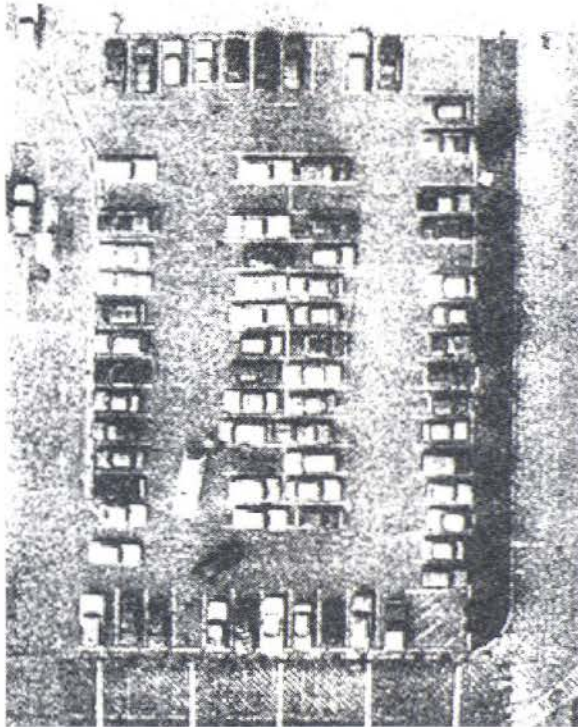


Installation Report:

Re Marks on Parks*

John Graham



Harbourfront Centre: York Quay parking lot

"You ruined a perfectly good parking lot!"

(Review of *Re Marks* from a Queen's Quay resident to the artists, June 1994)

Parking Lots and Re-building the Public Realm

Within the form and structure of North American cities, parking lots physically fragment social space and are mainly characterized by their utility and relation to commodified land practices. Like other "under used" urban sites, integrating these open spaces with both the natural and social features of urban environments potentially offer desirable opportunities for modest community based redevelopment projects.

Building on the efforts of many urban activists to re-construct parking lots as community gardens, performance and exhibition sites, informal markets and skate board parks, and since the advent of postmodernist design practices, "integrated car parks" are now appearing through mainstream planning and development processes – reflecting, among other things, a more self-conscious, "institutional" view of structured open space. One such project was recently built in Burlington, Ontario, as part of a commuter transit station. In addition to 712 parking spaces, the lot contains 260 trees, 1068 shrubs and, eschewing typical methods of storm water drainage, retention ponds for plants and wildlife. Similarly, in Georgia, the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta and the Architecture Society of Atlanta (ASA), as part of their joint "civic improvement program", sponsored an international design competition inviting participants to make proposals for public art/mixed use projects on a number of Olympic sites – including an active parking lot. This sorely needed endeavor (Herculean, Sisyphean or Trojan?) is ostensibly aimed at "re-constituting a system of public open space in the new American city."¹

Formed as they are in the structure of the modern metropolis, these two projects instead of re-constituting the public realm, might simply represent "product differentiation" in the production of exclusive forms of consumptive space.² Since "parts of [social] space, like parts of discourse, are articulated in terms of reciprocal inclusions and exclusions," a critical test of any mode of spatial practice, especially integrated parking lots, focuses on the "meanings" and "social relations" of material forms.³ The Burlington project, for instance, does represent an interesting, small scale effort aimed at integrating uses on an active parking lot, yet nature in the carefully constructed commuter parking lot also belies its broader relation to suburban and exurban forms and the historic razing of agricultural and wild landscapes. Moreover, this rare example stands apart from common municipal practices that tend to disregard parking lots as open space in the context of their local areas and urban and regional systems. In the Atlanta case, recent Olympic place-making schemes evidently privilege non-local designers and international spectacle, effectively excluding local communities, hard-pressed for meaningful development, from the effort to re-make the city. Even with their "exclusions", these two parking lot conversions nevertheless represent early examples of an emerging effort to variously diversify the modern metropolis.



