

## **Assembly**

### A Revaluation of Public Space in Toronto

#### I. Introduction

There exist in our contemporary society a belief about public space that is best characterized as a myth: public space is free, inclusive, common and accessible to all. Regardless of individual interpretations of the implications of such a statement, the fact remains that we generally tend to project idealistic views onto public space. The purpose of the present study is an attempt to identify and demythologize this particular myth along with its ramifications. It is primordial that during a period when the purpose and ownership of public space come into crisis, either because it is not public enough or because it is not private enough, the "nature" of public space should be revalued. The basis for the work is a defined polemic: public space, since the industrial revolution and the rise of our contemporary society has been defined by 1) the erosion of the boundary between our public and private realms and their subsequent dissolution into the larger realm of the social, 2) consumer culture and 3) the alienation of humankind from reality, or the spectacle. This theoretical development describes a society that views public space as the space of regulation, consumption and leisure. In other words, it points to a passive society, incapable of action and speech in the public realm, constantly focused on appearance and the objects of consumption. The development draws on three books from three thinkers, "The Human Condition" by Hannah Arendt, "The Consumer Society" by Jean Baudrillard and "The Society of the Spectacle" by Guy Debord, and is physically grounded in the city of Toronto. Three iconic projects from three successive generations, City Hall and Nathan Phillips Square, the Eaton Centre, and the new Dundas Square, parallel the theoretical development. The sites have been studied as they appeared in public documents published during a time period spanning from their original concept to after completion. It is by a process of assemblage, of carefully building together a "mass" of public information, selected quotations from each thinker and documentary photographs, that the shapes of the myths slowly appear. The following text is a synthesis of some of the emerging shapes observed

throughout the process. It does not offer a straightforward solution to the problem, but rather a sort of meandering path along its most prominent features.

## II. Nathan Phillips Square and Hannah Arendt

### Introduction

On September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1958, the winner of the international competition to design Toronto's new City Hall and Square was announced to the public. Finnish architect Viljo Revell won the commission over 530 entries from 42 different countries, making this competition the largest international competition ever held anywhere around the world. The City Hall and Square were to be built on downtown land expropriated by the City in the early 1950s located just West of the City Hall of the time at Queen St. West and Bay Street. This competition was the result of the voters's rejection of the City's 1955 proposal (on the same site) once described as a "drab filling cabinet." More significant to our study, the design requirements attributed more public space in a downtown area than had ever been attributed in North America for over a century. The civic square, which was later given the name of Nathan Phillips Square (the Toronto mayor in office at the time of the competition), would occupy about half of the area reserved for the civic centre. The design, deemed bold for the time, was criticized by supporters and detractors alike but went on. Finally, on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1965, Toronto's new City Hall and Square were inaugurated under much fanfare.

The construction of a new City Hall and Square brings about numerous questions about the contemporary public role of civic institutions and citizens. In her book "The Human Condition", the German/American philosopher Hannah Arendt gives a critique of the public realm according to humankind's worldly condition. For her, our post-industrial society is characterized by "the rise of the social", or the phenomenon marked by the dissolution of distinct public and private realms into the larger realm of the social. During the industrial revolution, and primarily because of living and working conditions, private interests, or property, labour and the sustenance of life, became public concerns. Similarly, values that were traditionally attributed to the public realm like freedom and excellence became part of the private realm. If, as Arendt

argues, our society has no clear public or private realm, then what is the contemporary role played by public space attached to a civic institution? This question becomes even thornier if we understand the loss of both realms as indicative of the rise of conformity and bureaucracy. The role of the citizen has indeed been dramatically diminished from an active role in public affairs to the passive role of taxpayer or voter. Theoretically, our society could do well without a physical City Hall as the one built in Toronto. Its most important function, one could argue, is that of being something other than a generic office building, a symbol.

### Toronto City Hall as Wish-Image

Toronto's new City Hall approximates the Marxian concept of wish-image. A wish-image is a contemporary conception that, while it is imagined within contemporary technological and artistic culture, does not acknowledge the inherently revolutionary aspect of those spheres and draws on past culture for its inspiration. Wrought iron neo-gothic ornamentation of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century is a striking example of such a wish-image. Similarly, Toronto's City Hall, although it is built within the contemporary, fragmented metropolis, draws its inspiration from past forms.

A line from the competition brief of 1957 reads: "In the eighteenth century, the cathedral and the town hall frequently dominated the urban scene both physically and spiritually." The architects are specifically asked to design a symbol of authority drawing on iconic examples throughout history. The image of the European town square dominated by an institution exists in all our minds as a type. Even though an anachronism, this type does not change with time and is applied quite unquestionably here. What Toronto is referencing are pre-modern-democracy types of civic authority. The problems for the designers, as stated in the brief, are achieving "an atmosphere about a building that suggests government, continuity of certain democratic traditions and service to the community." The brief is quite right in stating that these are problems. The wish for a symbolic and thus authoritarian City Hall is somewhat contradictory to a society where the tendency is for the public realm to dissipate into bureaucracy. One commentator on the design is not completely far off in his view of City Hall as the symbol of totalitarianism. As Arendt says, "as we know from the most social form of government, that is, bureaucracy, the rule by

nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruellest and most tyrannical versions." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40)

