

## Being Out in Public

*Questions of Praxis and Representation*

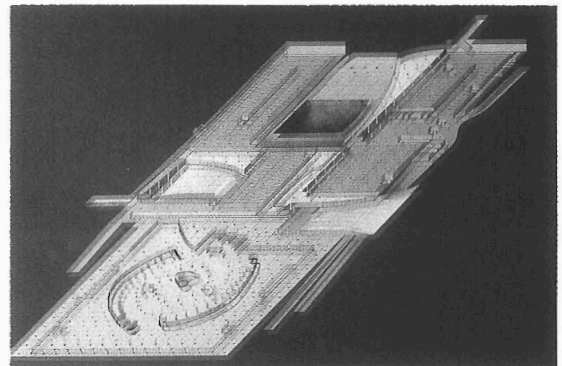
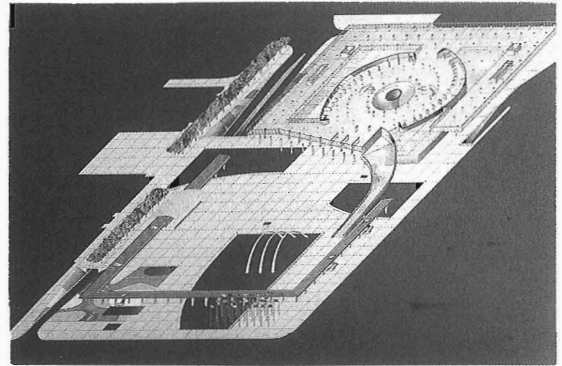
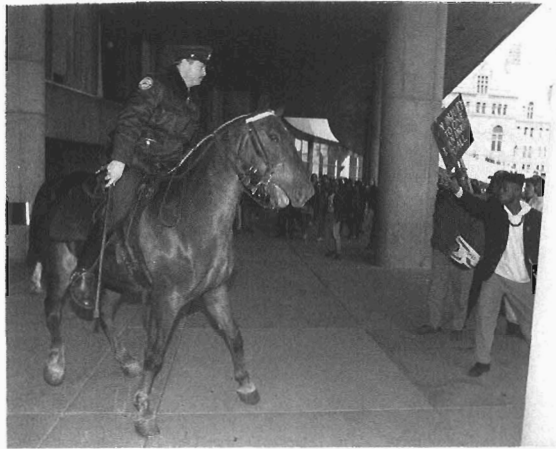
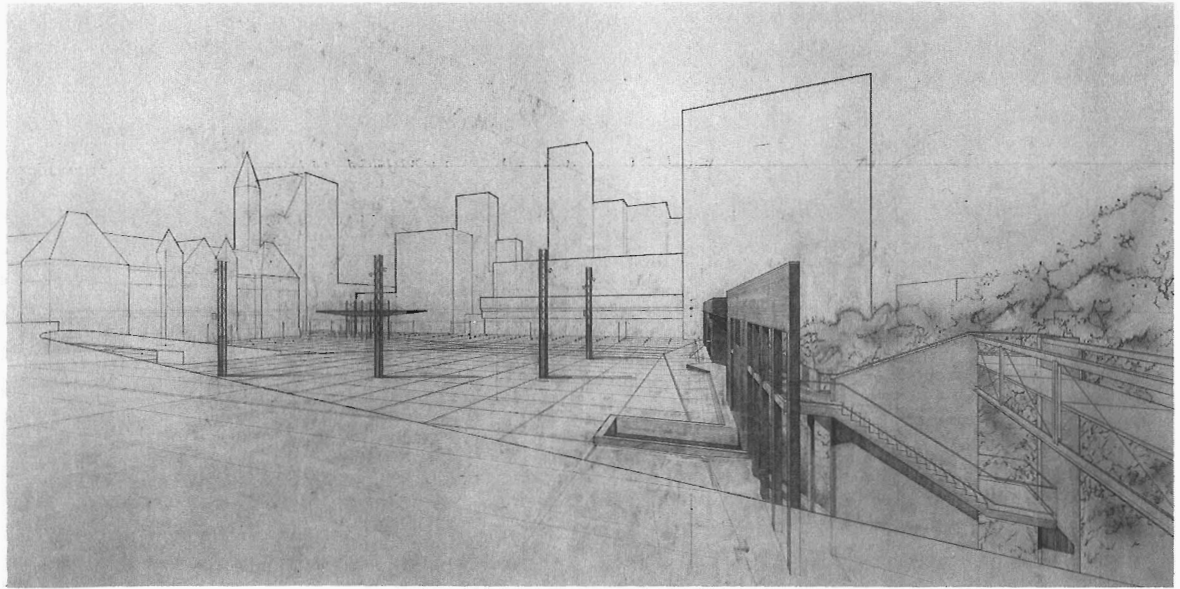
George Baird

