

Boundaries of Difference: Party Walls and Personal Effects

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In 1996 *The Party Wall etc. Act* was issued by the British Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The Act was designed to provide a framework for preventing and resolving disputes throughout England and Wales, in relation to party walls, boundary walls and excavations near neighboring buildings. The Act recognizes that a wall is a 'party wall' when it stands astride the boundary of land belonging to different owners and any work to the party wall by any one of these different owners, even for that which is entirely reserved for their own property, requires a written agreement.¹ The Act came into force in July 1997, three years after *House*, the infamous London sculpture by Rachel Whiteread was torn down. Despite 3,000 people calling ardently (in writing) for its preservation, it took a mere 800 local residents calling for its demolition for the Bow Council to rule in their favor.² *House*, the concrete cast of a condemned row house in East London, turns the party wall inside out and its familiarity as a defining urban instrument – its ultimate authority over codes of domestic conduct – is

inverted and made perversely public. Unacceptable, it seems.

The party wall, as an urban boundary, is an impermeable yet supple element against which scenarios and relationships of daily life unfold. This paper speculates on the enduring party wall as a construct that not only registers but defines the familiar interface between city and citizen, neighbor and neighbor and private and public life; and, asks whether its tectonic manipulation can re-define its subject as a constantly changing, fugitive identity.

The Toronto Case

The prevalent Toronto fabric of 19th Century party wall building stock, adopted from the British type, although presents little variety in its envelope is complexly charged with citizen defining powers. Although it is the largest city in Canada, Toronto is still described as a city of neighborhoods. Arguably the most multi-cultural city in the world, over 100 languages are spoken throughout metropolitan Toronto,



Fig. 1. Il Fornello, Church Street, Toronto. View of moving storefront. Photo by Tom Arban

and neighborhoods are identified for their cultural distinction. Districts such as Little Italy (Fig. 2), China Town and the Gay Village continue to be dominated by a 19th Century Victorian party wall fabric – one that is often refurbished and in-filled with contemporary party wall models. Needless to say, the type is enduring. Projects such as Il Fornello, Church Street (Fig. 1) in the Gay Village, or the Inn on College (Fig.3) in Little Italy necessarily adopt a kind of typical wall-to-wall site for urban intervention, and make present inherent political boundaries from the sidewalk to the back lane.

Inn on College

As a six-room inn with a street level restaurant/lounge/check-in area, (Fig. 3) the project experiments with ideas of site specificity, cultural identity and comfort by intertwining familiar surfaces, materials, ergonomic standards and trivial statistics spanning exposed and unwavering party wall borders. The existing two story building is divided into a dark inset base, luring at the street, and a light, projecting *piano-nobile*, with varying degrees of exhibition - all held in place by the typical clay brick Toronto frame.

As a re-interpretation of its British predecessor, the street front restaurant is virtually carved out of a suede-wrapped mass that is modeled to accommodate various kinds of activity (and conversation) and articulated by wood paneling, tartan upholstery and, of course, collections of objects strategically displayed to expose moments of the defining party walls. The rooms and second floor corridor were initially conceived of as sliding tubes within a larger lining in the existing brick building husk - safely removed from the boisterous street level. Each tube, now a collar-like device clad in vinyl "brocade" is

eroded for appropriate window disposition whether at the street, courtyard or back lane. These collars, rendered in a kind of raised pattern that alludes to a stripped-down version of the Victorian *boudoir*, set the stage for each room. It is one of the three main surfaces that shape the room as convertible for dining, sleeping, working or entertaining. The collar sits in front of the demising walls rendered as a faceless but ever-present neighbor and is then further lined with a thin-set tile and mirrored glass surface at wet zones.

The various activities of lounging, dining, washing and smoking unfold against the recesses and projections of the suede covered mass of the restaurant. Restaurant zones are defined by collections. Collections of restaurant equipment like spoons; teacups, commemorative plates, ashtrays and goblets are re-presented through the length of the experience – from street to back lane -- in conjunction with both natural and artificial light. A series of coasters which register abstracted views of College Street paired with local trivial statistics, much like childhood hockey cards, have been designed to gain collectable status in the city.

