TRACE ELEMENTS: AN ART SCHOOL IN NEW WESTMINSTER

by

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B.A., McGill University, 1991

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

School of Architecture

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

May 1997

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Date MAY 12, 1997
ABSTRACT

The physical traces left behind by the passage of lives constitute a form of collective memory; they are the tell-tale signs that suggest to us how things have come to be the way they are, remind us of the way they used to be, and suggest how they might become in the future. The physical world selects objects for preservation according to a capricious set of rules, choosing not only the extraordinary and the notable, but also the ordinary and the seemingly insignificant. When these traces of our experience are permitted to remain, places of extraordinary richness begin to develop, where heritage is not manufactured, but is allowed to evolve.

Taking this process as a starting point, this Graduation Project began as an investigation into the reciprocal relationships that can exist between new architecture and its physical and historical contexts. It explores ways in which a new building can both affect and be affected by the residual traces of circumstances and activities that have occurred in a place over time, excavating and preserving the history of place, and sustaining this history by adding a new layer of meaning and form to an existing site. In the search to determine ways in which these time scales intermesh and layer within a set of spaces, another investigation occurred, into the relationships between form, scale, light, activity and the perception and experience of time.

The site chosen for this project is a building lot on Columbia Street in New Westminster, containing the ruins of a commercial building dating from 1898. The programme was for an art college, containing a gallery, a lecture theatre, a library, offices and studios. In the design of a new building for this site, a number of existing elements were identified for their potential to suggest either aspects of the site’s history or the design of new spaces: an old brick retaining wall whose bricked-in doorways suggest spaces
underneath the adjacent street, a stone door-step recalling an entrance, a fragment of stone from an even older building that once stood on this site. New spaces were then ordered, both in relation to these found elements, and in relation to each other, based particularly on the ways in which they suggest and respond to the passage of time. An play of affinities and contrasts was established, whereby spaces are simultaneously related to, but distinguished from one another. The design of this building was therefore determined not only as a reaction to a given set of circumstances, but as a consideration of the ways in which the passage of time, both historical and daily, might be manipulated as an architectural element.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

For their generosity and commitment throughout the process of this design, I would like to thank my committee: Patricia Patkau, Bill Pechet, Shauna Gilles-Smith and Bruce Haden. I thank Richard Peck and Greg Boothroyd for their help in the preparation of this thesis. Finally, for her thoughtful advice, hard work and support, I thank Jeanna South.
View of Model from South
Detail: Main Entrance
Detail: Light Well