

# Minutes

**Toronto Society of Architects  
February Meeting**  
5 February, 2008 – 6:30pm to 8:30 pm  
Arts and Letters Club, 14 Elm Street

## Present:

Adam Sobolak	David Stokes	Matthew Searle
Adrian Blackwell	Diane Schotte	Medhat Soliman Rofael
Alex Socoviev	Don Bolton	Melissa Verge
Alexander Mrkich	Elisa Cabrera	Michael Clifford
Andrew Jeanes	Geordon Green	Michael Grunstra
Anne Marie MacKenzie	Heather Dubbeldam	Mike Seymour
Antone Frisina	Ian Chodikoff	Mike Smonghton
Antonio Gómez-Palacio	Ilinca Popa	Nancy Smith
Baruch Zone	Irina Sozontova	Ning Cheng
Bindya Lad	Ivan Franko	Owen Peat
Bruce Semple	Ivan Martinovic	Phil Goodfellow
Cameron Barker	Jeff Gulyes	Rafid Kustou
Carlo Milessa	Joe Lobko	Rosa M. Umana-Rosales
Charles Starks	Karl Sarkis	Shauna Levy
Christopher McCormack	Leo Schotte	Shawn Micallef
Christopher Triska	Leslie Jen	Stephen Sangill
Constance Exley	Lyn Northey	Susan Lewin
David Bowick	Matt Galvin	
David Sisam	Matt Sommerville	

## 1. Introduction

- Antonio noted the many new faces present at the meeting. He went through the evening's agenda.
- 'Around the room' introductions followed.

## 2. Approval of Meeting Minutes

- Antonio requested that the meeting move forward by approving the minutes from previous meetings.
- Nancy motioned to approve the minutes from November's meeting, Phil seconded the motion, and the minutes were approved.

## 3. TSA Initiatives

- Antonio noted that the initiatives were activities, events, etc., that are run by individuals who come to the TSA for support, which allows the organization to be a launching pad for ideas. The following upcoming TSA initiatives was briefly discussed:
  - **fAd:**
    - Antonio advised the Festival of Architecture and Design (fAd) was approaching. He also noted that Elyse Parker, fAd co-ordinator would be issuing a call for events in the next few weeks.

#### 4. Urban Affairs – Concrete Toronto

- Antonio introduced Phil, TSA Vice Chair who organized the Urban Affairs sessions.
- Phil noted the many new faces, and explained how the Urban Affairs session worked. He advised that the best part of the conversation was generated when the floor was opened up for discussion.
- He noted that Michael McClelland was the moderator was today's moderator and encouraged open discussion.
- Phil shared that next couple of themes for upcoming meetings will include Opening Space, and Employment Lands.
- **Basis for the Publication:**

Michael shared that his office, ERA Architects, is interested in architecture and how it is perceived. They wanted to produce another publication, and conceived of the concrete book idea from conversations at cocktail parties, where the dislike of Robarts Library was often articulated by architects. Personally, Michael has always liked buildings in Toronto that were concrete, and did not understand why others did not. From people's opinions, he realized concrete buildings were the least loved buildings in Toronto. So he decided to build up a series of ideas and get different people's opinions, and got people to write about concrete. Concrete Toronto is a publication that explores our City in new way. Those who contributed to the book were invited to speak about the topic at the meeting.

#### The 'Burbs':

Shawn Micallef, associate editor of Spacing magazine and founder of [murmur], professed a love for suburbia. He noted that urban architecture is under appreciated. Having grown up in the in the suburbs, in a world of garages and lawns, he was jealous of those who grew up in Toronto. He chose to move to Toronto after

graduate school, and has been here for eight years. However, he admitted to being drawn back to the suburbs. According to Shawn, the suburbs emanate a landscape of private life and have an associated stigma of mystery. The City emanates a landscape of public life, where its inhabitants are able to get to know it very well, and it hints at how humanity exists within it. The notion of freedom was also mentioned noting that the TTC emphasized a freedom for Shawn, which was not available in the suburbs.

### **Suburban Toronto:**

Michael noted that the suburban landscape of Toronto varies. The discussion was steered to Bathurst Street, a dense, concrete-devoted environment all built in the 1960s. Here, Marsha Klemens, Urban Designer at the City of Toronto, provided a comparison to Moscow. Marsha shared that she resided in Bathurst in the early 1980s as a child immigrant from Russia. Although urban living is perceived for being anonymous, the Bathurst area had a real sense of community. She recalled playing with many other children, and knowing what was going on in people's lives, sometimes knowing too much. Nevertheless, to her this 'Concrete Park' felt like home.

### **Residential Concrete:**

In addition, a fair amount of social housing was constructed during this time, resulting in the suburbanization of Toronto. Such areas of vast residential concrete towers have now become poverty stricken, neglected perhaps even forgotten. However, these large apartment buildings, often accommodating families with three and four bedroom units provides social housing which is much needed. We need to find ways to bring value back into these large buildings, and look into revitalization strategies. It was suggested that a Light Rail Transit (LRT) could bring external value to these buildings if placed in proximity to them, as many of these buildings addressed the street.

