading up to its eventual fall.

Before this date—AD 300—Rick argued that Roman art and Roman depictions were very representational in nature; put simply, they strove to very accurately depict figures as they were: trees were trees as they appeared in nature, people were people as they appeared in life, so on and so forth. Art after this point however, became more symbolic. The Romans appeared to have grown less concerned with the exactitudes of recreating the realities of the world around them; approximations, icons, symbolisms, all appeared more and more to suffice.

I found it both a curious and a lovely observation, one I imagined only one as astute and observant—and dare I say obsessive—as Rick Haldenby could have made. A lack of time cut the lecture short, leaving me unsure of what further conclusions Rick wished to draw from his observations.

And while I did not think this at the time, this observation of Rick's gradually struck me as rather ominous. This reduction, this simplification, this abstraction was a phenomenon I had observed in the arts since the renaissance. Paintings had simplified, moving from representations or depictions of the real world as the painters had observed it, to depictions of atmosphere and emotions associated with what we saw in nature, eventually reducing to explorations of the basal elements of painting—patterns, the line, fields of color, pure form, pure geometry. Purity in the abstract. Music—at least in the narrow context of Western pop in which I found myself and with which I had grown comfortable—had undergone a similar reduction in composition. Such was my impression in any case. Architecture, again in the context of the West, which was the only context with which I could with honesty refer to myself as familiar, had also simplified. We moved away from reproduction of the natural world,

from the ornate, from ornamentation, from decoration, to modernism, cleanliness, simplicity, rationalism.

What then, was the implication? As Rick had observed in the case of Rome, was the collapse of civilizations always precipitated by a simplification, a reduction in their arts? But even that was too grand a statement; Rick had only pointed to observations made about the art and collapse of one civilization—the correlation could only be coincidental at this point. Perhaps, given more time, Rick would have pointed to more examples where this correlation proved true. It's equally possible however, that Rick only mentioned the observed correlation because he found it to be interesting, and nothing more. There was perhaps no intention that this information be extrapolated to the present day, to our current “civilization,” assuming our current society, our current globalized...system can be referred to as a contiguous civilization. His observation was probably not intended to occupy as much of my mind as it eventually did.

I feel I could have been forgiven for taking what Rick said as far as I did though. Studio was introduced shortly thereafter. There was an emphasis on the migrant situation, which was then referred to as a crisis, in which migrants from Africa and the Middle East—for reasons upon which there was little elaboration—arrived en masse and illegally to Italy and other European countries, seeking something—again, largely unspecified—placed under the umbrella term of “a better life.” There was mention of the tension this mass influx of unwanted immigrants caused within these countries, and Italy specifically, citing planned protests by nationalist groups and anti-immigrant groups in Rome and elsewhere. The picture was painted with an air of urgency, of impending collapse, as if we were at a flashpoint, an epoch event of sorts.

Our first project was to design an intervention—which was not housing—which would help integrate these new immigrants into Roman society. Our site was along a stretch of the Janiculum walls, a 17th century set of defensive walls built by Pope Urban VIII, adjacent to the location of the Mercato di Porta Portese, a weekly market which occurred on the streets near this portion of defensive wall. There was a beautiful irony, upon which the professors potentially wished to play, of building or designing architectural interventions meant to foster inclusion among an architectural edifice designed originally to keep the other out.

Immediately, I was faced with the question of if architecture alone could foster inclusion, and inclusion of a people many of the native population had no intention of including, and in any case had no desire to include. Was the migrant crisis even an architectural problem? Was the problem with the migrant crisis one of a lack of inclusion? Why was the migrant crisis referred to as a problem, as a crisis, anyway?

These were the questions running through my mind as I ventured to the site, and took photographs of the vast sea of asphalt, of the abandoned vehicles, of the old auto-shop warehouses and parking lots which made up the context of the site, of the needles I found littered around trees, of the discarded plastic bottles and aluminum cans found along the street, as I walked along the part of the Tiber which bordered the east edge of the site, and saw the encampments of the homeless along its banks. Even the choice of site seemed at odds with the supposed goal of inclusion; it was a derelict, leftover industrial site, dating to the area's history as a sort of river-port of Rome. Though this was probably one of the few sites in Rome where extensive modification would not be a problem; it was as close to a blank slate, or a *tabula rasa*—to use the architect's favorite dead language—as one could get here.

But as I returned to studio over the following weeks, I returned to my original questions: what the hell could architecture do about this? Was I supposed to think that if I designed a specific space, or a specific thing, that I could alleviate the isolation felt by a socially and culturally othered population? Was I supposed to seriously solve, with architecture, a problem which to me was fundamentally political, social, cultural? Had someone designed a specific place for me, would the isolation I had felt in my youth due to my behavior and my biracial heritage be absent?