When we build public space, we magically think people will use it no matter what. This is obviously not the case in our society. Toronto City Hall and Nathan Phillips Square, although they were imagined to be the place where people would gather whenever anything happened in the City, do not constitute a *necessary* destination for public affairs. This is in complete contradiction with the image of the City Hall as an eighteenth century institution described in the competition brief. The modern City Hall is forced to invent programme external to its significance, concerts, celebrations, festivals, art shows, outdoor skating, etc., in the hope that the population will come. "We are delighted that the new City Council has so quickly grasped the lively possibilities of Nathan Phillips Square, as already demonstrated by the skaters who never seem to vacate the place," says a local newspaper editorial. "Sunday art exhibits, as proposed by Mayor Philip Givens, seem already a certainty. Square dances, hootenannies and Shakespeare programs are also under consideration by subcommittees of the Parks and Recreation Committee. This is splendid. Let us have them all, plus a hot-dog stand, flower barrows, chestnut wagons and someday, – not too far away – a sidewalk café."<sup>1</sup> For members of society, the mistrusted sphere of public affairs appears indeed as a constant detractor from the much more attractive and aesthetic sphere of leisure.

It is quite fitting that the project site be given to architects as a *tabula-rasa*, an expropriated and levelled downtown lot with almost no connection to the rest of the city. After all, this separation from real determinants only supports its status as a wish-image. The project almost appears to free itself from contemporary constraints, not to say local constraints. It is therefore able to achieve – as a projected vision – a sort of timelessness on which the symbol can draw. The void allows the architects to focus entirely on the model of their vision and build it as such. Toronto City Hall, as one critic puts it, is a built "esquisse", a constructed sketch model of the project.<sup>2</sup> Modern architecture must always struggle with this familiarity of the model with the real object. The conditions of the *tabula-rasa* force the alienation of the architect from the

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial, *The Globe & Mail*, "Not a square square", 9 January 1965. Fragment 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal RAIC*, "Panel Discussion on the Civic Design Aspects of the City Hall", September 1965. Fragment 121.

common world. An alienation that is inevitably projected onto the final built form.

### Permanence and Flexibility

In 1998, after the Greater Toronto Area and its municipalities (including the City of Toronto) amalgamated into one "mega-city", the new City Council came close to abandoning City Hall. "Many councillors, including Mayor Mel Lastman, voted against retaining Revell's landmark as civic centre of the new megacity in favour of the totally banal Metro Centre."<sup>3</sup> This reflects a tendency of our society to disregard permanence. "There is perhaps no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality, a loss somewhat over-shadowed by the simultaneous loss of the metaphysical concern with eternity." (55) For Arendt, the first condition for immortality is that an object outlives its maker. As she warns, there can be no public space if it is not built for generations to last. Whenever our society disregards permanence, it usually does to the benefit of efficiency or economy. When Toronto City Hall was constructed in 1965, it received much criticism on its lack of efficiency and its cost. Its two towers were seen as rigid and inflexible and its cost rose to about 150% of calculations. Even before it was built some argued for the project to be abandoned. It is quite significant that the issue of efficiency over permanence would almost ruin the project 33 years later. It is quite outstanding of the City to have decided to keep the building as civic centre. One can only imagine the *tour-de-force* necessary in refurbishing a City Hall built as its symbol into anything else.

This lack of authentic concern with immortality in our society, completely actualized in consumption, is paralleled by a decrease in its ability for excellence. For Arendt, the only proper location of excellence is the public realm: "No activity can become excellent if the world does not provide a proper space for its exercise. Neither education nor ingenuity nor talent can replace the constituent elements of the public realm, which make it the proper place for human excellence." (49) When the social realm took over the public realm, it ruined the only location where the great actions and words of humankind can exist in permanence. Action and speech, unlike physical things, cannot outlast their individual moments unless they are reified into objects of the common

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<sup>3</sup> The Toronto Star, "Bringing city's heart to the people", 3 October 1998. Fragment 171.

world. The lack of a proper location for excellence and the inflation of the private realm also means that society has lost most of its ability to excel in public. "While we have become excellent in the labouring we perform in public, our capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and the private." (49)

## Equality

A question that may arise could be formulated as such: Nathan Phillips Square is host to a variety of public events, does not that make it a successful public space? It does, but only if we consider its ability to host events from the viewpoint of modern equality. The problem here is not the use of the square per se, but the sameness relating each event. Because society has a tendency to "equalize under all circumstances" (41), the possible distinction of an event – either scheduled or not – is dramatically reduced as it blurs into a greater indistinct mass of events. However great of a "ripple" an event can generate, it will eventually just be a ripple on a much larger pool. In other words, from the viewpoint of the whole of society, there is no difference between a political rally, the visit of a dignitary, a popular festival or a criminal act. The reason for this is that society measures equality according to justice. Traditionally, equality was measured according to freedom. "Equality [...] was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed." (Arendt, 33) Our concept of equality, Arendt warns, is much more connected with the "equality of the household members before the rule of the household head" than with the concept of freedom. In other words, although members of society are theoretically "equal under the law", they operate in a sphere devoid of freedom. The problem, then, in this equalization of public space becomes the location of freedom – if all events that fall into the realm of predictability (under the law) become equal, then the free act inevitably falls into the realm, not of the unpredictable, since it can always be brought to justice, but of the fundamentally disruptive that frees itself from the rule of the "head of the household".

