A THINKBELT CONTINUUM

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How a Work of Architecture Can be Transformative Society

RAIC International Prize Scholarships
Jesse Martyn ✓

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PART I

ESSAY

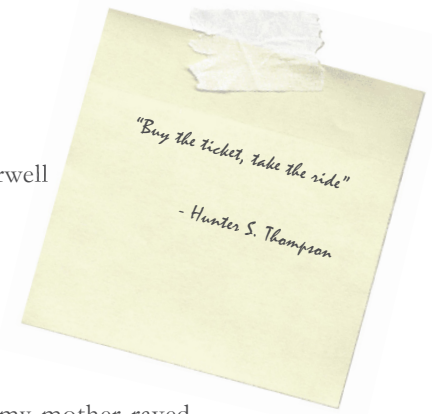———

A Thinkbelt Continuum ...

"It was a bright day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."

- George Orwell

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Several years ago, I took a road trip to ~~Detroit,~~ Motown, the vibrant city my mother raved about sneaking off to with her friends on a Friday night when they were old enough to drive and bold enough to cross the border. Forty years *(at least)* later, this was not the Detroit I visited. I arrived in a city that had been abandoned, as if the *Walking Dead* had altered the environment to serve as a film set for their post-apocalyptic drama. The iconic *Michigan Central Station* was overgrown and fenced-off with barbed wire now acting as a condemned museum. This was true for much of Detroit—it had been frozen in time for tourists like me to revel in the misfortune that bestowed itself upon a once booming industrial metropolis. As I took photographs a man shouted from across the street, "Detroit will rise again!" *(or something of that nature)* Wondering if the man was crazy or if I was crazy for my infatuation with the derelict state of this place, I quickly put my camera away and scurried off.

THIS GUY
Detroit, Michigan, 2017

Michigan Central Station, 2017

During my visit, I ~~reminisced about~~ *imagined* a time when *Henry Ford* and *Albert Kahn* first met and developed a strategy for a new automobile manufacturing facility that would become forever know as Fordism. *how i now see my autocad work flow* Kahn's *Highland Park Ford Plant* (1910) materialized as a revamped assembly line that altered automotive manufacturing and restructured the North American labour force through inventive architectural design—an architecture of production. Unfortunately, the once transformative industrial architecture morphed into a collection of relics. This boom-bust cycle builds-up and tears-down communities, decimating whatever or whomever is in the way. Yet, such catastrophes provide glimmers of hope, offering up a chance to reset, to rethink—emphasizing the need for architects, ~~planners, and stakeholders~~ to be **anticipatory** in their duties as community builders and leaders.

On the other side of the pond, avant-garde groups such as *Archigram* deployed speculative ideas that re-envisioned architecture's role in society. *Cedric Price* concocted proposals such as

Highland Park Ford Plant, Interior

"The time has come to approach architecture urbanistically and urbanism architecturally."

- Alison Smithson

DETROIT'S LARGEST INDUSTRIES AND HOTELS.
Albert Kahn - Highland Park Ford Plant
FORD MOTOR COMPANY.

the *Fun Palace* and *Potteries Thinkbelt* (1960s) that we can still see the impact of today. Price's *Potteries Thinkbelt* was situated in North Staffordshire, England as a mobile education system that adapted a network of pre-existing road and rail lines. The proposal implemented a unique educational framework as a means to revitalize a community experiencing post-war decline due to its dependence on pottery and the labour force. Price made use of existing infrastructure that supported an antiquated industry as a vehicle for change, respawning an abandoned system for a second life—a radical repurposing.
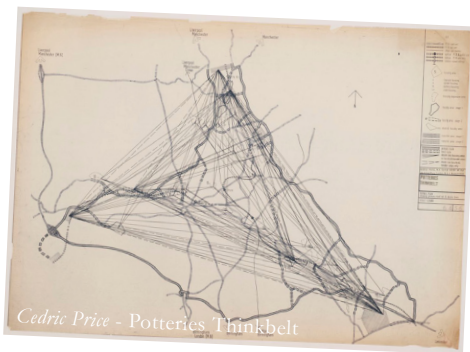
Cedric Price - Potteries Thinkbelt