This fascination architects—who seldom read theorists versed in sociology, in anthropology, in fields and study of the mind, of human behavior, of group behavior—had with solving non-architectural problems with architecture increasingly made little sense to me. Why did architecture need such power, such a level of agency? And how were we to judge its effectiveness on any of these fronts of which most of us knew so little? I hadn't any answers. And in any case, this wasn't a question I was to answer at this point in time anyway. I had to create an architecture which would foster inclusion.

My eventual proposal was based on the premise of education; if different cultures had a space where they could learn and talk about each other, a mutual understanding would be fostered, which would naturally incite inclusion. I of course was not fully convinced of this, and believed it be a vast and dangerous oversimplification of the conditions causing, surrounding, and emanating from the migrant crisis. But for the sake of studio tradition, where our actions must be prefaced with a rhetoric of some sort, this was the lie I spun for myself, and for my critics.

They weren't convinced. They didn't see how it would work. My "informal spaces of education," were not specifically designed enough. I was trying to do too many things at once, a critique I received often. All good points.

Others proposed sleeping pods for the migrants. An intricate play-structure was another proposal, the hope being that Roman children and migrant children would play together, and share the same space. Community-style kitchens and other such programs where the native population imbued basic skills to the migrant population was another, more frequent proposal.

Many of the proposals belied the comparatively privileged position from which many of us came. A metabolist-inspired series of sleeping pods, along the banks of the Tiber River, beyond the judgmental and xenophobic eyes of a native population. A hotel, luxurious in its presentation, also rising from the banks, also out of sight, and consequently out of mind. The problem, which was not ours, and was not one with which many of us had ever had to contend, was best dealt with by burying under the proverbial rug. To solve the problem was to hide it beneath interesting architecture. Of course, the rhetoric around these proposals never worded things so bluntly; such would require an honesty unbecoming of architectural proposals of this type. They were instead presented under the premise of new experiences, and fostering interactions between disparate populations.

Some of these proposals were rather well received. Others, not as much. The differentiator however, seemed to me to have little to do with the potential effectiveness of the proposals in solving the problem as presented; rather, it whittled down to design sensibilities, design preferences. Which made perfect sense; how else were architects to judge architecture, buildings, and other built interventions? But on the other hand, if design is the only metric by which we can accurately judge—and do so with any degree of merit—why open and present the problem as one with a social cause, a political or anthropological origin?

The days continued similarly to how they did in Cambridge; we had classes, I spent most of my free time in studio. After class and on weekends, we would congregate on the steps of the fountain of the piazza di Santa Maria, and consume wine which was cheaper than water, and flowed endlessly. Or we would go to one of the seemingly infinite bars within spitting distance of the school, and do the same. The wine got old fast however, and I soon spent more and more time in studio.

Though the city offered far more than Cambridge did—more things to do, more things to see, more places to go, more places to be—I found myself living my life quite similarly to how it was always lived. The extras changed nothing. Not where I was concerned anyway. I did find myself walking more often, as things did not seem as far away as they were, even if they were farther than I would ever consider walking in a city like Cambridge.

There were periodic walking tours, providing exercise, as well as reprieves from the monotony of student life. Rick, the seasoned guide, walked us through different parts of Rome, expositing architectures from different periods, of different styles, with different origins, looking at churches, temples, On occasion we boarded a couple of buses and went to old towns on the outskirts of the Rome.

Rick told stories. Stories about the buildings, stories about their users, about their commissioners. He spoke about how architecture embodied its time, what it meant to successor times, and to successive peoples. Through architecture, he described entire periods, entire civilizations, and entire empires. With his words, he spoke life into the inanimate objects which surrounded us, which formed the context of our own lives, and through which our own lives were lived. He was an excellent storyteller, my enjoyment of which was tempered only by the fatigue which came with being outside and walking for several hours at a time.

There were two trips, each roughly a week in length, which took us out of the immediate vicinity of the Metropolitan city of Rome, and of the region of Lazio; one to the north of Italy, and one to the south. The trip to the south—the aptly named South Trip—was the first, taking place during the third week of September.

We spent a week roughly in the Campania region of Italy—immediately to the south of Lazio, where Rome was located—in the vicinity of Naples, the Phlegraean fields, and the Amalfi coast. The weather was warm, generally

sunny, and generally pleasant. We stayed in a small, generally unremarkable, and architecturally unmemorable hotel in Paestum, within walking distance of a beach. In the opposite direction, also within walking distance was a series of Greek temples, as well as a spattering of other ruined buildings of ancient Greek and ancient Roman origin.