## Behaviour and Bylaws

Society is the association of individual groups into one “super-human family.” (29) Arendt argues that when the private realm of the household infiltrated the public realm, the latter took the qualities of the former. The inequality that was the trademark of the household became perceivable in a society where everyone is equal under justice. This elevation of the household as the whole of humanity is not only an external appearance of society, but it is also, and perhaps more importantly, the way society perceives itself. Society demands a certain behaviour from its members, much like the head of the household would. “It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.” (40) Action, once the foremost mode of human relations, has now been replaced by behaviour. (41) This trend, Arendt says, is not only paralleled, but supported by the rise of statistics and the behavioural sciences under the models of which every human being has accepted his/her existence.

In public space, the dominance of behaviour over action is actualized by our use of bylaws. The “normalization” of human interactions is written in a strict code of conduct, in which everything deemed publicly unacceptable is outlawed. Bylaws regulating public space are the magical thinking of a society that harbours a profound wariness of all unexpected public action. On Nathan Phillips Square, for example, bylaws forbid such activities as, just to name a few, riding a bicycle, lighting a candle, standing on a planter, wading or throwing objects in the reflecting pool, or using a megaphone. When, during the extremely cold weeks of February 2005 and reacting to the low use of publicly-funded official shelters, the City decided to take action on the issue of homeless people using the Square as an overnight refuge, it chose to propose a bylaw that would make sleeping on Nathan Phillips Square illegal. Whether we see it fit or not, bylaws will normalize “under all circumstances”.

## Expropriation and Homelessness

Three days after the official inauguration of Toronto’s new City Hall, the City announced that the Timothy Eaton Company Ltd. was planning a \$260-million

dollar project for a shopping mall adjacent to the City Hall site. The Eaton plans created much of a controversy since they called for the removal of the old City Hall on Queen Street. The City had originally sold the building to the Metropolitan authorities as part of its new City Hall budget. Metro owners were now asking Eaton \$8-million dollars for the transfer. A long battle ensued between advocates of the removal of the building and advocates of its upkeep that eventually culminated in the abandonment of the project for financial and political reasons. City officials, although with some reservations, were mostly enthusiastic about the project. "We would be stupid to reject the first overtures of such a gigantic proposal," Mayor Philip Givens said. "I am certain any plan they present will exceed, if not rival, Rockefeller Centre."<sup>4</sup> The debate reflects a trait of society described by Arendt in which "society, when it first entered the public realm, assumed the disguise of an organization of property-owners who, instead of claiming access to the public realm because of their wealth, demanded protection from it for the accumulation of more wealth." (68) At the base of this statement lies a crucial distinction between property and wealth. "Wealth and property, far from being the same, are of an entirely different nature. The present emergence everywhere of actually or potentially very wealthy societies which at the same time are essentially propertyless [...] clearly shows how little these two things are connected." (61) Moreover, our contemporary understanding of public space might be at odds with the fact that traditionally, it was private property and wealth that granted an individual access to a free public realm. There could be no possible public space before a certain amount of privacy is secured. The danger of equating property and wealth, as our society does, is that, as Arendt writes, we tend to "sacrifice private property whenever it comes into conflict with the accumulation of more wealth" (66) , even though private property is far more important to the common world than wealth is. The abolition of property, as opposed to the abolition of private wealth which would have no consequence unless it affected property at the same time, can only mean that individuals are deprived of a worldly place of their own. This is the "homelessness" of our society in its strictest sense.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Globe & Mail*, 16 September 1965. Fragment 331.

### III. The Eaton Centre and Jean Baudrillard

#### Introduction

Phase I of the Toronto Eaton Centre opened its doors to the public on February 10, 1977, as one of Canada's largest retailing space. It comprised over 250 individual retailers and its central galleria stretched a distance of 260 meters parallel to Yonge Street. At its highest point, the glass ceiling of the galleria reached 27 meters. The City saw the project as a positive reinforcement to its commercial heart, bringing back some of the "vitality" that recent sub-urban centres had drained from downtown. After the demise of the 1965 design for financial and political reasons – and perhaps also for the public's reception of the design, the Cadillac-Fairview Corporation took over the project and re-submitted a design to the City, this time keeping it away from the eyes of the public. Understandably, the completion of the project was awaited with great anticipation and explicit apprehension. "The overriding problem with Eaton Centre is that nobody knows what it is," warned aldermen John Sewell<sup>5</sup>. The construction of the project advanced testingly as opposition was met not only from sceptics like Sewell, but from a Church and dying wishes. The Holy Trinity Church, still standing today, refused for the longest time to sell part of its land needed for the Centre's completion. In the end the land was sold and "following its new image, the church [...] started playing canned music for curious noon-hour shoppers from Eaton Centre who drop in to take a look."<sup>6</sup> During the same time period a "small parcel of property, willed to the University of Toronto in 1922 on the condition that it never fall into the hands of the T. Eaton Co. Ltd."<sup>7</sup>, had to be acquired through a legal reinterpretation of the will. When the doors of Phase I finally opened, headlines clamoured – without much exaggeration – that the inauguration was "the biggest game in town."

