## Windsoria: Border / Screen / Environment

Michael Darroch and Kim Nelson



In the euphoria of proliferating screen technologies, the meaning of the word "screen" has frequently narrowed to the senses of a surface or space of projection, or a technology of display. Yet several crucial connotations of "screen" are muted by these developments. First, the architectural sense of a partition, such as a mechanism for dividing spaces, rooms or buildings;<sup>1</sup> second, the notion of concealment or shelter;<sup>2</sup> and finally, the sense of filter or sieve.<sup>3</sup> Remarkably, the term "screen" signals both projection and concealment, both partition and passing through. Taken together, these senses provide a rich, spatial metaphor, one that invites us to contemplate the environment of an urban border culture such as Windsor-Detroit. As an essential feature of this binational metropolitan environment, the Windsor-Detroit border acts as a screen, a partitioning yet porous fixture, onto which each city projects its character and anxieties. In a region connected politically, economically and physically, which relies upon the patterns of circulation of people and goods along these many connections, the border currently seems to stand in a contradiction between its hardening at a time of intensifying trade disputes and security and its obsolescence in an age of all-pervasive and mobile technologies. The concept of environment, in Marshall McLuhan's terms, resists the idea of "border," emphasizing instead the unifying total field of media and technologies across a cultural landscape. Two artist-led projects originating in Windsor, the Green Corridor Project and the Broken City Lab, invite us to reflect upon these notions of screen and environment by probing the border's relationship to this urban region.

Windsor remains an industrial city popularly characterized as a metropolitan region plagued by urban decline. A drive through Windsor's downtown is like a trip through time: sidewalks lined by dour 1960s apartment blocks, boarded up storefronts, a scattering of pedestrians at interspersed bus stops. Well before it was a city ravaged by the decline of the Big Three, Windsor was victimized by the automobile industry's success. Since the implementation of auto production in Windsor in 1904, there has been minimal effort to diversify industry. The city was content to produce cars and to connect home, work, and leisure through cars. The cultural life of Windsor today remains largely dependent upon automobility.

A significant portion of the NAFTA trade corridor is funnelled through the Windsor-Detroit border gateway, representing some 25% of all Canada-US trade, the most substantial international trade relationship in the world. Windsor-Detroit has a rich history of a booming early to mid-twentieth-century economy and strong organized labour. Meanwhile, the central industry—the manufacturing of automobiles and automobile parts—has faced rapid decline. While some 10,000 vehicles per day cross the border, automotive plants in the surrounding neighbourhoods are being shuttered. Unemployment numbers in Motown Detroit and Motorcity Windsor are at the highest rates in their respective countries. As such, the Windsor-Detroit gateway is an emblem of concurrent automotive flow and failure.

Windsor is organized around the border's magnetism. Originally by ferry, but later via the Ambassador Bridge and the Windsor-Detroit Tunnel,<sup>4</sup> Windsorites have crossed the river for cultural and consumer activities. Windsor's cultural-commercial sector has equally thrived in times when Detroiters freely crossed over, but has suffered with the decline of industry, the strengthening Canadian dollar, and tightening passport regulations. Tellingly, the only notable large screen in Windsor faces Detroit, beckoning to thirsty patrons from across the river to visit Caesar's Casino, the central feature of Windsor's skyline. Windsorites frequently converge on the riverfront, now a walking and running trail built upon obsolete industrial and railway grounds. The Detroit skyline offers each city a momentary escape: a stunning view away from Windsor, from within Windsor: an entrancing view of Detroit, from outside Detroit.

