

**Gala Speech for “Spacing” Magazine (and “Murmur”) Fundraiser  
(sponsored by ERA Architects Inc. as part of  
Festival and Architecture and Design Month)  
Distillery District  
May, 2005**

I'm thrilled to be here. And it's a special encounter. It isn't often that grass roots philosophical movements such as “Spacing” and “Murmur” meet and go on a date with top-notch urban designers, architects and restorers.

It's so shocking at first that in fact I didn't quite know what the two had to do with each other -- the intent of current development is so adversarial to the principles of the body as a compass for urban design.

And the body is what this celebration is about. The “body”, that's slowly being disenfranchised by the statements of global architecture. The body for which the city was intended, for which the city is furniture, testament, forum of play and discovery. It is the body of the citizen that asks for expression. And a city is the expression that can ennoble the human condition, or trivialize it. City; the poem that we write everyday with labour and love that mistakenly becomes a zone of illiteracy when we spell it out in bad planning and building.

I'm going to call my theme, "restoring the body to the city" or, alternately, “the city restoring the body to the citizen”; for that is the project of architecture and urban design; to restore a sense of the human to the global landscape.

The technological world persuades us to the virtual; it announces comfort for the individual, while depriving him of the domain through which beauty is lived and understood-- the human body. Rules, regulations, safety principles, efficiencies, contain and direct the body. Virtual world and information technology conspire to make the body a thruway for commercial gains, at paces and bio-rhythms that disrupt the natural. The natural is being redefined; and urban design is a battlefield between the virtual and the natural.

Spacing says: the body is the natural inheritor of the city. If you build and design so that the body cannot play and be curious; you have unhappy people. If you take the familiar and shackle it with useless innovation, you have resentment. If you insult the body with corrals of rude geometry and advertising, the body will rebel, for the body is vessel of heart and mind, and it demands a city that reflects both heart and mind.

The “Murmur” project is about falling in love with one's city, by letting it claim you with its history, its stories, by reminding us that every new and strange place has the fingerprint of human drama. This is how we build a city myth, by connecting the places of every day, with the spells of human involvement. The idea is too brilliant not to be poetic.

You pick up the cellphone, dial a number, and human voice recounts a story of the place you are in or that is around you. It turns the virtual against itself. It returns the city to the body.

These are grass-roots strategies from young and creative minds. The distillery district looks awfully fashionable for a group of young men and women whose sense of urban housekeeping is ingeniously subversive. The civic ethic they espouse is not expensive; it speaks in articles about eye-contact, about exploring alleys, forgotten routes and arteries of the town, about saying no to commercial greed, about taking what is over-looked and making a future of it. But as we look at the space we are in tonight, we see the same good sense graduating and marrying an aesthetic; we see planning and the genius of the obvious coming together. We see a vision. We see that urban restoration is the first kiss between the city and the body that inhabits it; because history is the eros of the city; the places that have been lived in are loved, and a design that acknowledges this is loving, and is even an act of love.

And the body responds, with freedom and joy; it feels at home between the old and the present; for the city is only present when continuity is honoured. And this is where E.R.A. must be commended, and urban designers and architects everywhere who don't forsake the old in the conventional stampede towards the "new". For the "new" will be without character without a delicate homage to what stood in its place.

I think this meeting, this celebration, this collaboration between citizenry-consciousness and architectural consciousness is a key-point for a coherent vision of Toronto, for when architectural creativity and citizen's creativity bear each other in mind, a city that can be lived in, becomes a city that is attractive to all.

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City of Toronto Poet Laureate