It should not be a surprise to us that a retailing centre could momentarily "take over" the public realm as the Eaton Centre did in Toronto. After all, consumption is perhaps the single most conditioned activity of our society. In the words of John Kenneth Galbraith: "The individual serves the industrial system [...] by consuming its products. On no other matter, religious, political,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Globe & Mail*, "Eaton Centre agreement called too lax", 23 November 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Aubrey Wice, *The Globe & Mail*, "Trinity to keep worship style", 19 February 1977.

<sup>7</sup> *The Globe & Mail*, "U of T seeks way to void will", 18 September 1973.

or moral, is he so elaborately and skilfully and expensively instructed.”<sup>8</sup> We are raised and educated, not as public speakers or doers, but as *public consumers*. This is but one sign of what Jean Baudrillard, in his 1970 book “The Consumer Society”, describes as the ideology of consumption. Consumption, more than being a simple activity, is a complete system of interaction and belief. It is both the means and end of post-industrial society. “It is this reflexive, discursive configuration, endlessly repeated in everyday speech and intellectual discourse, which has acquired the force of *common sense*.” (Baudrillard, The Consumer Society, 193) The shopping mall, Baudrillard’s “drugstore”, is the quintessential architectural expression of the consumer society. It is a complete environment, “conditioned” and designed by the rules of the ideology. For this reason, there is perhaps no more poignant sign of consumption’s triumph over the social realm than a figurehead of the Crown, Lieutenant-Governor Pauline McGibbon, gracefully descending a staircase on the Eaton Centre’s inauguration day alongside the president of the Timothy Eaton Company Ltd., and cutting a ceremonial ribbon. Consumption is indeed so ingrained in our daily lives that such a scene bears no superficial sign of contradiction.

#### Anti-Consumerism

The ideology of consumption is inescapable. It is this sphere of production that has achieved the magical status of “the system”. Individuals, whether they want to or not, evolve within this system that, at the same time, completely describes and prescribes their interactions and beliefs. The exchanges occurring between people are far less conditioned by human aspects than by objects. (25) Indeed, the social status of a person generally makes more sense to us if it is given in terms of what they own and what they consume rather than by who they are or what they have achieved. This is true even in the case of anti-consumerism, where the refusal to consume certain products from certain producers and buying from others is in fact the same as displaying proudly the most expensive items from the most irresponsible producers. The interaction that occurs in both cases is directly conditioned by the rules of consumption and not external to them. As Baudrillard puts it: “Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation.” (196) All the refutations of the Eaton Centre project, of a City

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<sup>8</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, p.49.

that has “bent over double to invite such devaluation”<sup>9</sup>, do not suggest solutions outside of the realm of consumption – but only beg the question of what to do with a “\$14-million a year realty and business tax loss”<sup>10</sup>.

### Happiness and Waste

Because the consumer is effectively alienated from the fabrication process, the consumable object tends to acquire an aura of infinite replaceability. The result is virtual abundance, or the impression of the ability to consume without limit from an ever abundant “pool” of commodities. This generates a cycle between happiness and needs. By allowing the consumers to possess any object of desire, the system affords objective happiness; a happiness constantly superseded by the creation of more needs and wants, which in turn are fulfilled by other consumable products, and so on... The most superficial interpretation of this virtual abundance, of this “multiplication of the signs of happiness” (31), is that it is the very meaning of consumption. As this Eaton Centre ad shows, consumption is certainly presented this way: “The Toronto Eaton Centre. More than 250 of the most interesting shops in Toronto. Chic boutiques. Family value stores. Happily intermingled. And people. Throngs of people. Strolling. Shopping. And smiling because their city has new life in its heart.” But nothing could be further from the truth. The true meaning of consumption is not “happiness through abundance”, or “smiling shoppers”, but waste. “It is in destruction that [consumption] acquires meaning.” (47) The object of consumption is not a useful tool, but an object whose destruction (consummation) is implicit in its production. Only once it is destroyed, and consequently replaced, does it become “useful”. What is so crucial in determining this variation on use is that “consumption [...] is not a function of enjoyment, but a function of production.” (78) The inattentive critic who sees Toronto’s Eaton Centre as “a recreation facility in the broadest and best sense”<sup>11</sup> only supports our society’s profound misunderstanding of the meaning of consumption.

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Elte, *The Globe & Mail*, “The Eaton Centre: Sense or Nonsense?”, 31 March 1966.

<sup>10</sup> Alden Baker, *The Globe & Mail*, “\$14-million yearly taxes lost with Eaton Centre, Gray says”, 19 May 1967.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Klein, *The Canadian Architect*, “The Toronto Eaton Centre: Phase I”, May 1977.

## The Galleria as Street Fetish

Under the effects of consumption, public space has taken the qualities of a commodity. We treat it as a marketable product to which qualities of exchange value and usefulness are attributed. The “project” of a shopping mall, or even a city hall, is, because fundamentally social, a collective one. That is, the result is presented as the inevitable and indispensable product of our society’s progress. But while such a projection may be collective in the general sense, it never forms a public realm since the individual consumer remains alienated from the collective product. In other words, the involvement so necessary to a healthy public realm is lost because of the consumer’s “relation of curiosity” (34) to anything that surrounds him. Indeed, we primarily “use” public space with uninvolved curiosity as a we would a new iron or a new television set. It is a space that no longer “unites and separates” humankind, but that divides and differentiates it under all circumstances.