The Green Corridor Project and Broken City Lab work to redefine the urban context of the Windsor-Detroit corridor. These projects move away from a reductive and functionalist paradigm of transport, of merely "passing

through" the border's screen, and towards an interactive and ecological field approach to urban environments that uses the border as a projective space of urban imagination. Their synaesthetic approach invites us to reconsider the relationship between communication and environment, which McLuhan began to explore in the 1940s and 50s. Indeed, from 1944 to 1946, Windsor was home to McLuhan, precisely in the years that he began to develop his theories of culture and technology. Yet, for McLuhan, Windsor and Detroit must have been a shocking contrast of energies: a tranquil Windsor set against a Detroit intoxicated by mechanization. It was perhaps in contemplation of these distinctions that he began to conceive of media and technology as an environment. Under the influence of art historian and architectural critic Sigfried Giedion's nascent, yet seductive history of mechanization and its intrusion into everyday life, and having spent the previous years lecturing in St. Louis, McLuhan had become enchanted by the inventiveness of the American spirit. Detroit, with its assembly lines and war effort, and on the brink of bursting with racial conflict, can only have seemed a world apart from Windsor.

Giedion's studies of the "anonymous history of inventions and ideas"<sup>5</sup> influenced McLuhan's humanist notion of culture as a dynamic, interactive field that continually integrates human activity with natural, built, and technological environments. Invited to lecture at Assumption College, today a part of the University of Windsor, in 1944 by Fr. Stan Murphy,<sup>6</sup> McLuhan proposed a course on "Culture and Environment" as an "analysis of the present scene" where "advertisements, newspapers, best-sellers, detective fiction, movies" would be "contrasted with a true pattern of homogeneous culture, rationally ordered."<sup>7</sup> During a series of lectures delivered the following year, he first characterized his era as "The Age of the Mechanical Bride," an industrial society gasping for air in the maelstrom of electric information.<sup>8</sup> All of these considerations translated into McLuhan's first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*,<sup>9</sup> which resembles Giedion's studies in style and format. For Giedion, mechanization threatened to dehumanize the interconnectedness of urban cultural life, disrupting the human scale of cities. In *Understanding Media*, published nearly two decades later, McLuhan gestured to his time in Windsor in his chapter *Motorcar: The Mechanical Bride.* "There is a growing uneasiness about the degree to which cars have become the real population of our cities," he wrote, "with a resulting loss of human scale, both in power and distance."<sup>10</sup>

For McLuhan, the city sphere had once been a synaesthetic space. Cities had originated as a common ground, a *sensus communis*, offering constant translation or interplay between the senses. The rise of print technologies ruptured the harmony of urban life, fracturing cities into visually ordered, sequential patterns. The linearity of cross-border automotive flow across the Ambassador Bridge, where Assumption College is immediately located and where McLuhan and Lewis would have lectured, typifies this thesis. Media of the electric age, patterns of instantaneous and simultaneous transmission, all promised to restore an urban *sensus communis* on a global scale. As McLuhan and Parker later wrote, Detroit's assembly lines, "late by-products" of the Gutenberg printing press, would be "liquidated by the computer."<sup>11</sup> The political border along the Detroit River, that old media channel, would undoubtedly dissipate along with them.

Giedion's seminal *Mechanization Takes Command*<sup>12</sup> took a bottom-up approach to cultural research, understanding material and popular culture as a proper domain of cultural research. It stands as a corollary to his classic of architectural history, *Space, Time and Architecture*,<sup>13</sup> both of which are evident influences on the environmental or "field approach" to media that McLuhan conceived in Windsor and later elaborated with his colleagues in the *Explorations* group and seminar at the University of Toronto. One of these collaborators was notably the town planner Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, a long-time friend, translator, and editor of Giedion. McLuhan famously wrote to Harold Innis<sup>14</sup> that Giedion's two books were the inspiration for his "experiment in

communication."<sup>15</sup> Mechanization Takes Command demonstrated how badly research is needed into the anonymous history of our period, tracing our mode of life as affected by mechanization—its impact on our dwellings, our food, our furniture. Research is needed into the links existing between industrial methods and methods used outside industry—in art, in visualization."<sup>16</sup>

Giedion's methodology of studying the *anonymous history* of mechanized culture was not unrelated to his work as secretary general of CIAM, the *Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne*. For Giedion and his CIAM collaborators,<sup>17</sup> the *humanization of urban life* and the significance of the *human scale* were central to the urban environment of the future. As Giedion wrote in 1943, the same year he began to correspond with McLuhan, CIAM's objective was to raise awareness about the need for transforming urban life and urban space, to arouse public consciousness as to the present state of our urban agglomerations. Until people become aware that decent living is impossible within our intolerably chaotic cities, no real transformation can take place. [...] Cities would never have been so degraded to their present state if such a consciousness had existed.<sup>18</sup>