### **1960s Optimism:**

Michael noted that concrete was used to represent initial ideas about architecture in the City's downtown. However, these architecture developments primarily built in the 1960s are unappreciated. Despite their brutality, Ian Chodikoff, editor of Canada Architect, indicated that there was a love in the vision of these buildings. The buildings represented ambitious projects that introduced new ways of recreating, embraced a new society and demonstrated how such a society should live. An incredible optimism was behind these 'social mutations' that looked at answering larger-scaled dilemmas through architecture.

The 1960s also exhibited Canada as a nation, which was represented through the building activity that took place during this time. Architecture was understood as a political expression. In addition, many organizations of national influence were formed including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). The climate of the country was about investment, which was articulated in architectural projects such as the Robarts Library, which emanated education, and the Manulife Centre which encouraged 'publicness'. As a result, Toronto's identity is linked to this period of time, where buildings became expressions for values, and the meaning behind the buildings were more important than the presence they created.

During this time, designers chose to work with new materials, one being concrete. As many large scale institutional, residential and public buildings were erected where the material of choice was concrete; it came to represent ideas of democracy, institutionalism, and power. In many ways, concrete became the signature of architecture in Toronto similar to the red stone that had been used in Florence. The use of concrete in these large scaled of the projects made them forgiving, as they often required hefty structural requirements.

### **Economics of Concrete:**

Adrian Blackwell, assistant professor at al&d (UofT), spoke about the relationship of architecture and economics, and structures that are beneath the two disciplines. Today, we do not think much about beauty and architecture. Adrian suggested that concrete was a result of fordist principles in modern Toronto, where concrete production was driven by the market and mass production. As a result, architecture became an economic fact, losing its beauty and perhaps taking a turn for the ugly. Like Serra's sculptures, architecture pursued this rejection of the pictorial.

### **Sustainable Debate:**

A revived public interest in architecture has fostered the re-exploration of concrete. David Bowick, partner at Blackwell Bowick Structural Engineers, conferred this trend by associating it to a re-interest in modern architecture. Previously, most of the residential projects, his firm has worked on were knock-offs of Georgian/Victorian styles.

David also shared that the environmental/sustainable debate on concrete has a split view. Concrete is a durable material with great longevity, which is consistent with sustainability goals, as it produces versatile buildings. However, the material also has a high embodied energy; making it challenging to re-introduce in a new envelope. Tearing down concrete can also be seen as irresponsible due to its embodied energy. Nevertheless, there is lots of potential for concrete in the future, especially if the embodied energy of the material is decreased.

In addition, both labour and material costs have risen for the material, limiting its use to crucial elements within a building. During the 1960s there was a high craftsmanship in the formwork of concrete which produced quality buildings. However, as the majority of concrete today is being used for to meet structural requirements, that craft has disappeared. Bowick noted that it has now become a finishing trade.

Some questioned what constituted a concrete building. In many cases, concrete is used as a steel veneer or structural concrete was clad in other materials. Michael noted that they did not discriminate in the publication and anything inherently concrete was included. It was also noted that the vocabulary of concrete architecture is somewhat limited and not as elaborate as other architectural styles. Most agreed that those buildings that achieved the most elegance, used the most concrete.

Antone Frisina added that the future of concrete seeks to redefine the material. For example, studies have been done to make concrete appear soft, and inherently change its texture. This has made the material more appealing, and allowed for its application in non traditional ways.

Graeme noted that concrete is a local material, as it is mixed on site or close to a site.

### **Manulife Centre:**

Michael Clifford, an architect who was involved in the design of the Manulife Centre shared that it is a pure rainscreen building. In addition, the building has a green roof, with five feet of soil that facilitates the growth of trees. The building was designed in detail, with the aid of engineering experts. Consequently, its walls are very deep. The Manulife Centre is one of the most highly regarded concrete buildings in Toronto.

### **Brutal-ism:**

Brutalism is often used to describe the expression of concrete that utilized during this time. Though it was determined that this term is often used incorrectly. Unlike 'renaissance' and 'deco' that have specific positive architectural connotations, brutalism has negative connotations associated with its use in everyday rhetoric. However, not all concrete buildings follow brutalism, Michael Clifford clarified that those buildings characterized by massiveness, a lack of exterior decoration, harsh lines, and the exposure of structural materials typically fall within this style.

With time, this material has become durable and used to refer back to history, time,

and duration.

Susan Lewin noted that some concrete buildings designed in the 1960s – 1970s are dreadful. Characterized by the use of pre-cast systems and a heavy use of clerestory windows, these buildings produced dim interior environments. In addition, as these buildings are coming of age, we are experiencing the worst aspects of them, especially as the weather poorly.

### **Lost Concrete:**

The timing of public re-interest in concrete is interesting as many concrete buildings in Toronto are reaching their perceived adolescence and being demolished. It was noted that most of Parkin's office work is being demolished.

Michael mentioned that a Boston gallery is interested in hosting a Concrete Toronto exhibition. The Boston City Hall is under threat to be demolished, and Concrete Toronto has given the material some resonance.

The discussion concluded that concrete is natural to the City. Unfortunately the concrete architecture has not received much attention. Discussion adds value to matter, and in this case, the publication Concrete Toronto has done a tremendous job at uncovering these buildings and giving them value. We hope that 'Concrete Toronto' is a discussion that continues.

**The meeting was adjourned at 8:35 pm.**

**The next TSA General Meeting will take place on Tuesday March 5th, 2008, at 6:30 pm, location to be announced.**