The transformation of everything into a commodity evolves into a fetishistic relation between humankind and its objects. The more we produce, the more we surround ourselves with objects, the more we are prone to attribute a special status to certain goods. When this happens, we project an image of the object as it is not, aggrandized, vital, symbolic, etc. The galleria of the Eaton Center aggrandized and symbolized the street into a fetish. It not only paralleled the main commercial street of Toronto, but perfected it. With time, the “perfection” worked too well. The construction of the galleria sucked the life from Yonge Street, slowly changing it into what Mayor Mel Lastman once described as an “eyesore”: a stretch of discount stores, run-down buildings and businesses of questionable reputation. Once it is seen as a commodity, the street can be approached as a tempting perfection. It is redesigned, reconstructed, climatized, homogenized into a condensation of its socially acceptable qualities. The unacceptable still remains, but elsewhere. This is the magical thinking behind the idea of public space as a commodity: it can be perfected by methods of production without any loss to the social realm.

## Shopping and Social Duty

The individual consumer fulfills his responsibility to the system by destroying its objects. The average 50 million people that come to the Eaton Centre every year are not “visitors” as the office of tourism would have us believe; whether

they are tourists or locals, these individuals are acting within a system for which the “shoppers” have become “necessary and practically irreplaceable.” (52) As long as the curiosity of the tourist for the architecture, or the local’s preferred use of the galleria over Yonge Street adds up to a sale before the end of the day, then a certain function has been achieved. It is because of this irreplaceability that, as Baudrillard argues, the individual consumer can see himself as the “new exploited subject of modern times” (84). “We don’t realize how much the current indoctrination into systematic and organised consumption is the equivalent and the extension, in the twentieth century, of the great indoctrination of rural populations into industrial labour.” (81) Under this “indoctrination”, consumption becomes the social duty of the individual (remember September 12, 2001). In the words of Eaton Centre shopper Stephanie Phillips: “Our grandparents fought the war. We fought Boxing Day.”<sup>12</sup>

Consumption is then a “gigantic political field.” (84) The emancipation that comes from the individuals’s realization of their relatively significant position within the system transforms their role as passive consumers into pseudo-political, active consumers. On one hand, as consumers we enjoy the idea of being able to “punish” the system through selective consumption; the boycott is perhaps to consumption what the strike is to production. On the other hand, we entertain the idea that the system must provide for every individual need. Regardless of how egotistic the need, there must be something with a price tag able to satisfy it. In both cases, and because consumption is a “fragile” economic structure, the system –must- react, either by reinforcing constraints and repressing “fanatical egoism” or by increasing production and creating more consumer individualism. For Baudrillard, this contradiction is the crux of the problem of the consumer society. “The paradox is as follows: one cannot simultaneously remind the individual that ‘the level of consumption is the just measure of social merit’ and expect of him or her a different type of social responsibility, since in the act of personal consumption the individual already fully assumes a social responsibility.” (84)

## Freedom and the Shopping Mall

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<sup>12</sup> *The Toronto Star*, “Boxing day crowds jam stores”, 27 December 1999.

It has been said that shopping may be the last public activity left for us to do "freely". The fact that it cannot be logically constrained since it is a "service", in fact a duty, of the individual to the economic system seems to attest to that. Compared to a public square where by-laws regulate use, consumer space, destined for the sole activity of consuming, cannot be regulated and is therefore "free". But this freedom, far from being total, is, as in the social realm, restricted. The consumer is free, and allowed to remain free, just as long as he consumes. This relative and feeble freedom is further diminished by the fact that the realm of consumption is the realm of the strictest inequality. If we accept that "shopping is such a personal experience and fashion is certainly a way of showcasing your individual personality,"<sup>13</sup> then there should be no doubt that shopping and consumption are just means of differentiation. Individuals may have some equality in relation to the use of an object (a bench will serve the same seating-capability for everyone), but that equality is immediately destroyed when the object's sign-value exceeds its use-value as is the case in the consumer society (that bench means something more than this one). Whether it is in relation to objects, buying power or control of the market, consumers are effectively separated and differentiated, never united. "Consumption no more homogenizes the social body than the educational system homogenizes cultural opportunities. It even highlights the disparities within it." (58) For Baudrillard, consumption is a "system of class" that generally divides society in two, consumers with no control over the process of production and consumption, and an elite with power over the same process. Freedom in the consumer society approaches freedom in the social realm. It is false freedom supported by false equality.