*Mechanization Takes Command* is a holistic account of the emergence of mechanized processes in every aspect of everyday urban life, particularly the effects of assembly line production and replaceable parts on transformations in agricultural production, breadmaking, meatpacking, household furniture, laundering, cleaning, food preparation, and even the bathroom. In order to re-establish the centrality of the "humanization of urban life" one had to understand the "relation of the parts to the whole, the contact between the individual and the community."<sup>19</sup> This dynamic approach to cultural history, the insistence on "organic interconnections" rather than "sequences" of historical events. As McLuhan later explained, "Giedion began to study the environment as a structural, artistic work—he saw language in the streets, buildings, the very texture of form."<sup>20</sup>

In 1951, the members of CIAM convened for their 8th meeting, overseen by Tyrwhitt, to discuss their central post-war concern: how to vitalize the "heart" or "core" of the city. Three years earlier, in the conclusion to *Mechanization Takes Command*, subtitled "Man in Equipoise," Giedion had called for "re-establishing [a] dynamic equilibrium,"<sup>21</sup> a "new balance between the individual and collective spheres,"<sup>22</sup> since "before our eyes our cities have swollen into amorphous agglomerations. Their traffic has become chaotic, and so has production."<sup>23</sup> According to Giedion, "interest in the core is part of a general humanizing process; of a return to the human scale and the assertion of the rights of the individual over the tyranny of mechanical tools."<sup>24</sup> Cities were an "expression of a diversity of social relationships which have become fused into a single organism."<sup>25</sup> Essential to this concept of the urban core was the "right of the pedestrian in the center of community life."<sup>26</sup> Tyrwhitt would later carry these perspectives to the urban planning movement known as "ekistics," or the "science of human settlements," led by the radical Greek urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis, which was devoted to a cross-disciplinary understanding that we are all "citizens of a worldwide city."<sup>27</sup>

McLuhan would clearly build upon these concepts in his own approach to a global urbanism. Cities, in McLuhan's hands, were also essential classrooms for studying the "present scene": cities were active and dynamic environments deeply connected to the spatiotemporal patterns brought about by technological change. Participating in the third so-called "Delos Symposium" of leading thinkers organized by Tyrwhitt and Doxiadis, McLuhan argued that "we are now surrounded by a new environment, of integrated tasks, integrated knowledge, and it demands pattern recognition."<sup>28</sup> As McLuhan developed his thesis of the implications of the "electric age" for media,<sup>29</sup> he frequently predicted the obsolescence of city structures, faced with electric extensions of bodies and senses that promised to bypass space and time: It is to the railroad that the American city owes its abstract grid layout, and the nonorganic separation of production, consumption, and residence. It

is the motorcar that scrambled the abstract shape of the industrial town, mixing up its separated functions to a degree that has frustrated and baffled both planner and citizen. It remained for the airplane to complete the confusion by amplifying the mobility of the citizen to the point where urban space as such was irrelevant. Metropolitan space is equally irrelevant for the telephone, the telegraph, the radio, and television. What the town planners call "the human scale" in discussing ideal urban spaces is equally unrelated to these electric forms. Our electric extensions of ourselves simply bypass space and time, and create problems of human involvement and organization for which there is no precedent. We may yet yearn for the simple days of the automobile and the superhighway.<sup>30</sup>

McLuhan extended this belief to the symbol of Detroit as the centre of automotive manufacturing, the last holdout of "Gutenbergiana." However, his prediction that the motorcar and its assembly-line spirit would be displaced by the electric galaxy is not yet visible in the Windsor-Detroit corridor, the focal point of the Canadian and US rustbelts. Rather, the decline of the automotive industry is starkly juxtaposed with the vast wealth, and the ushering in of the middle class, that this industry once signified. Indeed, as Chrysler and General Motors currently stumble through bankruptcy protection, the June 6th cover of *The Economist*<sup>31</sup> reminds us of Adorno and Horkheimer's conviction that "the difference between the models of Chrysler and General Motors is fundamentally illusory [and] known by any child, who is fascinated by that very difference."<sup>32</sup>

