

## Salvation Army Urban Garden: The Interstitial Space

SUSAN MOLESKY  
Dalhousie University

The interstitial space in front of the *Salvation Army Booth Center for Men*, devoid of aesthetic and inviting elements, presented little more than a “white zone” between the institutional building and the peripatetic publicity of the street but which paradoxically permitted ambivalent loitering; a stagnant cocoon. The callous space provided little more than buckets for ashtrays and trash which were appropriated as seating, discarded bus stop seats, a crumbling planter wall, patched groundwork and a large sign announcing “The Salvation Army Addictions and Rehabilitation Center”. Because this space offered nothing for the men, those who sat there were dismissed as having no dignity. The men who occupied this de-humanizing zone often were looked at as apathetic malingerers but in fact are caught between societal and physical rules of existence.

Gottingen Street is one of the three main pedestrian streets in Halifax. It is the poorest economically but the richest in culture and diversity. One day, on passing by the Salvation Army Booth Center for Men, a homeless shelter and rehabilitation center; I noticed a man seeking to be outdoors of the institutional building in a small outdoor space adjacent to it. This neglected space offered little by way of physical shelter. The space was nothing more than a long empty lot between the Salvation Army and an adjacent photographers’ gallery. The lot had two maple trees in the back, some grass and a picnic table. The man who instigated this work was standing behind a very small corner of the Salvation Army’s building. This small corner offered him little protection from the passersby on the street; no place to sit, but some measure of comfort through the very act of being outside. This particular man appeared scared and disoriented. The proposition to build an urban garden for the men of the shelter to enjoy fresh air, socialize with



Figure 1. Existing conditions

each other and with community members was immediately welcomed.

The purpose of the garden was to give these men a place to enjoy fresh air and socialize within the beautiful spaces of a garden. The change in the environment positively changes the perception of the passersby of the men of the shelter. Instead of being loiterers, the garden spaces legitimized their presence as men enjoying a beautiful place. Additionally, the urban garden deliberately and boldly serves as a challenge to the city’s attitude towards Gottingen Street itself. Hopefully, the design of the

garden space will instigate other such projects on this street.

### PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

The design and construction of this project in Halifax's North End, Gottingen Street was developed and constructed as part of a collaborative graduate and undergraduate design studio; Dalhousie University, School of Architecture's "Free Lab". The "Free Lab" was begun in 1991 by a few professors with an interest in 'experiments in building' at a hands-on scale. For two weeks in July, eight or more Free Lab projects are constructed throughout the province. The Free Labs range from the ephemeral to rammed-earth constructions; light framed to heavy timber; from faculty research driven to constructions with social or community benefits. The school provides nominal support, \$75 for each student. These funds, collectively used towards a common goal are just enough to compel students and faculty to seek further support as can be found and to creatively look for building opportunities with unexpected materials and in unexpected ways. In this case, small grants and material/equipment donations augmented the initial supporting funds. Seventeen students, one professor, four volunteers, eighteen supporting companies donating materials and equipment, untold sidewalk supervisors all contributed their ideas, labor and criticism.

As the professor leading this project, the challenge of maintaining design cohesiveness with a group of energetic students, while encouraging their professional growth through design proposals (discretely editing good and not so good ideas) was achieved through the careful diagrammatic structuring of the project. This diagrammatic structuring is elaborated on in the next section. In addition to the exuberance of good and not so good ideas, the students' brought extreme levels of experience to the construction of the garden. They taught each other, and were taught by the men of the shelter on occasion. A stone mason emerged, along with a bricklayer, a heavy equipment operator, a gardener. Although a good portion of the advice from the men was more beneficial to the men than the students, the students had very respectful considerations for, and interactions with the men.

The students also learned to deal with unexpected surprises, both pleasant and not so pleasant. The

pleasant surprise of finding a large quarried granite stone about 1' x 2' x 10' buried in the ground from an old house which previously occupied the site, presented the dilemma of what to do with it and the problem of how to move it. The unpleasant surprise of breaking the buried water line to this same old house forced the students to devise an artesian type plumbing fixture to drain the water until the city could repair the line. These experiences of: understanding the diagrammatic structure, proposing designs within this structure, finding potential within the found conditions, construction, the interactions with the men, and solving unpleasant problems, provided the students with invaluable professional growth.

### CONCEPTS, PARAMETERS AND RESOLUTIONS

In approaching the design of this garden, a balance between the Booth Center clients' need for privacy and the center's responsibility to unobtrusively monitor activity within the green space was sought. No shrubs or visible obstructions were allowed yet a protective screen was needed to provide a sense of enclosure and separation from the street. To address this dilemma, a steel screen welded together of loosely placed rods and allowed to rust provided this threshold while evoking the tall grasses of a meadow.