### Objective Reality and Fantasy

Under the ever increasing mass of consumable objects, individual objects acquire a certain sameness: whether they are of greater or lesser value does not matter, what matters is that they are dispensable, replaceable. As a consequence of this, the value attributed to an object comes not from its usefulness, but from its signification. It is the sign-value of the object that matters, or in other words, its distinction over the sameness of the rest. The Eaton Centre, as a vehicle of consumption, has some specific value in its

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<sup>13</sup> *Press Release*, Eaton Centre official web site, 23 March 2004.

usefulness, but it is generally overshadowed by its identification as “a world class shopping experience.”<sup>14</sup> The Centre is expected to distinguish itself as universal attraction and become an icon of the city it was built in. The fantasy of the “icon” replaces the objective reality of the real thing. For Baudrillard, the same can be said of every aspect of the consumer society, even human interactions and beliefs. “It is the truer than true which counts or, in other words, the fact of being there without being there. Or, put it yet another way, the fantasy.” (34)

#### IV. Dundas Square and Guy Debord

##### Introduction

In 1996, the City of Toronto officially undertook the project of redeveloping the corner of Yonge and Dundas Street. The area around the intersection known as Toronto’s commercial centre had slowly fallen into a state of decrepitude after 1977, the year the Eaton Centre was built. The shops around the corner of Dundas and Yonge soon lost business and the state of the neighbourhood worsened steadily. In 1996, the intersection was primarily known for pawnshops, bargain stores and drug abuse. The plan to redevelop the area included as its major contribution a new open public square on the southeast corner of the intersection. The national competition for the square was officially opened in September 1998 in the hope of creating “an animated urban square to serve as the centrepiece of the revitalization of downtown Yonge Street.” (Competition Brief) Following the expropriation of a series of shops along Yonge Street that cleared the way for the development, the empty site for the new square got to be described as the “most important piece of real-estate in Canada.” In December of 1998, Browne & Storey Architects of Toronto were announced as winners of the competition for Dundas Square. Their design, a relatively open square with a focal stage, a canopy lining Dundas Street, a row of trees to the south and an *allée* of water jets, was chosen among five finalists. Architectural critics were enthusiastic. The project was featured both in “Architecture” and “Canadian Architect” and received prizes from both publications. A major reason for the project’s success at this stage was that it presented itself as a void in the city and not a cluttered theme park. The

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<sup>14</sup> Publicity, *The Globe & Mail*, 28 June 1976.

relatively calm design contrasted the almost chaotic intersection. Nevertheless, Dundas Square became one of the most contentious site in the city. The major battle was over the “public” ownership of the square. While it was hailed by the city and some critics as the “most significant public space project in Toronto since Nathan Phillips Square”, it was derided by others as “the latest step in the rapid erosion and privatization of public spaces in Toronto.”<sup>15</sup>

This latter point of contention is justified. Dundas Square is a “fantasy”. It is the representation of a real public space, constructed and managed as such. With the loss of objective reality, and with the “dominance of sign-value over use-value”, the consumer society inevitably evolves into what Guy Debord defines as “the society of the spectacle”. In his 1967 book of the same name, Debord, the most prominent member of the cultural radical group the “International Situationist”, describes a society in which “all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” (Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1) Much like Baudrillard’s consumption, Debord’s spectacle presents itself as a complete system of values, interactions and beliefs. For him it is the defining ideology of our contemporary society and prescribes the social realm as well as the realm of intimacy. The object of Dundas Square is presented to us as a perfected satisfaction of our public needs – as would any “new and improved” commodity. But the movement which pushes it forward into the public realm only says, to paraphrase Debord, “that which appears is public space.”

### The Profitable Public Space

Any physical public space is part of a specific division of land ownership. For this reason, even our “public” spaces are somehow subject to the economic and behavioural pressures of much larger private spaces, say the real-estate market. In the words of Debord: “There remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry.” (Debord, *Comment on the Society of the Spectacle*, IV) This is one of the contradiction inherent to a city’s public space project. The public expects the city to treat the space as free of private interests, while in reality it is forced to treat the space as a loss to building

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<sup>15</sup> Wiley Norvell, *Eye*, “Bare Square Dares”, 12 June 2003.

taxes. This contradiction is better expressed in the words of Toronto Councillor Kyle Rae who has gone on record saying that Dundas Square is "City property, not public property."<sup>16</sup> In a city that is run as a private entity, public space must turn in a profit. Before the Square's official inauguration in 2003, the City set up a board of management for the square responsible for, among other things, maintenance, operation, control and fiscal management. A City of Toronto staff report states that "the by-law establishes the Board's goal of achieving financial self-sufficiency for the Square by 2005 and allows the Board to establish booking policies for the Square, retain staff and consultants, issue permits for activities on the Square, and to enter into contracts for services as may be required in connection with its role of managing the Square."<sup>17</sup> At the onset, Dundas Square is a separate entity from the City, a business venture expected to be financially sustainable. It is no wonder the City's rhetoric of Toronto's new "public space" may be interpreted as a case in point example of spectacular discourse.