Re Marks on Parks: Parking maze

* Re Marks on Parks was co-designed by Claire Ironside and John Graham and installed at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto during June 1994.



Re Marks on Parks: Installation detail

Re Marks on Parks

Paradoxical representations and park practices have existed since their 16th century origins in English language to represent and produce bounded space. Initially used to describe an agricultural pasture or tillage (1581), park was subsequently applied to describe both ornamental and recreational landscapes of towns and cities (1661), as well as enclosures for military armaments and equipment (1683). The nineteenth century national parks movement in North America was presaged by English Crown Acts that designated large scale land enclosures for “keeping beasts of the chase” (1715).⁴

Contemporary extractive and agricultural land use practices on perimeters of national parks continue to threaten enclosures of the sublime, the mythologized North American national park, challenging the logic of fetishized representations of parks as “viable preserves” of natural her-

itage.⁵ Reed Noss’s recent discussion paper on “ecological integrity in representative reserve networks,” part of the World Wildlife Fund’s [WWF] Endangered Spaces Campaign, is covered with *Radarsat*’s now famous “handgun” photo of Manitoba’s Riding Mountain National Park. This image of the park provocatively conveys the stark reality for some species caught inside competing land and social practices, and closed reserves of natural ecosystems.⁶

The development of *picturesque* form and function in the construction of nineteenth century urban parks and landscapes belies more than mere visual counterpoint or physical relief from the blighted conditions of the industrial city. Frederick Law Olmstead’s reflections on social order,⁷ public



recreation and the obligation of the “gifted and educated classes toward the weak, the witless and the ignorant” suggests his benevolent design practices were equally about mollifying class antagonisms, imposing a common morality and spatializing “relief” in the industrial city.⁸ Urban parks in the late twentieth century mark, among other issues, paradoxes in the spatialization of identity. The women’s movement and the gay community have concretized parks as sites of conflict in sexual politics. For example, in Toronto parks, “morality lights”, still a common descriptor in the City’s parks department, function within the practices of surveillance and intrusion, while only providing a degree of nighttime safety.

Following the adoption of mass production methods for cars and commodities in the early twentieth century a number of other signifiers and park practices emerged. Parkways and parking lots (1925) became a social necessity in order to encourage and accommodate automobile use. Technocratic practices in modern land use and transportation planning and development appeared around the same time, becoming potent instruments in city-building processes and the production of suburban and exurban (industrial parks!) forms. The ascendancy of car parks in urban land use is clearly just one legacy of the “Fordist City”.⁹

What forms, functions and meanings parks will assume in the new millennium remain unknown – although some clues exist. First, is the WWF’s “Endangered Spaces Campaign” to establish 400 natural reserves across Canada by the year 2000, which would redefine numerous national park borders. This ambitious program, however, has a long (log filled?) road to travel before the boundaries of these parks are reconfigured into systems of representative ecological networks. Next, “theme parks” reveal another, though much less appealing, trajectory for other future park practices. *Disney Land*, the world’s most famous theme park, recently marked its thirtieth (still going strong) anniversary, suggesting “variations” of simulated urban, and other environments will continue to define the public realm into the new century.¹⁰ Last, in a perverse refrain of an original modifier of park (1603), is Richard Misrach’s proposal for a new national park on the site of Bravo 20, a weapons range illegally used by the American Navy in Nevada since World War II. Bravo 20 National Park would commemorate one story on the ever-growing document of Cold War “assaults on nature” by preserving this “pulverized” desert landscape.¹¹ Visitors could stay and camp, tour an interpretive centre, stroll the “Boardwalk Of The Bombs” or cruise “Devastation Drive”, which together form a large axiometric target on the twisted surface of the flat volcanic playa.¹² The land could be returned to the public domain by an Act of Congress when the Navy’s fifteen-year withdrawal expires on November 6, 2001.