These longer, extra-Roman excursions could be thought of as longer versions of Rick's walking tours. He waxed poetically about ancient Greek architecture, spinning stories and retelling Greek myths about the settlements of Cuma and Baia. He wove tales, speaking effusively about early Greek colonists in Paestum, speaking of, and personifying the gods for whom the temples were built, threading through personal stories—stories of his own life, about how he met his wife, and the namesake of his first son, for instance. We were always left time to explore the ruins at our own pace afterwards, to document as we pleased, to create our own stories, to weave our own narratives.

I carried with me a small mirrorless camera, and a sketchbook, as many of us did; we were supposed to sketch what we saw and sketch what we didn't see, as a means to explore, to understand the built fabric around us, the built fabric of the ancients. I preferred to take photographs; my camera allowed me to capture the details which my hand failed to recreate, which my mind failed to register and commit to memory, to think of as important to the overall understanding of the structure or of architecture in general.

We hopped the knee high wooden fences which individually contained each of the three well preserved Doric Greek temples. We climbed the oversized steps which created the massive podia upon which the temples sat. We passed through the thresholds created by the colonnade exterior walls. We ventured our gazes skyward, taking in the ridiculous height, the ridiculous scale of it all. Whether or not we had experienced architecture of this age, at this scale, so wrapped in myth, in history, in importance for so many people across so many ages, we were all probably in awe to be in the presence of these temples.

My awe, my wonderment however, was soon replaced—as it so often was—by questions. And by perturbations. Was any of this necessary? Did the temples need to be this big, this outsized? Of course, Rick gave us reasons, and spun his tales, which may or may not have been the actual reasons envisioned and invented by the Greeks for themselves, but I had my reservations about them. Were the stories of the temples believed by the

entirety of the population of Greeks from whence came these same stories? Or were they the stories of a class in particular? Did the laborers themselves believe in the stories told to them? I began to wonder about the conditions that were in place that led to the excessive size deemed necessary for these temples, as well as the cost in terms of labour to build

These questions were due in part to a lack of knowledge, of education on the specific topic of the origins and development of Greek temples. But the crux of these questions remained with me—who's stories are we telling, are we allowing to survive beyond their times? To whom do we grant narrative immortality, and who gets left behind on the wayside? Who decides this, and why does it happen? Would it not be fruitful to preserve stories from every strata? Would our history not be more colorful?

The south trip ended, and we returned to Rome. Studio and the rest of our classes resumed. As did Rick's walking tours; there seemed to be no end to buildings to see, buildings to explore, stories to spin. The weather was getting colder, and we were donning jackets and longer pants.

Studio was well underway, an extension or continuation of the first project; housing for migrants, which would incorporate ideas present in the proposals from the first projects. Aside from a studio project in first year, this marked one of the few times where studio projects were done in groups larger than the singular. This presented for us an interesting challenge; we had all by this point settled into our ways, had developed our own design preferences and design sensibilities, and we each had our own reasons for our preferences. These differences had to be navigated, reconciled, and compromises had to be made. Our preferences and tendencies also had to be tempered for the Roman context in which we designed. Some were more successful than others.

The north trip began and then ended around the beginning of November. It was much colder, with many of us having to resort to donning hats and other winter gear to stave off the approaching cold. The pacing of this trip was more rapid, more frenetic than the trip to the south; we bounced from city to city, from town to town, spending a night here, a night there—two at most—before boarding the bus and heading to the next town. Rick's stories diminished in frequency, in breadth, in length. For good reason; we spoke less of ancient architecture, and there was simply less of it around. These cities were younger, their histories and stories consequently shorter. We instead got more time to explore, to walk around these cities, these

towns, again, to make our own judgements, to come to our conclusions about the architecture around us.

The striking striped and surprisingly dark interior of the Siena Cathedral, and its intense and ornate gothic carvings, decorations, and ornamentations; the large, empty, slightly concave Piazza del Campo at its center; Gubbio's Piazza Grande, artificially elevated upon a plinth overlooking the rest of the town and the foothills of the Apennine spine of Italy; the contrasts and interactions between the renaissance architecture of the walled city of Urbino, and its modern university building; Parma's very large squares, and its unusual medieval, octagonal baptistery; Mantua's Piazza Sordello which transformed into a market for a few hours every morning before returning to a vast emptiness; its massive and labyrinthine renaissance ducal palace; its comparatively more delicate Palazzo Te, an odd palace-Palladian villa hybrid filled with mannerist frescoes, and sporting a massive garden; Verona, the city of Romeo and Juliet and Carlo Scarpa's renovation of the Castelvecchio Museum; the industrialized city of Vicenza at the feet of the Alps, and its many Palladian villas; and finally Venice.