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Doxiadis Associates, in conjunction with the Detroit Edison Company and Wayne State University, undertook a five-year, \$3 million study of the "urban Detroit region." This macroplanning project regarded Detroit as belonging to a multi-pronged megalopolis stretching between Chicago, Cleveland, Toronto and even Montreal. Notably, in the three-volume study, the Canadian-US border disappears as an impediment to regional urban development. The project's major recommendation was the development of a twin-centred urban structure between downtown Detroit and Port Huron, at the border with Sarnia. Sadly, it is all too apparent today that this massive project was based on a false problematic: "How can an additional seven million people be most effectively accommodated in the Urban Detroit Area between now [1972] and the year 2000?"<sup>33</sup> Today, with a city population of fewer than one million, and a greater urban population of some four million inhabitants, Detroit is popularly characterized a shrinking city. The *Green Corridor Project* and the *Broken City Lab* are working against these compelling images of Detroit, and by association Windsor, as hollowed out urban environments.

*Green Corridor* and *Broken City Lab* resurrect Giedion's concern with the "humanization of urban life" in combination with McLuhan's<sup>34</sup> belief that artists are among the first to discern changing patterns in the whirling vortex of contemporary culture. For both of these thinkers, artists must employ the very conditions they are critiquing. In Windsor, the border, in particular the rattling cement thoroughfares that mark its gateway, act as an arena for artists working within and in opposition to their own environment. The co-ordinators of the *Green Corridor Project*, artists Noel Harding and Rod Strickland, seek to transform Windsor's environment by fighting to "take back" two kilometres of freeway leading to the border through modern, politically-conscious, digitally-mediated art. The *Green Corridor* critiques the disjunction between the ceaseless flow of trade and travel, the industrial landscape of the University of Windsor, and the impoverished and industrial environment of surrounding communities by appropriating these sites as an integral, dynamic, and projective space. Launched by Strickland and Harding within the School of Visual Arts at the University of Windsor, the *Green Corridor* is a humanistic, urban planning and pedagogic programme for undergraduate students. Models of the reconfigured city space surrounding the Ambassador Bridge, the University of Windsor, and surrounding neighbourhoods are developed and elaborated in the classroom.

61

*Green Corridor* challenges us to rethink urban space in direct contrast to linear spatial flows typified by the metaphors of *corridors* of *crossing*: the NAFTA corridor, the city on an edge, the politics of the border gateway. In this sense, *Green Corridor* re-imagines the border in the multiple senses of screen described at the outset. The project interprets the border as a physical space of projection, yet transforms the border environment into a fluid space open to innovations in urban design. In this way, we might argue that *Green Corridor* shifts the spatial bias from border/crossing to an environment or field in Giedion and McLuhan's terms, a space that integrates media and transcends temporal constraints.





Figure 2: Model of the Nature Bridge. Courtesy of Green Corridor Project.

Figure 3: The Nature Bridge 3D Rendering. Courtesy of Green Corridor Project.

The project's most successful physical installation is the *Nature Bridge*, a pedestrian overpass completed in 2005 in partnership with the city of Windsor. This pedestrian bridge spans Huron Church Road at Assumption High School, mere kilometres from the border and the Detroit River, allowing for safe passage of pedestrians across the broad roadway and above vehicle traffic thundering below. At once passageway and environment, the bridge is the first step in the Huron Church Road Urban Design Master Plan, which envisages the surrounding area as a "total environment" integrating elevated landform patterns and wetlands with buildings, street lighting, surface materials, and public artworks. To this end, the structure of the *Nature Bridge* can support wind turbine and solar panel installations to power lighting and bridge irrigation, a system connected to the nearby wetlands.



Figure 4: Assumption High School and Wetlands. Courtesy of Green Corridor Project.