Perhaps it is not the defining walls, but these *things* that make site and space inseparable. In both the restaurant and the rooms loose furniture is minimal but critical. The restaurant tables, whether at 20" lounge height, 29" dining height, 36" counter height or 42" bar height, set the tone for social interaction. Similarly, the standard bed height in each room becomes a datum, a kind of horizon of leisure, at the bed, bathtub, chaise and trivial statistics. This line, whether at the street, courtyard or lane way window, register local abstract facts site specific, orienting devices which define the lens through which the city is perceived.



Fig. 2. Little Italy District, Toronto. 2005 tracing of existing party wall fabric.

The Humble Brick

Inn on College's two-storey, 1900 Don Valley Brick building on Toronto's unique College Street is far from remarkable. Interestingly, this low-rise main street Toronto type, which lines the city, has become a site most susceptible to frequent renovation, remodeling and re-use. The obsolescence of British inspired models of front and back/public and private urban zones prompted the need for such rampant interior reordering – the original brick husks, however, remain true.

Brick City

Before skyscrapers, Toronto was quite the 'brick city'. In the twenties there was hardly a building that wasn't made of Don Valley bricks.³ Before the 1920's there were only two types of brick available: smooth red brick and the cheaper buff brick ranging in color from tan to green. A Don Valley Brick Works catalogue of the 1920's reflects the introduction of new technologies and manufacturing techniques to create more colors and textures as well as a more machined aesthetic – evidence perhaps of the greater cultural status now inherent in exposed 19th century smooth red brick. The inclusion of exposed structural brick in any interior adds immediate value it seems. According to Daniel Willis, we can begin to view the presence of brick in terms of its class associations. In the 19th century, in the United

States as in Canada, brick became somewhat less common on important buildings. It assumed more and more the role of structural back-up for stone which "suggests that its cultural associations in the 19th century were comfortably, if not exclusively working class."⁴

In Toronto from about 1970 onward, brick began to acquire an interesting status of permanence and nostalgia – no matter how new. To include "exposed brick" in any real estate ad, even today, carries an inherent richness. Willis explains how "In contemporary society, exposed brickwork occupies a fortuitous position in the hierarchy of building materials: Not only does it require considerable labor to make, it also satisfies the nostalgia for tradition, solidity, and (supposed) permanence."⁵

Although consistently now hung as a veneer, exposed brick almost always adorns the numerous new row house developments within Toronto's existing fabric. When surveying the City's distinct neighborhoods for patterns of intensity, the dominance of this party wall type within new infill developments is surprising – even in Toronto's infamous Gay Village, where the type's implied homogeneity seems incongruous with the ever-present spirit of individuality and self-expression. .

His and Her Things

Is it not the self-tailored aspects of one's home, not necessarily (often type-cast) furniture, rather one's "things" that begin to mark its and therefore one's differences? Much like it is for the imprints of wall papers, curtains, concentrated dirt, shoes and spoons on the poured-in-place surface of Whiteread's *House* that imply the entrapment of a moment and the absence of its people – a quality Anthony Vidler compares to the "mummified traces of everyday existence" of Herculaneum and Pompeii.⁶

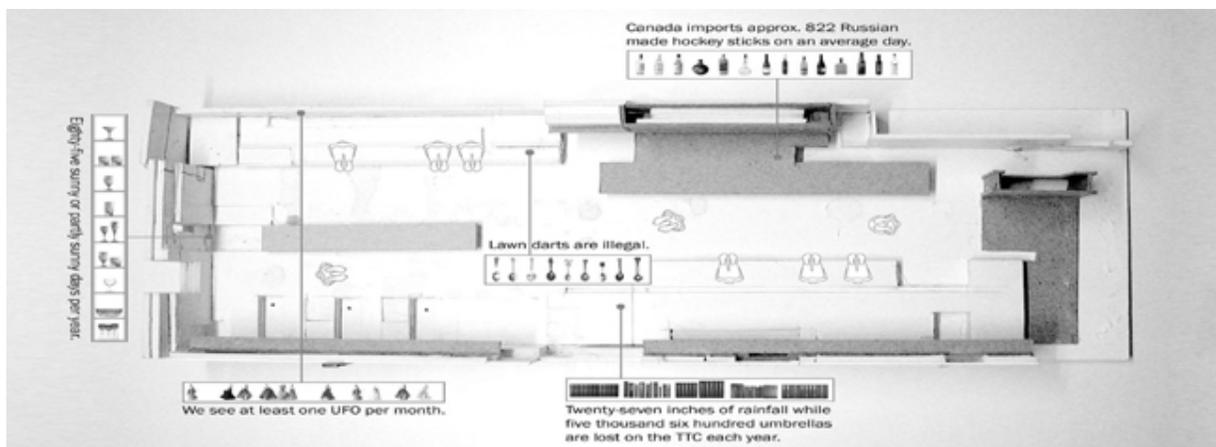


Fig. 3. Inn on College, Toronto. Worm's-eye diagram of possible distribution of collectons and trivial statistics



Fig. 4. Toronto Party Wall Project matrix of “city” versus “citizen” isolated parts.