There was a lot to take in, a lot to interpret. The details of this trip have muddled considerably, metastasizing into a single continuous, nondescript mass.

The cities were cleaner; the architecture, more regular, and not nearly as variegated as the cities of the south—Rome in particular. The street systems made more sense, the cities were generally easier to navigate. However, they appeared to have less life; the constant noise and hubbub of Rome was never present to quite the same degree. It perhaps wasn't the fairest of comparisons to make; Rome was several times larger than any of the cities or towns to which excursions were made in the north. They were also not as important as tourist destinations, and so did not attract anywhere near the number of foreign feet that Rome did. These cities were all far quieter—starkly so—as a result.

We returned back to Rome. Snow fell once. We were bundled in our thickest coats and our thickest sweaters—which were unfortunately not that thick at all—to stave off the cold, unusual in Rome. The end of November was fast approaching, and with it, the end of our term in Italy. We were pushing our studio projects at a frantic pace, finishing our designs, and moving on to our drawings, when the unthinkable happened.

A classmate was struck as he rode his bike on one of the many cobblestoned streets. Our work ground to a halt. We ground to a halt. Everything ground to a halt. The class, the professors, were all overcome with grief. We were unsure of how to continue. Unsure of if we should continue. What was the point now?

And so we didn't. Our assignments were scrapped, our studio projects halted in their tracks. We spent our last days in Rome meandering, grieving. Aimless.

XIV

AN END AND A BEGINNING

I was back home in Mississauga before the beginning of December. And I was back at work by the beginning of January for the same firm for whom I had worked before the beginning of the Rome term. I once again lived in Toronto, though no longer at my former apartment, long since taken by another long-term resident. Instead, I became another victim of the magical housing market, the explosive inflation of which by far and very easily outpacing the meagre increase in my otherwise not-so-meagre pay—paying more per month for an uninsulated bedroom, further away.

The routine went on this, my last co-op term, quite similarly to the preceding co-op term. I was even placed on the same project as before—albeit in a more advanced form, its design now neutered, simplified, from months of constant bickering, a constant back and forth between the parties which supposedly represented the client and the architects; between the parties prioritizing cost savings and penny-pinching on what was a multi-billion dollar project, and designers prioritizing design moves and decisions which would create “joy,” create “more interesting spaces,” create “spaces which would reduce stress,” or whatever other vague term they may have chosen to do. By the despondent and anodyne look those on my team had in their eyes, and the complete absence of passion in our discussions about the project, they had lost the back in forth, or were too frustrated, too tired to continue.

Even if they had convinced their counterparts—adversaries may be a more apt term in this case—that the design needed to be joyous, or interesting, or what-have-you, the argument could be made that a building, a project of this type didn't need to do any of these things; it just needed to work, and needed to work cheaply. More likely in my mind, is that they were

simply unable to convince the clients that their design decisions would decisively result in any of the things they promised; either due to poor communication, or due to a fundamental difference in values, in design sensibilities between the architects and designers, and the non-architects, the non-designers: what one thought was good was not necessarily what the other thought was good.

My work term ended four months later, and another school term began, the last of my undergrad. In addition to studio, and its accompanying technical course, we also had—for the first time—a landscape course, as well as a course calling itself, “critical architecture theory.” I found it strange we had not had courses like this until our last term in undergrad. In the case of our lack of landscape education, it made some sense in retrospect; the majority of our projects were located in urban contexts, where one generally had less freedom for landscaping.

The course on architectural theory I thought however, should have definitely been introduced sooner; if we were to be judged on similar aesthetic grounds for our architectural work, and our architectural visions, if we were to share the same values—which seemed to me to be as good a way as any to ensure such a commonality—it made sense to introduce architecture at a conceptual level sooner, so that we would come to internalize them over the coming years. But I digress.

Studio was different this term; instead of a sort of three-stage process, whereby precedents and the context are first studied and analyzed; higher-level concepts and massings are produced; followed by a final product with—ideally—minor adjustments, a modicum of extra detail, and a beautiful presentation, we would have the full four months to work on a single project, and develop it to a level of finality and resolution which hitherto had not been reached in a studio.

The reality however, was not too different from our previous ways of working however; our process of development could still be described as one with three-stages—precedent and context study and analysis; higher-level conceptualization; details and presentation: we had spent the entirety of our undergraduate careers working through projects in this way; we had internalized them, such that for many of us, there was no other way, and no other reason to approach design any differently. The difference then, was that instead of a series of externally dictated deadlines which demarcated the limits of each stage, we had the freedom to choose when we would end, and when we would move on.