#### Surveillance and Safety

"Once it attains the stage of the integrated spectacle, self-proclaimed democratic society seems to be generally accepted as the realization of a fragile perfection. So that it must no longer be exposed to attacks, being fragile; and indeed is no longer open to attack, being perfect as no other society before it." (VII) The "fragile perfection" of Dundas Square is its projection as the image of the end product of society, as the inevitable condition of economic progress. Nothing should or can interfere with its goal of financial self-sufficiency or its image as Toronto's new public place. "What takes place on the public sidewalk surrounding the Square will impact on the Square's success in meeting its objective of becoming a vibrant, safe and active focal point and economic catalyst. The Board has expressed concern respecting the possible impacts of activities such as sidewalk busking and vending, postering and sidewalk maintenance, and with security issues such as panhandling."<sup>18</sup>

It is thus in the nature of the new square, and in fact the duty of its Board of Management, to "safeguard" its intentions from undesirable behaviour. For this

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<sup>16</sup> Jeff Gray, *The Globe & Mail*, "Square to open with flair", 30 May 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Joe Halstead, City of Toronto, *City of Toronto Staff Report*, 4 October 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Joe Halstead, City of Toronto, *City of Toronto Staff Report*, 4 October 2002. It is interesting to note that even the voices raised against the use of security systems on the "public" square demand their removal, not on the basis of equality, but on the basis of restricted *privacy*.

reason, the space at Dundas Square is constantly monitored by a private security company as well as a series of closed-circuit surveillance cameras. The square's distinction from other city squares is crucial here, because it allows the Board to use privately owned security systems to enforce bylaws. The use of cameras on Dundas Square, which in other parts of the country was deemed a "violation to citizen's right to privacy,"<sup>19</sup> was in 2003 lauded by Mayor Mel Lastman as "reflecting the need for a more vigilant society."<sup>20</sup> The project also received the unmitigated support of Julian Fantino, Toronto's Chief of Police at the time. "This is not to impede or otherwise interfere with or disenfranchise law-abiding citizens," said Fantino. "This is to deal with the criminal element who victimize decent law-abiding citizens."<sup>21</sup> This discourse on "safety" is spectacular discourse in its broadest sense. In no way do these measures add up to what should be a safe environment, one that is open and enjoyable to all of society. Dundas Square's safety – or more pointedly, Dundas Square's security – is not seen from the viewpoint of public experience, but from the viewpoint of economic progress. The result of this spectacular condition is the *appearance of safety*. The "problems", as identified by the Board of Management, are simply translated onto other locations.

### Public Opinion as Simulation

The very idea of a large society over which a single person or group can have some control could not possibly exist without statistics. Statistics gives us the ability to view and treat the whole of society as a predictable model and is at the basis of polls, surveys, public opinion, etc. No other "tool" is thus perhaps more significant in establishing contemporary democracy. What can then be the value of Dundas Square, or any "public space" for that matter, if what we accept as public opinion is but a rendering of a predictable model? As Debord writes: "We have dispensed with that disturbing conception [...] in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or revolution." (VIII) Yet we still like to view public space as the location from which such movements can gather momentum. As one local newspaper writer claims: "For Torontonians, [Dundas Square] will be a stage set, [...] a vantage point from

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<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Quinn, *The Toronto Star*, "Police push for cameras to monitor the public", 19 October 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

which to see the city as well as ourselves.”<sup>22</sup> Only the most optimistic among us can see Dundas Square as a “stage set” other than a performance space, but as a space where public discourse can exist meaningfully. The “stage” at Dundas Square does not support public discourse. It in fact supports our growing incapacity for public action. Action, on the square, is the result of carefully managed programming. “The initial fee structure approved by City Council in December 2001 exempts City-planned and executed events held on the Square from paying fees and limits such City use of the Square to 20 percent of programmable days.”<sup>23</sup> Prediction is everything in managing the Square as an acceptable (normative and self-financing) venue. It should be no surprise that the unpredictability of real public action has no logical place within a system in which the most prominent public “spectacle” means \$3,000 to the City on peak days. “Carol Jolly, general manager of the Dundas Square Board, says the city originally wanted to set the rental fees even higher, but she managed to talk them down to a mere \$3,000.”<sup>24</sup> There is perhaps no better testimony to this tension than the own words of Toronto’s ex-Chief of Police, Julian Fantino. “‘A problem is now arising,’ writes Julian Fantino in a report to the September 18 meeting of the police services board, ‘where portions of the public believe that Dundas Square is a public space.’ The chief elaborates on the problem, reminding us that ‘anti-war demonstrators in the first quarter of 2003... utilized the square as a meeting point without proper authorization.’”<sup>25</sup>

The reality of public space and public discourse is that they are simulations. They are spectacles of what has been accepted, by the elusive majority, as the norm. Any behaviour that deviates from that norm is a-social by nature. For Debord, this condition approaches tyranny dramatically since “spectacular discourse leaves no room for any reply” (X) and therefore reduces the world to a single perspective.

## The Media

The most evident manifestation of the spectacle in contemporary society is through communication. Media, or the vehicles of mass communication, have a tendency to reduce the world to a singularity. This vulgarisation is evidently

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<sup>22</sup> Christopher Hume, *The Toronto Star*, “A European Space”, 18 January 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Joe Halstead, *City of Toronto, City of Toronto Staff Report*, 4 October 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Mike Smith, *Now Magazine*, “By Permit Only”, 15 May 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Mike Smith, *Now Magazine*, “Dancing in the Dark”, 2 October 2003.

spectacular because, like the statistical model, it constitutes a “monopoly of appearance” (The Society of the Spectacle, 12) that hears no reply. “There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it.” (Comment on the Society of the Spectacle, VII) The message, whether private publicity or public information, is fed to spectators as a reality over which they have no control. The accumulation of these messages saturates the perimeter of Dundas Square, where billboards, video screens and “oversize novelty items” have taken over the roof tops and façades of the surrounding buildings. Two freestanding “communication towers”, structural skeletons supporting information devices, have even been constructed. Under the intensity of the “most exciting outdoor advertising opportunity in Canada”<sup>26</sup> it is quite unlikely that any public forum could find comfort.