The Toronto Party Wall Project

The Toronto Party Wall Project (Fig. 4) begins to contemplate this question. Via tectonic experimentation, the Toronto Party Wall Project speculates on the capacity for the current trend of rampant party wall development in Toronto to heighten and promote cultural difference within the sameness of its urban model. As a hypothetical prototype for the fashioning of 125 distinct row house combinations, the explicit design project disassembles the current party wall only to reassemble it as a ‘z’-shaped, three-layered organism. An insulation layer, a kind of armor, is sandwiched by an articulated brick layer of the ‘city’ and a kinetic porcelain paneled layer of the ‘citizen.’ A simple arrangement of oscillating inner and outer city surfaces is tested for its complex citizen defining or erasing capacity.

The city layer is articulated as five versions of much used *Hanson*⁷ -- “the face brick” – where color and coursing technique are selected for their implied geographical promise: Williamsburg MKII; Kingston Blend; Georgetown MKII; Boston; and, San Antonio Range. These are randomly combined with stack bond, one-third running bond, English Cross bond, Flemish double stretcher bond and Common or Header bond coursings. Textures range from matt to combed and mortar joints defined as flush, weathered, grapevine, ‘v’-shaped or raked help to pronounce qualities of the familiar stock. The five resulting husks each begin to define a specific aesthetic identity, open to

interpretation via proximities to adjacent urban fabric. The brick layer is rendered constant, durable and permanent, variable only by hints of fluctuating inner panels of kinetic porcelain on a rigid steel frame beyond its thick face. Five versions of this inner lining articulate a receiving surface of movable magnetic, baked porcelain or stretched *Kevlar*⁸ panels that when adorned or impregnated with objects and prized possessions create a kind of occupied boundary – one that seemingly inflects into its neighboring space. ‘Things’ are selectively hidden or exposed in either a “quilt,” “meringue,” “weave,” vertical or horizontal “ship-lap” system heat molded to suit an autonomous steel substructure that rests 12 inches from the inner face of the brick (city) layer. The seemingly endless permutations of combined parts makes for a rich tapestry of overt specificity within an only seemingly familiar homogeneity.

Know No Neighbor

Strategically, the Toronto Party Wall Project determines that your ‘inside’ is the ‘outside’ of your neighbor and vice versa – there is no identifying evidence, only presence found in their absence. Ultimately, the project mines the inherent structure of the domestic envelope for its spatial authority to test whether provoking the self-conscious inclusion of personal effects and ever-present demising walls can liberate its hold on cultural sameness – a strategy that the Il Fornello, Church Street tries to advance.

Il Fornello: Caldo e Freddo

Il Fornello brings to the Church Street LGBTQ District of downtown Toronto a slow and subtle interruption within the eclectic context of its party wall urban fabric. This new restaurant attempts to harness the spirit of its local theatrical gay culture into a more intimate constantly changing experience. Like the Inn on College, and numerous other urban interventions that span the typical Toronto part wall context, Il Fornello's two-storey brick shared demising walls remain ever-present as an urban force inflected on the charged, public interior. For this 100-seat restaurant, subtle political delineations along its defining party walls are literally outlined both by the unconventional rolling storefront in various positions of rest, (Fig.2) and the pleated sapele wood proscenium that ensconces the restaurant and is virtually squeezed by the demising party walls to distort and wrinkle its orthogonal geometry creating pockets for things that are deposited at various depths of surface. At last culturally defining things become the culturally defining surface.