The program this term, our final, was a spa, an onsen on the northern main island of Japan, Hokkaido. While the majority of us had never been to Japan, the majority of us had been to spas of some sort, and so had an idea of how they were supposed to feel, what they were supposed to mean, and why they were important.

I had never been to a spa before. The means, the desire, the need was never there; I understood them merely as a luxury for those of greater wealth and greater privilege. And while it was never expressed as such, the cultures for which spas were told to be important, were important probably only to their similarly wealthy, similarly privileged members.

I read. I pulled books from the library. I read online articles. I spoke to classmates who had gone to onsens, who had gone to spas. I tried as much as possible to replace my lack of experience with a wealth of literary knowledge. Unfortunately however, as I came to learn, something is always lost in translation between the physical experiences—being within the spaces, experiencing the textures of the spaces with all the senses, learning for oneself what one likes and what one dislikes about a particular space, and discerning how they flow from one to another—and merely *reading* about the spaces.

I never got comfortable designing this spa; it remained too foreign to me, too different, altogether too unnecessary for me, one who's entire ethos and sense of designs sensibilities is borne largely in part of necessity and of valuing necessity above frivolities. Spas remained for me—despite all my research, despite all the literature illustrating and elucidating upon their cultural importance—a fundamental frivolity.

I felt far more comfortable in the course on architectural theories, where the thoughts and ideas were expressed as just that; thoughts and ideas, which were not infallible, which could be disputed, which could be argued, which could be discussed. They explored the ideas behind the architecture, more so than the architecture itself, which was what pulled me, what I found so alluring. Architecture itself felt straightforward enough: surface, space, texture, light. What was interesting were the ideas, the stories within architecture which gave these basic elements meaning, from which preference and taste could arise.

This course also gave me an excuse to read and write prodigiously, and to discuss ideas without any expectation that the discussions have a concrete, or definite conclusion. Ideas felt freer to flow here than they had in a while.

We were also asked to debate, and one debate in particular struck me in how the class reacted. The resolution of this particular debate was whether or not artists should have more say and more control of public art insofar as their content and location is concerned. I was placed on the side arguing against the resolution, and the team of which I was part went so far as to suggest that the public should have more control over the art that is placed and produced for public display—public art. In support of the argument, I made a comparison between trained professionals—such as doctors and engineers—who had undergone years of training and practice, contemporaneously in institutions of higher learning, to develop objective expertise on a topic of specificity, and artists, who generally don't undergo quite nearly as rigorous a training regimen, for a topic that is subjective in nature in any case anyway, that has no "correct," no "proper," no "only way," of approach. To conclude, I asked an open question to the class: "why does the aesthetic judgement of an artist take precedence over the aesthetic judgement of anyone else? What qualifications do they have?"

The expression of the artist, the vision and the values of the artist, and the sense of aesthetics of the artist, versus the expression of the public—or the layperson—the vision and the values of the layperson, and the sense of aesthetics of the layperson. Why *should* the expression of the artist take precedence over the expression of the layperson—especially where the field of aesthetics is concerned—which is important to note as its subjective nature meant mastery was an arguably unattainable goal, especially compared with other fields where the expression or judgement of an "expert" rightly takes precedence over the expression or judgement of the layperson—engineering, medicine, statistics, et cetera.

No one responded. Instead, what I received was a series of facial expressions, ranging from incredulosity to confusion to disappointment, accompanied by a deafening silence. It was as if I had asked a stupid question. And maybe it was. Yet no one answered, no one even attempted to elevate me from my ignorance—presuming of course that my question was indeed one borne of ignorance. That artists should determine the aesthetics of art, whether it be displayed publically or privately, was simply a given, or such was my assumption given the lack of response.

The opposition presented arguments which seemed to centre upon the purpose of art, which, according to them, was to challenge commonly held perceptions, and to challenge in general. No mention was made of from whom this declared purpose came, or why this opinion mattered at all, but I digress; the class seemed to agree that this was what art was for.

The debate was largely a heated one, with several tempers flaring from individuals who were generally as stoic as stone. While I don't recall what the division was before the debate, after the debate, the class was split roughly fifty-fifty, with half the class supporting the resolution that artists should have more say in what becomes of public art, the other half was of the opinion that the public should have more say in what becomes of public art.