The projective concept of the *Green Corridor* is most clearly articulated in its current phase of intervention: the *Open Corridor*, an interactive and site-specific festival of arts, science, performance, and community taking place throughout the summer and fall of 2009. *Open Corridor* is "a celebration and proactive view of Windsor," a project "to compel its citizens to recognize their value and value of their creative community."<sup>35</sup> The festival, organized as a drive-through gallery along the length of Huron Church Road, works to engage motorists as they pass through. Through a range of public art exhibitions and performances, *Open Corridor* is aimed at engaging local and international travellers, where the act of passing through the corridor is transformed into a temporal experience. The culmination of these events is the Drive-Thru Symphony, a

collaborative project with multimedia composer and musician Brent Lee. The event is designed as a synaesthetic experience, integrating pedestrians and drivers into an interactive performance through sight, sound and even smell. Eight music ensembles "will perform sound works they have created in response to the themes of environment, traffic, and shifting time."<sup>36</sup> Against an "overlayered" call-and-response exchange between musicians and vehicles, participating artists will collaborate to activate the corridor environment with visual projections, text, and time-delayed images. The project further proposes to introduce aromas specific to the vegetation and infrastructure of the area<sup>37</sup> at strategic points throughout the performance. The goal of the two-day performance is to "propose[] a 'sensorial' approach to urbanism that explores how we use sight, sound, and smell as a means of navigating and understanding the city."<sup>38</sup>

Local artist Justin Langlois, a *Green Corridor* collaborator, is also the founder of the *Broken City Lab*, an artist-led, interdisciplinary-creative research group working to reimagine the potential for action by disrupting and engaging Windsor and its communities. The Lab has undertaken a range of interventions centred on environmental awareness and "self-help" slogans for Windsorites: biodegradable, seed-filled balloons emblazoned with "You Are Worth It" for the *Open Corridor Festival*; the *Text-in-Transit* project in partnership with Transit Windsor, featuring one hundred statements and stories posted as bus advertisements, such as "The automobile can only take us so far" and "There is a future here"; and *Scavenge the City*, an "algorithmic walk" based on a randomly generated set of instructions for navigating Windsor's "downtownish area." Whereas *Green Corridor* works to reimagine and redevelop Windsor as a border environment, *Broken City Lab* articulates a greater need for dialogue with Detroit.



Figure 5: Cross-Border Communication model. Courtesy of Broken City Lab.



Figure 6: Windsor Skyline and the proposed Cross-Border Communication project. Courtesy of Broken City Lab.

During their proposed *Cross-Border Communication* project, a series of interventions "based on the desperate need to communicate with Detroit, Michigan, from Windsor, Ontario," the group will use a 6000-lumens projector to project messages, such as "We're In This Together," onto the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce building facing Detroit.

Slogans projected for the Lab's "100 Ways to Save the City" performance in October<sup>39</sup> simultaneously rely on the border as a reflective space and encourage its dissolution. "Ignore Borders = Windsoria," reads one of their projections—a popular local term used to describe the greater Windsor-Detroit metropolitan area.

As a taken-for-granted symbol of urban decline, high rates of unemployment and crumbling city infrastructure, Windsor-Detroit encapsulates the old environment of manufacturing, a dissipating force that once bound work and community. By reifying the border into a visual space on which to project acts of resistance to the border's very divisiveness, the *Broken City Lab*'s installations come into contact with the *Green Corridor Project*'s proposal for rethinking the Windsor-Detroit gateway. If each project appears staunchly local in orientation, their joint commitment to imagining a Windsor yet-to-be—through pedagogical experiments, model designs, and web-based design proposals—connects them to the broader movement of ecological urbanism. Taken together, these two art projects are probes, in McLuhan's sense, that throw the border into sharp relief as an anti-environment against today's environment of fluid digital screen and mobile technologies. Writing for the *University of Windsor Review* in 1966, McLuhan claimed, "one of the peculiarities of art is to serve as an anti-environment, a probe that makes the environment visible."<sup>40</sup> The anti-environment is a point of opposition