The garden was conceptually divided into three main spaces having unique qualities, functions and materials with a path stitching the site together. The diagonal path also served to mediate a slope by becoming part stair, part ramp which afforded accessibility. The three major spaces consist of 'the porch', adjacent to the street which is defined by a widened but separated sidewalk, a front planter and a cantilevered bench. The threshold into the garden is created by a large quarried granite stone found during the site excavations, a concrete retaining wall and a steel screen meant to evoke grasses. The screen separates the garden from the street while maintaining visibility. The semi public middle space of the garden is formed by two ovals set across from each other. The two oval spaces have a lively interaction but are unique in their materials and in their thermal qualities; one being sunny and having a raised bentwood cedar bench and round pavers, the other being shady with a rock wall and grass. The back portion of the garden was left rustic and offers privacy. Its entry

is marked by a double-round brick barbeque with fabricated stainless steel grills and inserts. The brickwork for the barbeque is as unique as expected when several architecture students, with bricks in hand, are asked to explore form.



FIGURE 2. Garden from above

Much of the materials used were donated or found within the site. This mix of formed and cast concrete elements (both machined and by hand), with the bricolage of found materials and the commonness of brick and interlocking pavers provides the durability required and the delight of variety. The materials were organized for their associative meanings with concrete and interlocking stone near the street; brick, cedar and round pavers for the first oval space; rocks, mostly bluestone slate found in the ground were made into a rock wall for the second oval space.

Abundant and various places for sitting were provided ranging from the highly public cantilevered



FIGURE 3.

concrete bench which faces the street, various heights on the planter walls, large granite stones placed throughout the garden, a curved cedar bench in the sun, a shady rock wall and grass.

### UNIVERSAL CONNECTIONS

The creative process in architecture can be regarded as the grasping of aesthetic potentials with two distinct modes of engagement. The primary mode is that of "seeing" and the secondary is "communication". Because Communication requires of the artist a translation of what is personally and privately investigated into a representative form that can be universally and publicly received, the product of this grasping, the residual evidence of an open work is a representation which speaks of things absent yet present. The artist/architect's sensitivity towards reading the indicators of site, coupled with their assured trust in knowing that there are certain universal connections which we share, when brought to a work, manifests as a phenomena that is as materially distinct from its surroundings as it is principally connected. The bucolic setting in which we may view the stone edifice and dwindling steeple of a distant church evokes just such a distinct connectedness: It speaks to us in a stronger voice than the primary landscape, but speaks to the tended landscape through the successful seeing and communication of its architect.

In this case, the project was an open work of a sort which also held a strong performative component. This work needed to be successfully completed because of its highly public nature. This open work was undertaken with the faith that the design, problems, lack of resources, offer constraints which force exceptional inventiveness. These constraints were resolved spatially and aesthetically through sheer will and attention to placements and details.

Seen in this light, the purpose of an architectural investigation or work, and its subsequent manifestation in concrete form is essentially anthropomorphic; to translate the existent order - its physical, social and aesthetic laws - into a distinct representation of the universally communicative human presence. Our perceptions of the men now using this space are changed from societies forgotten ones to a legitimized presence.



FIGURE 4. The finished garden

## CONCLUSION

As a project which was proposed and volunteered to a charity, profitability is not measurable in typi-

cal capitalistic terms. Instead, this project should be measured relative to its human and urban contributions. On any given day, the men are in the garden, enjoying the conversations the spaces

afford; being alone which is sometimes sought; interacting with the garden itself through moving or changing the things within it (a giant sand lizard and a bird bath mysteriously appeared); and tending it. In addition to these informal prospects, the Salvation Army has begun holding regular organized events in the garden such as ice-cream socials, corn boils and barbeques. In all of these formal and informal activities, the men continue to smoke.

The benefit to the students' in projects such as these has been eloquently summed up by one student, Refilwe Mompe, during an television newscast of the project:

"It puts it in my heart in a way, to say that I have made something that will be part of a community, that I might leave behind. I have this feeling that I can always come back in a couple of years and say 'Wow, I did that'. It just brings a good feeling inside of me."<sup>1</sup>

## ENDNOTES

Student participants: Corrado Agnello, Logan Amos, Adetokunbo Bodunrin, Alexandra Bolen, Kristin Chrzanowski, Melissa Clarke, David Cocks, Tony DiNardo, Mike Eady, Joe Lambert, Kayla MacKay (NSCAD), Refilwe Mompe, Christina Persaud, Nick Roland, Kristal Stevenot, Victoria Yong-Hing