Installation and Materials

Re Marks on Parks should be seen in the effort to highlight the problem of parking lots in the social and natural space of urban landscapes. Using the surface of the York Quay parking lot in the festivalized, waterfront landscape of Toronto’s *Harbourfront Centre*, it iconographically exhibited various social constructions of “park” across time and space. Given the impossibility of



Installation detail

representing all its meanings and significations, icons were selected to identify major institutions that have mediated variations of park in land use, as well as significant junctures in the development of its meaning. The iconography of the “parking maze” was arranged to show that meanings of park, while linked, have never been fixed or removed from multiple questions of social power. A short publication accompanied the installation, providing an audience “map” to the project. The map included a time-line to demonstrate the before and after of various representations of park, and that present meanings dominate both past and future ones.¹³

Typical of our various projects, *Re Marks on Parks* was produced through the simultaneous and shared activities of doing research, gaining approvals and funding, and constructing ideas and designs. Actual implementation happened slowly over the month of June, 1994, usually involving two or more people.¹⁴ This process was cast in the “hyperplanned” mix of consumptive land uses at the downtown waterfront site, originally donated by the federal government as a park to the citizens of Toronto in 1972.¹⁵ The mix includes the select shops, restaurants, offices, and residences of Queen’s Quay, the popular cultural and recreational facilities of *Harbourfront Centre*, and their commercial parking lot. The busy lot generates(ed) necessary revenue for Centre staff and programs in two ways:¹⁶ parking fees, and its function as a “new car lot”.¹⁷ Consequently, a condition essential to implementation was that impacts on parking flows and the new car displays be minimized. The temporary installation will remain until the paint wears out or the surface gets re-paved.

The materials used in *Re Marks on Parks* were appropriated from the vocabulary of local pathway and road sign systems. For example, the parking maze was painted in Coning Green, commonly used to de-mark bicycle/pedestrian lanes on a popular Toronto waterfront recreation trail. The familiar “park” icons were painted in Highway Hazard Orange and accented with light reflecting beads usually applied in surficial highway markings. The blocks surrounding the “institutional” icons across the middle of the maze were highlighted with various coloured headlight road reflectors. Finally, the third dimension of the installation was activated by vehicles – suppressing, reconfiguring and dominating other representations of park within the maze.



... John Graham was a gardener for the City of Toronto's Parks Department for six years, during which time he collaborated on a number of local ecological restoration and installation projects, including the 1993 and 1994 Artist Garden Series at *Harbourfront*. He continues to work with Claire Ironside (whose photos appear throughout this report) on these and other landscape projects. Thanks to Claire, Max MacDonald, Lesia Olexandra, the editors of *Undercurrents* and Mike Bresalier.

Notes

1 Architecture Society of Atlanta & Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta, "Public Space in the New American City/ Atlanta 1996" (Competition Package 1994) 4. The anonymous writer of the competition package explained that the 1996 Olympics Games offered Atlanta an opportunity to "expand the paradigm of the "new American city" [see endnote 10], and in so doing explicitly address new possibilities for public space (ibid)." Considering that these "new possibilities" will be framed in the hardened structure of the 12th largest, "multi-centred" metropolitan area in the US, and the frenetic, boosterish forces of Olympic style urban renewal understanding what "expanding the paradigm" means indicates a number of problems. For example, conflicts between Olympic authorities and community groups over basic development strategies suggests that the new American city still excludes democratic politics – especially in the predominantly Black districts of south side Atlanta where current Olympic development has evoked bitter memories of previously imposed urban renewal schemes (18-20).

2 See David Harvey, 'Postmodernism in the City' in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell 1990) 77.

3 Henri Lefebvre, *The Social Production of Space* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell 1991) 131.

4 Shorter Oxford Dictionary (Third Edition), s.v. 'Park'.

5 See Reed Noss, *Maintaining Ecological Integrity in Representative Reserve Networks* (Washington and Toronto: World Wildlife Fund Discussion Paper 1995) Chapter 3 'Indicators and Correlates of Ecological Integrity'; and Chapter 4 'Landscape Design'.