It is some time now since the so-called public realm began to be viewed askance by thoughtful social critics and cultural theorists. In two famous texts, Jürgen Habermas in 1962 and Richard Sennett in 1974 already saw the public sphere as being in a state of decline, and younger generations of commentators in the field have tended to be even more pessimistic – not a few of them even chastising these two predecessors for what later came to be seen, in some cultural/theoretical circles at least, as their naive hopes for the possibility of a new public life in the future. It is probably indicative of the bleak current mood in these matters that a topical American anthology of texts by social critics and architectural historians has been subtitled “The New American City and the End of Public Space.” Still, this pervasive pessimism has not – except among the most unyielding followers of Adorno and Lukacs – entirely obliterated nostalgic yearnings and hopeful speculations in respect to what might still be able, publically, to come into being. Indeed it is sometimes the case that the most thought-provoking visions of future possibility can be discerned in the arguments and commentaries of some of the most probing critics of Habermas and Sennett.

As an architect, I have been interested for some time in the question of whether it would be possible to construct a new model of a public realm – a field for praxis, as it were – which arises less from exalted memories of the Athenian “polis” than it does from attentive observation of the unconscious behaviours of strangers who, at the least, co-inhabit shared space, however contingently, and from consideration of the “agnostic” model of conscious political praxis which is now being framed by young reinterpreters of the work of Hannah Arendt.

A convenient vehicle for the exploration of these issues in architectural design is provided by a programme which was developed a few years ago for a “redesign” of Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square – a major public space in that city which was originally designed in 1958, and completed in 1964. The real-world circumstances of the new programme I had been asked to develop were primarily pragmatic ones, having to do with improvements to performance facilities, public services, etc. Still, they nevertheless opened the door at the same time to a design consideration of some of the challenging issues cited above, particularly as they arise nowadays in respect to race, class, and gender. I decided to use the





Top: Guido Hartray,  
Harvard University  
Right: Marcello Franganillo,  
Yale University  
Above: Protest at Nathan Phillips  
Square, May, 1992.

programme to conduct Visiting Design Studios at Harvard and Yale last year. In an introductory statement, I challenged the students:

The square was originally designed on the basis of a set of urban assumptions about the forms of public assembly and display which were operative circa 1958. Many of these assumptions, including those affecting our view of pedestrian and vehicular movement in the core of the city, by now have changed profoundly. . . . Then too, in recent years, Toronto has begun to sustain a significant social transformation such as to bring into play large questions as to what the status of the "public" can be in a space such as this one. It is not insignificant that the recent so-called "riot" in Toronto began in it.

Two design responses are illustrated here, the first by Guido Hartray at Harvard University, and the second by Marcelo Franganillo at Yale. Hartray chose to focus his attention on the very surface of the paving of the square itself, particularly in relation to the adjacent surfaces of the pavements of the surrounding streets and sidewalks. In an aggressive gesture, he proposed to eliminate the perimeter colonnade which now rings the square, preferring instead to pose an explicit confrontation of a radically opened-up surface of the square with a decisive, bounding wall along its western edge. This opposition is mediated only by a high, open loggia in the square's southeasterly corner, hovering over the intersection of Queen and Bay streets.

Franganillo, on the other hand, chose to open up the surface of the square, and by the creation of a series of sloping incisions into it, to disclose the curious interrelationship of distinct pedestrian worlds above and below it – the one currently constituting the honorific space of the forecourt of the City Hall, and the other a netherworld of parking and of pedestrian passages. Franganillo also proposed to replace the existing perimeter colonnade with a device which is, so far as I know, a new urban invention: a continuous, weather-protected overhead canopy *and* a set of publically accessible bleachers, both combined into one.

Neither scheme focused centrally on the improved accommodations for public assembly, or attempted to strengthen the already vestigial axiality of the City Hall itself, but both sought to build on the strong identification which so many Torontonians now have with the space as a primary icon of their citizenship. Both sought also to offer the means of a wide range of modes of unself-conscious bodily praxis – procedures of self-disclosure and identification of both individuals and groups in three-dimensional space. By the sheer heightening of the consciousness of surface, and by the establishment of a revelatory visibility which is the result of new means of bodily ascension and descent in public, both schemes seek to establish conditions propitious to "action."