Architects are not artists—thankfully. Operationally, they are closer to doctors and engineers, also receiving years of training and practice in institutions of higher learning to develop objective expertise on a topic of speciality—putting buildings together and organizing the sub-trades and specialities who facilitate this process. They appear to me to think very much like artists however, thinking of themselves as arbiters of beauty in the built world, with a knowledge or feel for culture and the other nuances which make up the built world in which we live. It is this, the latter half of what being an architect entails for them, which separates them from building or civil or structural engineers.

And it is this latter which was quite apparent to me after this debate. Architects, though they have no reason to do so, appear to share a belief, almost inherent, that they know what's best for others, especially in terms of the aesthetics of the spaces they build and create.

Yes, we are and have been taught about culture, we learn about precedents, and the evolution of architecture, and what has been influential. But all this is taught from a single lens, a single point of view—that of other architects. We operate in a bubble which reinforces our own beliefs at the expense of all others, even if it is unintentional, simply because there is no means available by which to engage with the other. Would the Greek laborer have thought of the Greek temple as important as architects present it to themselves?

I came to question my place at the school very strongly after this debate, for some reason. I was troubled. I bothered by lack of questioning, or the lack of response to the question. Why *should* the expression of the artist take precedence over the expression of the layperson? Well, why not? Had no one ever given this thought? Was I the only one that thinking this hard about this subject? Or was this an instance of the answer being so obvious that putting it into words in response to a question becomes a nigh impossible task?

While I had always been aware of the differences between my own socioeconomic upbringing and origin and that of my peers, I was now troubled by how differently I thought, as was now very evident to me after asking this question. I was ostensibly being trained as an architect, but I could not bring myself, could not convince myself to think like one.

XV

A WANDERING MIND

The term soon came to an end. And with it, so did my life as an undergraduate student. There was a grad dinner, and a final party. It was not as bittersweet as I had thought it would be. Most of us elected to go to work in the field of architecture, for the many offices mostly in Toronto; others—like myself—decided to immediately pursue a master's degree.

Given my reservations concerning architecture and architects, the decision to continue within the field was certainly a curious one. Why not pause, think, and consider something else, a different field? Would that not have made more sense? Perhaps. Probably.

Architecture still interested me. That I was able to ask these questions, still explore and critique the ideas behind what architects and architecture have built their practice upon, to have these doubts, and not have immediately obvious answers to these doubts was, although it was troubling, was also quite alluring. I'm not entirely sure what else I would do, and felt I had become strangely comfortable in this position of difference, in this position of being lost.

There was also the fact that I much preferred the lifestyle and the freedom of thought which was a hallmark of the academic life, to the structured repetition which—through five co-op terms—I had come to see as characteristic of life at work, in the office, in the field.

I had chosen to return to the school, to Waterloo, having become familiar with the building, its staff, the professors, and the city of Cambridge in which it was located.

This master's program involved the composition and completion of a thesis. I was initially going to build off of and elaborate upon an essay written for Tara's class, which stressed the importance of the physical design of social housing. This however, did not last particularly long; the reasons for which are twofold. The first, is that my conception of social housing dated to its modernist iterations in the immediate postwar period; social housing was no longer built that way (in North America in any case) and as such, it made no sense to me to critique it, especially not from a design perspective. The second issue was that it was not new enough to keep me intrigued for the duration of a thesis, which I had planned from the beginning to be 16 months, since much had already been written on the subject, and much had already been built to address the issue; there was little novelty left in the subject for me, and instead of spending the time elucidating where or how I may contribute newly to this specific subject, I spent my time looking for what had very little done in terms of written literature or constructed work.

In our first term, we picked studios. I was intrigued by a studio which posited looking at questions through the lens of liminality; borders, conflicts, differences.

Over the next four months of this first term of my graduate life, I went through several thesis topics, after abandoning the first, seemingly unable to settle on one; exploring scale as an architectural tool to express power; a hypothetical progression or evolution of architecture if those *not* in positions of power were nevertheless in a position to dictate the built form of those around us; the means by which to use architecture to subvert and dismantle existing structures of power; so-called "ground-up" architecture—architecture without architects; architecture through the voice of the voiceless; the transition from "vernacular" to "monumental" architecture in the entirety of Western architectural history; the transition from "vernacular" to "monumental," this time however focusing on the changing role of builders in this transition; the disappearance of what John Ruskin referred to as "the hand of the maker" from modern architecture; a modern revisitation of John Ruskin—what would John Ruskin write about modern architecture; the changing role of builders as mediators between designer and layperson; a picaresque fiction exploring the differing ideas of John Ruskin and Adolf Loos, two men who, based on my admittedly brief reading of both, presented opposing ideas on what constituted beautiful and correct architecture.

