

EXHIBITION, FILM, AND NEW MEDIA REVIEWS

Richard Henriquez: Building Stories

Directed by Gavin Froome and Mike Bernard

Vancouver: All in Pictures in association with Marcon, 2022.

Documentary. 29:52 minutes.

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North Vancouver

R*ichard Henriquez: Building Stories*, by Mike Bernard and Gavin Froome, is a documentary on the work of Vancouver-based architect Richard Henriquez and its legacy. The documentary provides a compelling portrait of Henriquez’s architectural practice – one that has provided Vancouver with some of its most important and culturally significant buildings. Indeed, for many, Vancouver cannot be imagined without the iconic Eugenia Place overlooking English Bay, or the Sylvia Tower, the False Creek Housing Cooperative, Gaslight Square in Gastown, or the innovative BC Cancer Research Centre on Broadway. As much as the documentary is a celebration of Henriquez’s work, it also provides a provocative insight into what drives much of his practice and shows the “passing of the baton” to his son, Gregory Henriquez, and his practice: Henriquez Partners Architecture.

In the opening scene, light streams from an oculus of a window that is a flattened diagram of a gable house. The framed view is taken from Henriquez’s renovated home. And it is here, at Henriquez’s home, that the viewer is treated to clues to the foundation of his architectural practice. Here, art is everywhere – drawings in filing cabinets, rolled collages on walls, sculptural dioramas on tripods, and exposed wood framing of the original house. Attached to the home is a wonderful light-filled circular room that serves as a three-dimensional photo album, an inner observatory tower to memory akin to something from generations ago. It is “a locational monument to define a ‘place to the world’ based

on the memory of events, persons, past experiences, stimulated by the arrangement of symbolic objects ... corresponding to the place in the world where they came from." The room shows architecture, with all its creative potential, as a practice that centres the person as the protagonist of his own story.

Building Stories is about how narrative in architecture can speak to us. It shows us how narrative is a necessary layer that distinguishes building from architecture. Henriquez's architectural methodology speaks to a time when drawing was valued not only as a poetic exercise but also as a rational method that can transcend space and time by linking us to our memories and to the values we hold dear. It is a rediscovery of *architectural parlante* but through the layering of collage. As an artistic practice, collage juxtaposes and brings together disparate realities. Applied to architecture, the inclusion of fragments and their associations creates a narrative that grounds the building to its site; it adds value to the urban realm by imparting a background to the ritual of our ordinary lives.

At some point in his practice, Henriquez realized that it is "not science and technology that will save and feed the world"; rather, it is "culture that will clothe and feed the world." If culture can be interchangeable with art or architectural practice, one can rephrase this by stating that "it is architecture that will clothe and feed the world" or that it is "art that will clothe and feed the world." This firm belief, that art underpins architecture, that it is relevant, applicable, and worthy, is an admirable disruptive force. In Eugenia Place, art brought to the West End community a form of urbanism. While previously developers were reluctant to further densify the West End, Eugenia Place changed the perception that a tall building would not fit this neighbourhood. The argument over density continues, with the current Official Community Plan allowing tall towers only on the periphery of the West End. There is a contest of wills between the low-lying modernist buildings at the neighbourhood's centre and the grand new towers being built on its perimeter, reflecting an urban debate concerning density, affordability, and neighbourhood character.

In the West End, at the terminus of Barclay Street, sits the Presidio, a gorgeous building that puts its neighbours to shame. It is another Henriquez – slightly off the beaten path. The Presidio is amazingly detailed. It has a bearing, a rightful place at a corner junction where the city ends and the park begins. As one walks past its reflecting pools and garden, on a path to First Beach, its geometry is tantalizingly off grid but purposeful. The building has swooping corner balconies, softening

and almost naturalizing its edges. Glazed central grand rooms, corner turrets, and canopies that appear to move with the passage of time detail an unspoken past and the unseen realities of the occupants who live there. It is all poetic, until one encounters the fictional narrative that supports this building – a façade that has been stitched from Villa Karma, a house designed by Adolf Loos (who is from Vienna). As the worlds of fiction, cinema, and architectural history collide, one cannot help but give in to this reworked reality. The irony lies in the fact that Adolf Loos was instrumental in the modernist project of stripping all ornament for a minimalist formality. The Presidio surely is a rejection of all that, which leaves us somewhere between the modernist project and the postmodernist world it is trying to leave behind. Surely, this is where Richard Henriquez’s legacy will carry on through Gregory’s Henriquez Partners Architects – in charting a brave new world at the intersection of modernity, urbanism, and affordability.