6 Relief workers built Riding Mountain National Park and its landmark structures, including their own camp, during the 1930s depression – it was proclaimed in 1932 and opened 1933. Power, production and the local economy still factor significantly in defining area ecology. The Province of Manitoba recently approved Louisiana Pacific's application for clear cuts in an area that covers the north east border of the park – the American conglomerate is preparing to remove, for pulp production, approximately 400 semi-truck loads of Boreal Aspen each day over the duration of their lease. Moreover, Bear-baiting practices on the perimeter of this is-

land ecosystem also pose a threat to its "ecological integrity". Local guides and outfitters regularly advertise their "high success rates", something short of a guaranteed kill, to solicit big game clients. Each year on the border of the park an estimated 300 Black Bears follow their noses to oblivion. Interview with Dave McArthur, archivist and programmer, Riding Mountain National Park, March 1995.

7 See F.L. Olmstead 'The Uses and Abuses of The Park by the Public' and 'The Park Keepers Force: Managing the Public', in F.L. Olmstead (Jr.) and Kimball T., eds. *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Central Park* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press 1973).

8 Galen Crantz, *The Politics of Park Design* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press 1982) see chapter 8 'The Role of Parks in the City' p.236; chapters 5 'The Powers that Be'; and chapter 6 'Users: Class and Classification'. The construction of New York's Central Park included the 1855 expropriation of 'Seneca Village', a "thriving community of Black property owners at a time when few owned land". Of the 71 Black property owners in New York City 24 lived in Seneca Village; See Douglas Martin, *The Globe and Mail* (13/5/95) A19.

9 One startling example is Atlanta, where the ASA recently calculated that 60-70% of their "downtown" is devoted to surface parking or parking decks. Architecture Society of Atlanta & Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta, (1994) 18. See Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso 1987) chapter 7 'The Historical Geography of Urban and Regional Restructuring' and chapter 8 'It All Comes Together in Los Angeles'.

10 Michael Sorkin, editor, *Variations On a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang 1992).

11 Mike Davis, 'Dead West: Ecocide in Marlboro County', *New Left Review* (1993) 56-7.

12 Richard Misrach, *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 99. Bravo 20 occupies 64sq miles, only a fraction of the American military's 4 million acre inventory in Nevada; in his preface to the short history of Bravo 20, his collection of "neo-pictorialist" photographs (see Davis, 56-7) and the national park proposal, Misrach observes what visitors would visually experience on "this" Nevada site: "After several miles of nothing we came upon the first bomb. Then a crater. Then more craters and more bombs. As 'Lone Rock' [a volcanic 'plug' on the centre of the playa] turned from a bump to a mountain, the playa transformed from pure desert wilderness to the post-apocalyptic landscape of a Mad Max scenario. Soon after that there was not an area of land that was not riddled with crater upon crater, shrapnel, and bombs (practice and live). As far as the eye could see in any direction was man-wreaked devastation (*ibid.*)"

13 Henri Lefebvre, (1991) 131.

14 At various points during the process we were kindly helped by Michael Bresalier, Kristjan Vitols and *Harbourfront Centre's* grounds crew and production staff.

15 See Edward Relph, *Rational Landscapes and Humanistic Geography* (London: Croom Helm, 1981) 84-100.

16 In late March, 1995 the Federal Government announced their decision to end support for Harbourfront Centre - resulting in the decision by the Harbourfront board of directors to close the popular facility by September 15, 1995. Racked by years of jurisdictional and political struggles over funding it seems an unlikely end to one of the most efficiently operated cultural organizations in the country (among other things their corporate funding levels exceed most other institutions in the country).

17 Ford of Canada's sponsorship agreement with *Harbourfront* includes prominent display space in various precincts of the 94 acre festival site.



Re Marks on Parks: Selected icons