I was never able to settle on one, to focus my efforts singularly, for more than a triplet of weeks at a time at most. This was a problem most other students in the program had at first, though they were all eventually able to consolidate, to focus on their efforts specifically upon a specific topic, to find a specific answer, or to propose a specific solution or response, to something. I, on the other hand, continued to meander, well into the second term, well into the third.

What was my issue? Why was I unable to pick something, and stick with it?

A point which was brought up frequently as I periodically presented my continuously evolving—or devolving—series of ideas, of potential thesis topics, was that I was never specific enough; I was always either too broad, or simplified too much, or spoke in terms which were too general. No solutions, or resolutions, or proposals, or anything at all really could be derived from my topics. It was as if I was stating “water,” or “cheese,” as my thesis, and leaving it at that. A point with which I agreed, and a point which probably neared one of the reasons among many for my constant, never-ending switching.

The natural next step then, would be to specify, set limits. What specific example will I be study? What site, or what typology will I study? Where? Or even before all this, what problem can be stated to require a proposal or a resolution?

These terms, these limits, this prescribed specificity would allow me to grasp and fully explore the depths of a small thing, in the process touching upon larger themes, without ever explicitly trying to solve them. Case studies, in essence. And architecture, being a very practical, and very plastic art, lent itself quite readily to this form of exploration, which is doubtless not without its merits. James Joyce did after all, say that, “in the particular is contained the universal.”

On this note, and in related fashion, I was also frequently told to make something; an artefact, a drawing, something that would bring me out of the realm of words in which I find myself so dangerously comfortable. The object would be the specific point of termination, the terminus, which would force my mind to abandon the broad strokes with which I am so comfortable and so inclined,

That said, this train of thought works best only when one already has an instance of specificity in mind. It is quite a bit easier to have specificity, and expand to broader ideas which impact or influence the specificity; if I start with *plasmodium*, it is easier then to expand to malaria, to mosquitoes, to disease, to hosts, to humans, and so forth.

The task of specifying becomes much more difficult when one only has broader ideas in mind. If I were to start with disease, for example, there's no reason for me to specify malaria, or *plasmodium*. Why not yellow fever? Or the common cold? Or the Spanish Flu? Or any of the myriad other infectious agents? There's no reason that makes itself apparent for why I would pick one and not the other. A decision should be made, I agree, but only because it would make the task of exploring the larger idea easier. The decision however, would be completely arbitrary because the specific was never the initial interest; the specific is introduced as a necessity. I may as well roll a million-sided dice and pick whichever side comes up. And this was something I did consider for a moment; rolling a dice where each number would correspond to a topic, and rolling with it, regardless of whatever it was.

Broad strokes are my natural train of thought. When recounting the story of my initial reactions to the Greek temples in Paestum, while my mind is initially interested in the specifics of the relationship between the slavers and workers who built these particular temples, and the high-priests and state officials who commissioned them, my mind quickly devolves to the relationship between those who are able to express themselves, and those who are not, at large. When recounting the debate in the critical architecture course, while my mind is initially concerned with propensity to value one aesthetic judgement over another, my mind again devolves to thinking about hierarchies of expression at large, and our lack of critical judgement on the subject.

Instead of identifying problems and immediately attacking them, and flinging solutions at them once the problems are identified, I had always been more interested in exploring *why* the problem is thought of as a problem to begin with. Why is the homogeneity within the architectural profession a problem? More specifically, why do *I* perceive this as a problem? Why do I have issue with my perceived difference; why do I perceive myself as different?

As an example, I will look at a thesis of a fellow master's student; it concerned itself with the question of ameliorating the living conditions of the Dharvi slum in Mumbai, while maintaining its economy and its way of life. If I were to look at slums, I would question why slums existed, why slums were viewed so negatively, was the reality of slum-living coincident with the perception the public had about them, and upon answering this—and only if the answer is in the affirmative (slums really are shitty places)—how would we improve them without entirely destroying their accompanying way of life. The question of “which slum” would never come to mind, even if it would make the task of addressing the aforementioned questions easier. Why would I pick a slum in Mumbai? Why not a slum in Lagos? Or in Mexico City? Or in Jamaica? I would have no reason to pick one over the other; none of these conditions would strike me as more interesting, or more important, or more pertinent than the next, which would make making a meaningful decision nearly impossible, or completely arbitrary to me. In any case, I would probably not ever get to the point of picking a slum in particular at all; I would continue to meander and ponder the questions surrounding the very perceptions of slums, because it is *this* question, *this* topic, which piques my interest, which releases the most dopamine in my synapses, not that which necessarily addresses the specificity.