Outside In:

The Forgotten Connections between Nature and Home

Directed by Danny Berish and Ryan Mah

Vancouver: Black Rhino Creative and Leap Creative Group, 2021. Documentary. 40 minutes.

PATRICK SHEAFFER

New Westminster

IN THE OPENING SEGMENT OF *Outside In*, an unnamed speaker asks, “Can our buildings actually make us healthier?” The film is subtitled *The Forgotten Connections between Nature and Home*, and while such relationships are promoted in a lengthy segment on the appreciation of houseplants and gardening, a primary focus lies on the beneficent effects of the architecture of one new home on the emotional and physical well-being of the family it shelters. The motivation for realizing this house is based on a belief that nature is insufficiently accessible to city dwellers and that its construction allows the family to enhance well-being by moving out of the congested city centre onto an established but otherwise unremarkable suburban neighbourhood street.

Setting aside unanswered questions concerning the affordability (and sustainability) of building a custom, single-family home in Vancouver (famously proximate to both mountains and sea), the relative health of such a move is debatable without exploring details of design and construction and social connections. Behavioural well-being is not emphasized, and the resemblance to “white flight” inside or outside of Canada is not discussed. It is lamentable that no historic examples illustrating perspectives of traditional Indigenous cultures are represented. Content of this nature could support an interpretation of this film as representative of significant BC contributions and improve its relevance to professional and academic viewers. While contemporary Canadian ethnic minorities are featured in another suburban home (shown to have been lovingly upgraded over time) and a well-tended urban co-op apartment, a deeper dive is needed to establish diversity credentials and garner street cred. Diversity criteria could also improve prospects for the film’s applicability as an academic reference.

Specialized healthy building practices and interrelations between people of British Columbia and their natural environment are otherwise given minimal attention. Emphasis is placed on attempted dissolution of barriers between outside and inside, but these are limited in scope and amount to basic design strategies that have been expressed in construction systems from every age and context. Again, depth and breadth are helpful when attempting to describe the state of the art. Consider for context the response to similar natural forces posed by the Classical Chinese bureaucrat’s garden or Sir John Soane’s London home, or by twentieth-century buildings designed for northern latitudes by disparate international innovators like Pierre Chareau, Johannes Duiker, Alvar Aalto, and (later) Herman Hertzberger or Ralph Erskine. Such examples would lend context to enable an evaluation in comparable terms and, perhaps, to guide the narrators to impart a sense of continuing progress – and hope.

The horrors of calamity and the imperative to rebuild have inspired innovation geared towards reconnecting nature with dwellings, classrooms, sanatoria, offices, and industrial facilities. In the open air of turn-of-the-century Scandinavia and northern Europe, such impulses were demonstrably used to improve access to natural light and fresh air, enhance conditions for work and for learning, and mitigate the prevalence of tuberculosis in aging cities. The film’s reference to local health-care recovery facilities engaged with nature is a brief yet welcome extension of these precedents. The development of carefully composed

glazing and space planning to improve daylighting and connections that made possible healthy living environments still relevant today should be considered a benchmark for ongoing efforts that aspire to improve the quality of all life. Structurally, an introductory overview and final summary would help to contextualize these themes within a thesis, to introduce speakers, and to emphasize intent. Without such explanatory notes, it is up to the viewer to piece together narrative and to deduce conclusions. Human memory may be brief, but human physiology has evolved over millennia. Appropriate new development is built on past achievements.