Yet the spectacle is not only the superficial messages transmitted by media images. More insidious than that, the spectacle is a “social relationship between people, mediated by images.” (The Society of the Spectacle, 4) Even the occasional use of the media screens surrounding Dundas Square to transmit live images from the square is lauded by the square’s architect: “You turn from being a spectator into an entertainer. It’s a fabulous reversal.”<sup>27</sup> It does not matter: whether it is seeing themselves on screen, reading the news, or simply taking in the ads, individuals on Dundas Square are, like the spectators of the “society of the spectacle”, forcibly conditioned by the images that surround them. The spectator’s world, under these conditions, becomes “the world of everyone’s separation, estrangement and nonparticipation.” (Debord & Canjuers, Preliminaries Towards Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program, 1.6) Passivity, and the egotistic over-indulgence of leisure, is at home on a square where action has been reduced to programming and speech to the “laudatory monologue” (The Society of the Spectacle, 24) of the media.

### Design and Good Intentions

Architectural design inevitably reduces the public realm to a homogenous and singular public space: the “whole”. This reduction is more or less generated by the fraught relationship between the designer’s individual values and general

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<sup>26</sup> Clear Channel official web site, “Yonge-Dundas Square”, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> *The Toronto Star*, “Watching the billboards watching you”, 2 August 2004.

social values. For this reason, public space is allowed to enter the world of the commodity. It can be defined as a whole solution, independent of the external cultural and political factors that eventually come to rule over it. As long as the design appears "responsible" and does not blatantly (and critically) enter the spectacular discourse of censorship and security, the designer shields his or herself from any blame. The designer becomes a "fictional speaker" of the spectacle, one who surrounds the spectator with their commodities and the politics of their commodities. (218) Dundas Square, in the words of architect James Brown, does not prescribe space; "it proposes a series of supports that allow a lot of different choices to happen."<sup>28</sup> The uncritical position is further supported by the architectural critics. "The architect intends to precipitate a revival of downtown street life by enhancing a new public space with such amenities as shelters, landscaping, and seating."<sup>29</sup> It appears as though a square that "proffers an oasis of calm within the multi-media cacophony that will surround it"<sup>30</sup> is the "critical position" of the designer when in fact it is the simplest uncritical expression of the competition program. In the words of Joe Berridge, whose company organized the competition: "It could have been just a concrete slab with a piano in the middle to meet the design requirements."<sup>31</sup> The architecture, closed in on itself and kept from engaging the determinant factors at play, inescapably ends up being the reduced expression of the social movement pushing the project forward. The design proffers the illusion of responsibility that is accepted as genuine intention by the spectator, the "consumer of illusions." (47)

## V. Disassembly

There is always a tendency at the end of a text to conclude and reduce the argument to a straightforward solution. I do not wish to take that route here. I believe the developing argument, in its many folds and meanderings, can be far richer than its simplification, however beautiful the final "equation" is. The assemblage itself usually says more than its maker can put into words. From the start, this work has accepted "heterogeneity" as a necessary condition of

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<sup>28</sup> Pamela Young, *The Globe & Mail*, "Architects Devise Calm Eye in Urban Storm", 2 January 1999.

<sup>29</sup> *Architecture*, April 2000.

<sup>30</sup> *Canadian Architect*, December 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Wallace Immen, *The Globe & Mail*, 2 December 1998.

public space, consciously moving away from the homogenizing tendency of design. This condition has been accepted and its effects applied to the method and process of research. That this work cannot offer a concrete solution is, perhaps, inherent to the question. Nonetheless, what we can do, is try to “frame” the problem while still remaining faithful to its heterogeneity.

Defining and designing significant public space is probably one of the most demanding things for our contemporary society. At every instance, one is forced to conciliate the demands of mass culture and individual agency. When doing the same for private space, we can work confidently, having the assurance of private interests and needs. For public space, the innumerable interests and needs of society come into play – most of the time unwittingly so – and the project is inevitably bound to fail the “idea” of public space. We must therefore look to redefine public space for our society. Yet we must do so without losing its outstanding characteristic as the location of freedom, speech and action. There is incredible trust at the moment in the power of new technologies to do this exact thing. Virtual networks, whether the internet or cellular technology, have somehow been elevated to the status of the “new public space”. While there is a true potential for these technologies, they cannot yet constitute a true public space as they act extraneously to our worldly human condition. They do not provide “real” interaction in the sense of being seen and heard by equals since the interaction they do provide always includes distance. They connect us, but at the same time effectively separate us. Yet, this is where the crux of the problem could lie. Our nostalgic and mythologizing view of public space may be drawn out of a definition of the human condition that has already been superseded by something that lacks definition. Much like Henri Lefebvre “urban” is inexplicable and will continue to be until all pre-urban forms burst apart, or like Baudrillard’s “mass society” evades examination and definition (perhaps also until old social forms burst apart), public space for our contemporary society may prove to be indefinable until all surviving old notions of public space and private space disappear. Or until all the myths we continue to project onto public space are finally disassembled.

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