For this individual, specificity was a starting point, a point of departure. They already had Mumbai in mind—in their case, because they were from Mumbai. The individual did not start with a large topic and try to triangulate into a point of specificity; such a task would have doubtless been impossible for them, much as it was proving to be impossible for me.

The individual had a decidedly personal connection to the place in question. And many individuals with whom I had spoken—for advice, for guidance, for a “how”—were of this same vein; they had a personal connection to the thing they were researching or were interested in, or they had a longstanding interest in the thing: there was a specificity already there from which they could easily spring.

But what of individuals who can elucidate no particular connection or interest to any specific place, person, or topic? Individuals whose starting points always tend to be larger ideas, larger themes, phenomena too vast to be termed “problems,” and therefore too vast to have appropriate proposals or solutions? Individuals such as myself?

There aren't any specific locations, or cities, or countries which I found interesting or unusual enough to apply specific study, or even apply effort to gather the funds to visit. Perhaps my hometown of Mississauga, which was as milquetoast a town as they came, and had no significant locations to which one may attach oneself, had something to do with it. Perhaps not having my own space, or a sense of ownership over any particular space, or really a sense of privacy until I moved to Cambridge had something to do with my non-attachment to spaces and my relative non-interest in any specific place. I never had the luxury of attachment.

Perhaps this was my issue; I had no attachment, no willingness to involve myself personally or passionately with any specific area of study, or any specific person. Everything is objectified, reduced to a mere intellectualism, which renders everything more or less equal, which makes specification an arbitrary and therefore impossible task.

I sat in my studio space, early May. While it was quite warm outside, the overactive air conditioning systems of the school implored the wearing of longer jeans, and a jacket indoors. In front of me was my laptop, an old Asus G750JW, which had served me faithfully, largely without issue or hiccup, for the past six years. A blank Word Document was opened on the screen.

What was I to make of this thesis? What was a thesis supposed to be, if it was supposed to be any one specific thing?

One type of thesis, and the one with which we are likely to be more familiar, is the one which builds naturally upon the natural inclination of most individuals to start from a specific point of interest, and build or investigate more deeply from there. This type of thesis presents itself as a specific solution, or resolution, or proposal in response to a specific problem. A specific problem, which often (but not always) involves a specific location, which lends itself to a specific response. In other terms, the resolution of issues through the application of principles to case studies. Again, as architecture is a very specific practice, a very plastic, and very physical thing, study and research via this methodology—that of case studies—is very fruitful and very useful.

Architecture however, is more than just the specific, the plastic, and the physical; if this was all architecture amounted to, it would be no more than civil and construction engineering. And if it is to exist at all, it *cannot*,

it *must* not be that. There is much more to architecture; there are ideas, themes, concepts, affects, percepts, and so on and so forth. There is so much beyond the physical. And not all these things are problems that require solutions; this however does not preclude them from being worthy of study or discussion.

What is a thesis then? I am of the belief that a thesis should be an exploration. An exploration which can, but does not always have to result in resolution. A thesis which probes the mind, and which probes reasons, probes observations, and tries to make sense of it all, without promising to do it at all successfully. This was what I wanted to be able to do in school, this is what I wanted to be able to make of my last time in an academic setting; to be able to probe without the real-world ramifications, or expectations of a definite, definable solution. I wanted to explore the myriad thoughts on my mind, the six years of observation I have made since being admitted to this school. And I wanted to do it all for its own sake.

I wanted to tell a story. To tell my story. A story through the lens of someone different, someone who feels, and believes they are quite unlike the small droves who normally pass through the tall glass doors of this old brick building.

Because, at the end of the day, is that not what architecture is about? Stories? We may tell ourselves that architecture can solve this or that. But it doesn't. What architecture does is probe. It allows us to explore solutions, to explore problems, to explore possibilities, and to reveal what may be hidden.

It allows us to exaggerate the realities of the world around us, or to lie outright, and tell ourselves everything is fine, when in fact, it may not be.

Architecture is the means by which we create narratives for our lives, for our spaces, for the world around us. Architecture itself is a sobriquet, a sobriquet of our societies and of our worlds. Architecture is the fiction through which our otherwise mundane lives are given color.

I cracked my knuckles, and began to type.

ADDITIONAL READINGS AND INSPIRATIONS

Over the course of the sixteen months during which I was enrolled in this master's program and working on and towards a thesis, I have read many books and have been exposed to many pieces of literature—both in print, and on the web—as well as other media. While I do not ever directly (or even indirectly) reference these works from various authors over various times, they nevertheless exerted an influence on how I thought about the problems and how I questioned things within architecture, and within the world at large.

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