Figure 7: 100 Ways To Save A City. Courtesy of Broken City Lab.

that draws attention to the changing patterns at play in the environment; it raises the perception of the environment to high intensity or high definition. The *Green Corridor Project* draws upon the old environment of the automobile and of manufacturing as its content and pits them against the new environment of integrated and interconnected mediated spaces. In opposition to the politics of trade, security, and terror, *Broken City Lab* highlights the border as new kind of screen or filter, a space of dialogue, connection and imagination rather than partition and concealment. In each project, the border itself is transformed into an art form. In his conception of a "city without walls" in the electric age—a connected, fluid and continuous global sphere—McLuhan anticipates such borderless cities, an idea to which the local image of "Windsoria" gestures. By illuminating the border as a reflective space, these projects work to overcome the rupture between city, community, environment, art, and industrialization in the Windsor-Detroit area. Their common goal of achieving a "total environment" resuscitates the universality of a new humanism that emerged in post-war urban utopianism, represented by calls, such as Giedion's, for a "dynamic equilibrium" and urged forward by urban design programmes such as CIAM.

## ENDNOTES

1 "The area was screened off."

- 2 "A screen of trees."
- 3 "Coal was once screened by hand."
- 4 Built in 1929 and 1930 respectively.
- 5 Sigfried Giedion, "A complicated craft is mechanized," The Technology Review 16.1 (1943): 3.
- 6 Whose Christian Culture Series had lured Wyndham Lewis to Windsor.

7 Marshall McLuhan, Letters of Marshall McLuhan, eds. Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan and William Toye (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 157.

- 8 Philip Marchand, Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger (Toronto: Vintage, 1989), 116.
- 9 Marshall McLuhan, The Mechanical Bride (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2002[1951]).
- 10 Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 194.
- 11 Marshall McLuhan, Counterblast, designed by Harley Parker (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 76.

12 Sigfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948).

13 Sigfried Giedion, Space, Time and Architecture, 5th Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982[1941]).

14 (14 March 1951)

15 Marshall McLuhan, Letters of Marshall McLuhan, eds. Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan and William Toye (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 223.

16 Sigfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), vi.

17 Among others, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and José Luis Sert.

18 Sigfried Giedion, on C.I.A.M.'s Unwritten Catalogue, The Journal of the American Society of Architectural Historians 3 1/2 (The History of City Planning, 1943): 44-45.

19 Sigfried Giedion, Architecture You and Me (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 126.

20 (Stearn, 1967, pp. 270).

- 21 Sigfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 723.
- 22 Ibid, 721.
- 23 Ibid, 717.
- 24 Sigfried Giedion, Architecture You and Me (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 127.
- 25 Ibid, 130-131.
- 26 Ibid, 128.

27 Quoted in Ellen Shoshkes, "East-West: Interactions between the United States and Japan and their Effect on Utopian Realism." *Journal of Planning History* 3.3 (2004): 235.

28 Marshall McLuhan, "Address at Vision '65," in Eric McLuhan and Frank Zigone, *Essential McLuhan* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1995[1966]), 223.

29 One that never seriously held Giedion's attention.

- 30 Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 103-104.
- 31 "Detroitosaurus Wrecks: The Car Industry after GM"

32 Marshall McLuhan, The Mechanical Bride (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2002[1951]), 97.

33 Jerry B. Schneider, "Doxiadis' Detroit: Forty-Nine Million Alternatives," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 38.5 (1972): 332.

34 And Giedion's.

35 Green Corridor Project, "Open City Festival," pamphlet (2009).

- 36 The time it takes for sound to travel long distances, mobile audiences, and the streaming delay to the FM signal.
- 37 Including wet pavement and cut grass.

38 Green Corridor Project, "Open City Festival," pamphlet (2009).

39 "Cross the border one a week;" "Welcome to South Detroit;" "Take a Picture of Something Other than Detroit;" "Windsor + Detroit = BFF."

40 Marshall McLuhan, "The Relation of Environment to Anti-Environment," The University of Windsor Review 2.1(1966): 9.