Contrary to other contemporary additions to the street, Il Fornello does not assume the typical flamboyant aesthetic of "seeing and being seen." It acknowledges, rather, the primacy of individuality, not a generalized difference. Although the design utilizes requisite theatrical elements such as prosceniums, stages, curtains, masks and sets for their dramatic value, it is precisely in the degeneration or erosion of these elements that a complexity in the spectator/spectacle relationship is created. Patrons are invited to participate fully or minimally in the life of

Toronto's infamous Church Street while having the opportunity to oscillate psychologically between "back stage", "back drop" and "foreground". Il Fornello's rolling storefront moves approximately 18-20 feet with the ambition of defying those limitations imposed by the climate of Toronto. It allows the flexibility to have a patio environment in the warmer season, and an opportunity to recoup the space in winter. Its large powder coated steel channel frame, which holds the mullionless glass acts as a track for the wheels that scroll along a steel sub-frame embedded in the adjacent wall cavity, shallow enough not to encroach on adjacent neighbors, and are stopped by a neoprene gasket as a weather seal. The effect is uncanny. At various positions of rest, the steel frame renders the street view an almost two-dimensional spectacle from inside. From outside, the distant ceramic dinner plate surface collapses to the street edge.

A Gold Satin Aluminum *Octolux* screen delaminates from the cocooned bathroom block underneath the wood proscenium, reflecting fragments of bodies that crowd around the compressed bar space. The sequence of spaces terminates behind this *gilded mask* element in the narrow bank of gender non-specific water closets flanked by a communal sink. Here, although visiting the individualized water closet cells is a solitary experience, the subject is virtually crowded by infinite reflections and larger-than-life black and white two-dimensional family snap-shots – the most intimate of things. Private boundaries psychologically breached with poster-sized personal effects.

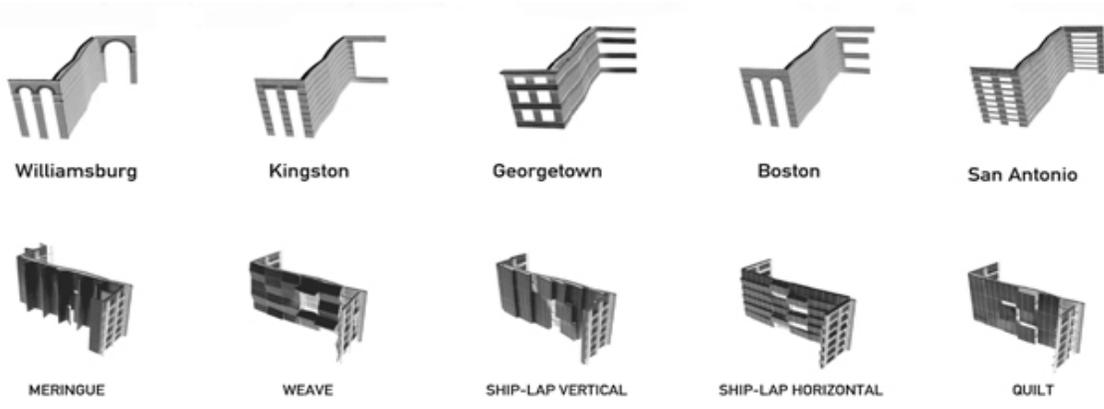


Fig.5. Il Fornello, Church Street, Toronto. View of restrooms. Photo by Tom Arban

Endnotes

¹ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister "The Party Wall etc. Act 1996: Explanatory Booklet." Crown copyright: London, 2002. p 1-16.

² Lingwood, James. "House: A Chronology 1991-1994" in *House. Rachel Whiteread* Lingwood, James ed. Phaidon Press Ltd.: London, 1995. p 144.

³ Johnson, John. "The Skyline of Toronto's Don Valley Products" in *The Toronto Star*. May6, 1979. p 17-21.

⁴ Willis, Daniel. "The Social-Climbing Brick: On the Class of Building Materials" in *Harvard Design Magazine*. summer 2000. p 71.

⁵ Willis, p 73.

⁶ Vidler, Anthony. "A Dark Space" in *House. Rachel Whiteread*. Lingwood, James ed. Phaidon Press Ltd.: London, 1995. p 69.

⁷ *Hanson Brick* is North America's largest brick manufacturer. With plants in Ontario and Quebec, it offers five regional brick collections that include more than 1,000 styles of brick.

⁸ *Kevlar* is an advanced building material which is made of an organic fiber in the aromatic polyamid family which can be translucent, light and very strong. It is also used in the composition of bullet-proof vests.