Cedric Price - Potteries Thinkbelt

Kahn's work had major architectonic implications on the automotive industry and the American workplace whereas Price's work had pedagogical impact in the form of a distance education framework which now extends across the globe. Price took the work of industrial architects like Albert Kahn and reimagined what these sites could become. The work remained speculative in nature, leaving the door wide open for provocative methods of decrypting architecture's ability to reach beyond the bounds of buildings.
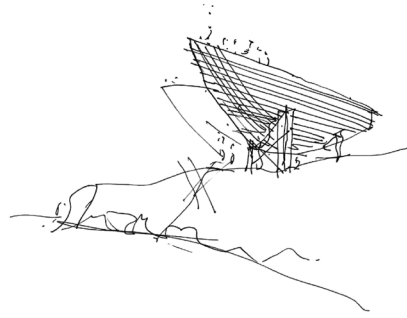
What I've come to realize is that 'architects' shape society through both buildings and speculative ideas; that architecture need not be made manifest in built form to fulfill it's potential. Architecture is always transformative in nature. The mere act of putting pen to paper transforms, at the very least, that one sheet of paper and the hand that wields the pen. Initial sketches may spark an idea that leads to an influential building or form a design ethos. This is demonstrated through the parti sketches of *Brian MacKay-Lyons* and *Omar Gandhi* that help establish a regional vernacular across Atlantic Canada emerging from, as *Bernard Rudofsky* puts it, 'architecture without architects'. Sometimes one's conviction to disrupt an industry that's notoriously resistant to change can be powerful enough to spark transformation. On the

sometimes for GOOD, sometimes for BAD

West Coast this is apparent through *Michael Green* and *Intelligent City* respectively experimenting with innovative construction methods and sustainable design technologies—emerging as global advocates for a greener industry. Free-thinking Toronto architects, *Lateral Office*, continually push boundaries through theoretical 'what ifs', bringing to light the geopolitical implications of space through proposed interventions in under-served and remote communities. Such is the case with *Many Norths* and its exploration of the spatial realities in Canada's Arctic North.

Rethinking the way leftover spaces are occupied can transform how we live and reframe our notions of housing. This is demonstrated through *Shim-Sutcliffe*'s pioneering of laneway housing, addressing the 'missing middle' crisis in Southern Ontario. In the Prairies, *5468796* (the barcode firm) *Architecture* maintain a cultural identity through heritage restoration and adaptive reuse. This is succinctly demonstrated in the *James Avenue Pumping Station* where the industrial character of a building is maintained and magnificently coupled with human dwelling. Architects and educators *Alfred Waugh* and *David Fortin* are critical advocates for dignified respect for tradition and the land. They're supporting a cultural shift toward unlearning and better understanding of indigenous architecture, design, and territory. This is but a short list of the many ways Canadian architects are transforming this country.

CROSS SECTION
5468796 - James Avenue Pumping Station

Beyond the Canadian context, ideas embedded in the design media we consume, extending into film, alter our perception of space and society. From the iconic architecture of *Ridley Scott's Blade Runner(s)*, to the magnificent imagery of *Wes Anderson's Isle of Dogs*—said to be inspired by *Kenzō Tange* and the 1960s *Metabolism Movement*—to the understated yet beautiful depiction of banality in *Kogonada's Columbus*, the influence of great 'architecture' is everywhere. Visionaries come in many forms from modern-day freethinkers *LCLA*, *Smout Allen*, *Interboro Partners*, and *Neeraj Bhatia*'s *Open Workshop*, to classics that remain relevant today such as *Kisho Kurokawa*'s *Agricultural City*, *Fumihiko Maki*'s *Investigations in Collective Form*, *Daniel Libeskind*'s *Micromegas*, and *Lebbeous Woods*'s *War and Architecture*. Each of these exemplars provoked us to think beyond what's right in front of our eyes and to be **anticipatory**. I can say for certain these 'architects' and their contributions to the profession have transformed my life for the better.

Wes Anderson - Isle of Dogs

Kogonada - Columbus

Lebbeous Woods - War and Architecture

For me it's clear, we need the Albert Kahns and Cedric Prices of the world to enact change and progress as a society. We need to propose big ideas (which sometimes come in small packages) that elicit creative ways to tackle critical issues surrounding postindustrial landscapes, equality, socioeconomic division, and geopolitical strife. It is not just buildings, but society that architecture transforms. For this, it's the architect's duty to ensure the society they are transforming is the one we all wish to be a part of. It is with these visions in mind that I am hopeful, and I too have come to agree, "Detroit will rise again".

*Note: *Italicized* words denote transformative 'architecture' and 'architects'
(also listed below in order of appearance)

The Walking Dead
Michigan Central Station
Henry Ford
Albert Kahn - Highland Park Ford Plant
Archigram
Cedric Price - Fun Palace + Potteries Thinkbelt
Brian MacKay-Lyons
Omar Gandhi
Bernard Rudofsky
Michael Green
Intelligent City
Lateral Office - Many Norths
Shim-Sutcliffe
5468796 Architecture - James Avenue Pumping Station
Alfred Waugh
David Fortin
Ridley Scott - Blade Runner (s)
Wes Anderson - Isle of Dogs
Kenzo Tange - Metabolism Movement
Kogonada - Columbus
LCLA
Smout Allen
Interboro Partners
Neeraj Bhatia - Open Workshop
Kisho Kurokawa - Agricultural City
Fumihiko Maki - Investigations in Collective Form
Daniel Libeskind - Micromegas
Lebbeous Woods - War and Architecture

Ridley Scott - Blade Runner 2049

"No one owns life, but anyone who can pick up a frying pan owns death."

- William S. Burroughs

"[K]ill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings."

- Stephen King