tural landscape of 1945–1970 was not bereft of ingenious and seminal works of art and architecture; however, the best were not necessarily influenced by the Cold War but transcended it.

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Related Publication

Actions: What You Can Do with the City / Comment s’approprier la ville
Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal
26 November 2008–19 April 2009

Over the past three years, exhibitions at the Canadian Centre for Architecture have been challenging fundamental assumptions about the design and function of what we build and the spaces we inhabit, asking us to rethink architecture in light of the coming environmental crisis. Sense of the City (2006) focused on the metropolis as a site of environmental experience in its own right, from the fall of snow or the cries of wild creatures to the feel of asphalt. Environment: Approaches for Tomorrow (2007) reconsidered the man-made landscapes as a set of ethical problems in managing our relationship to nature rather than an exercise in aesthetics. Sorry, Out of Gas (2007–8) looked forward to impending constraints of natural resources by revisiting design movements that responded to the first great energy crisis in the 1970s.

With Actions, the Centre has widened this debate to suggest that the most productive discourse on the urban form—how we should live in it and what steps we might take to adapt it to the desperate environmental and social needs of our times—might come not from a few grand plans or strategies, but from myriad little well-considered but unexpected acts, a conglomeration of subtly interdependent living manifestoes. The exhibition was one component in a layered project designed to locate, encourage, and document modest, independent, and for the most part distinctly non-architectural acts of transformative intervention in cities around the world. A parallel publication theorized the inquiry, while a permanent website recorded what it found and invited new initiatives to move it forward. Together these manifestations constituted the visible archive of a long investigation, gathering evidence in many media of ninety-nine initiatives, which ranged from the installation of a soccer field on the concrete floor of a public square to a community project designed to harvest the fruit of ornamental trees along a roadway, and, as submissions for a hundredth action found their way to the web, on to the unknown.

Actions suggested that the real shape of the city emerges not from the structures that developers and designers place within it, nor from how planners organize its systems, nor from what the architectural critics and guidebooks ask us to observe of it, but from all that happens under and over its roofs and floors, around and between its walls. Organized around four categories of activity—walking, gardening, recycling, and play—the exhibition took its cues first from the idea that in post-industrial societies the distinctions between town and country, suburb and center no longer exist. The result has been a marked emphasis on re-calibrating the urban ecology into a conflation of rus and urbs, in which the accidental motions of the metropolis are turned into rural promenades, and its incidental spaces are harvested, green-spaced, or farmed. We have now suffered through two decades of perfectly admirable but endlessly pious Benjaminian celebrations of the parcours; exhibitions and installations devoted to the greening of the city, the conversion of metropolitan wastelands into wilderness playgrounds, and the edible townscape; and art-based tracings of the unconscious choreographies of urban movement and memory. But it was apparent from the moment of walking into the show that Actions was something quite different, brought slowly to light through the clarity and simplicity of the presentation—a systematic assembly of documents converging through space, as if to make an ideal city of their own. The lack of color and histrionics, the uniformity and neutrality of scale, and a rigorous refusal to dramatize or polemicize began to evoke a
Like CCA’s Sense of the City, the idea was not that action is opposed to discourse, but that action in the city is in fact the most effective form of discourse. Grounding his argument in the complex notion that the metropolis is no longer a system of production but a system of consumption, he suggested that the best road to understanding the city, its histories, its conditions, and its futures might come from doing something with it—a sort of spontaneous consumption of its spaces out of which new habits and patterns of use might emerge. Even more boldly, and with remarkable persuasion, the show went on to suggest that such acts of consumption were—as work had once been—steps toward social redemption, the reconciliation of the individual with community, the community with the fabric, and the fabric with nature. As a result, the ninety-nine projects came across not as acts of disorder, as provocations, or incitements, but as expressions of the more complex and subtle notion that the fabric, rhythm, conditions, spaces, histories, and forms of urban environments could be best comprehended not by talking about them but by doing something in them. Like CCAs Sense of the City, we were looking at a plea for knowledge through visceral rather than analytical understanding, and—as the French title of the exhibition suggests—that layered sense of appropriation in which something is comprehended, mastered, and in consequence taken over.

There was a wonderful, untimely sense of democratic cheerfulness to all of this. The city the show addressed was neither the terrifyingly grand construction of La Ville (Paris, 1990), nor that of the wildly immoral heroics that mark the current trend to invent new cities through massive engineering, as emerging in the Gulf states or celebrated in the French government’s current exhibition Ville projetée. Nor did the actions within it resemble those that make up the mock city soup of Rouse’s “festival” marketplaces, or the new urbanists’ sentimentalizing streetscapes. In their own more gentle and pragmatic way, they had more in common with the optimistically transgressive spirit of the barricades and people’s parks of 1968 and ’69, seventies squats like Christiania and Tompkins Square, or even the democracy walls—some triumphant and some saddening—that appeared twenty years later. And, although the projects in Actions drew from the notion of the new city as the “end of utopia,” they were far removed from the dystopic cinematic visions of the city in ruins or in battle that have so colored our reading of the metropolitan future in the last generation. Here, in counterpoise, were visions of the metropolis as essentially benign, of cities worth fighting for, rather than—as in a thousand video war games and Hollywood films—apparently constructed simply to fight within.

The publication plays upon the project’s conversation between doing and discussing, intertwining twenty-five short essays—or “Thoughts”—with glimpses of thirty-five of the deeds—or “Actions”—in the exhibition. This is a seductive structure, but given the wide thematic, geometrical, and historical range of both essays and actions, it makes the lack of an index to place names, events, and inter- veners especially frustrating. Forced to browse texts, one comes away with too strong a sense of the conventional and self-conscious political premises in which the “Thoughts” are grounded. As a result the projects themselves slide even more gracefully by, allowing the city truly to emerge—as one of the essayists, the Israeli Tali Hatuka, puts it—not as an imposed socio-political construct but as a wonderfully idiosyncratic and unsystematic “social property” always being newly “defined and recreated by its users” (75).

Indeed, Actions was a powerful reminder of how little the life of the city depends upon the formal exercises of the architect or the self-conscious patterning of the planner, and how critical it becomes—if historical analysis is to have any impact on its fate—that scholarship begins accounting for the facts of its consumption rather than the aspirations behind its conception; for the rhythms of its use as much as the dreams of its design; for the architecture of dwelling not so much on how it was developed as on how its inhabitants took possession. Perhaps the web record of this central moment in city “recreation” will be one place to begin.

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Related Publication

Tadao Ando: Challenges—Faithful to the Basics
Gallery Ma, Tokyo
3 October–20 December 2008

In 1976 Tadao Ando constructed a small dwelling in central Osaka that established both his manner and his reputation. A single plane of concrete addressed the street: an act of unquestionable confrontation and rejection rather than one of welcome. This was a world turned within, a world closed to the city and instead oriented to the clouds. The planning of the house mystifies: two pods of rooms face each other across a courtyard open to the sky—and to the elements. An uncovered bridge at the second-floor level connects the two zones; inclement weather forces the occupants moving from one zone to another to use an umbrella or get wet. In its attitude toward living and its almost mute architectural expression, Ando’s Sumiyoshi row house was uncompromising.

The Sumiyoshi row house was mocked-up at full size as the central feature of the exhibition, which occupied the third and fourth floors of a building owned by Toto, a sanitary porcelain manufacturer, publisher of architectural books, and sponsor of the Gallery Ma. It relied to a large degree on digitally printed photographs that permitted large-format