

CANADIAN

\$6.95 MAY/09  
V.54 N.05

ARCHITECT

2009 RAIC AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE

3470248041180509 CAN

132/3 15(E)

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# PAUL RAFF



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In each of his urban interventions, Paul Raff seeks to make visible an intense poetic connection with place. He has collaborated with filmmakers, landscape architects, engineers and other artists to realize his investigations of the possibilities of material, the romantic qualities of space and the receptiveness of the viewer—or “experiencer”—of his works. These three elements have combined to create a range of diverse, powerful works influenced by the Situationist idea of psychogeography in which the environment is believed to affect the behaviour of individuals. Raff’s works integrate themselves into buildings, contributing to the architectural experience while engaging the visible and invisible cultural forces at play. They ask, “What is the nature of place? How does place shape one’s consciousness and how is it shaped by individual and collective consciousness?”

Paul Raff is an observer of space. His interventions use related media to explore issues of architecture at the intersection of place and experience. The environment is central to Raff’s work—because his interventions are lived rather than simply observed, they carry potentially visceral impact. Further, by harnessing the inherent poetics of common, often locally sourced materials, his projects achieve a rare magical quality at a manageable cost. Upon graduating from the University of Waterloo, Raff began a series of artistic interventions, all conceived in relation-

**ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT** USING 475 PANELS OF GLASS STACKED ON THE VERTICAL, RAFF’S DESIGN FOR CASCADE, AN INSTALLATION IN A PRIVATE RESIDENCE IN TORONTO, ABSTRACTS THE SENSATION OF LIVING BEHIND A CASCADING WATERFALL; AN EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE CASCADE HOUSE; FRACTURED GLASS INFLUENCED THE DESIGN OF THE CONCRETE FLOOR FOR THE LOBBY OF STRACHAN HOUSE.

ship to architecture. Working with then-collaborator David Warne, *UNBuilding Ways* and *Lucid Dream* offer insight into the formation of Raff’s unusual urban practice.

*UNBuilding Ways* was an early architectural experiment and gallery installation that Raff calls “a poetic autopsy,” a way of exploring and understanding the possibilities of architecture. Working with structural engineer Morden Yolles, a Toronto house slated for demolition was sliced in two, tipped over and further deconstructed, capsizing about seven degrees every two weeks until it had completely transformed in space. A corresponding gallery exhibit emphasized the experience by rehanging the house’s windows, doors and mirrors, adorned with translucent photographs of themselves, and a video recorded from the point of view of the original house’s television set.

In 2005, director Joshua Dorsey made a short NFB film about Paul Raff titled *The Infiltrator*, in which Raff explores the urban landscape, leading the viewer deep into construction sites and other rarely seen structures. The idea for *Lucid Dream*, an independent project, began when Raff climbed inside an elevator shaft and was so moved by the unusual spatial experience that he

sought to translate the feeling into an artwork. A 28-second video of floating bodies (shot through a swimming pool’s underwater viewing window) was screened inside a freight elevator, digitally rigged to synchronize its movement with that of the lift, giving the feeling of passing bodies, rising or descending.

In recent years, Raff’s projects have moved toward architecturally integrated commissioned works. Strachan House was a commission for the lobby, corridor and shared spaces of a Toronto institution for the homeless. Faced with the installation of a gypsum concrete floor, Raff, again working with Warne, married practical concerns with the need to create something meaningful for the inhabitants. After meeting with residents, he reinterpreted the shifting, stained characteristic of the street outside into a kind of landscape. He lay thin tracks of plywood into the floor, forming a pattern based on fractured glass, over which the concrete was poured, subtly hand-coloured and set, fossil-like, with objects—a shoe, a small bicycle wheel—selected by the residents from their lives on the street.

Another commission is *Garden Pavilion*, a sculptural piece designed as the focal point of an



ROBERT BURLEY

Over 400 panels of inexpensive 3/4-inch glass are stacked vertically to offer privacy and a “passively kinetic” experience that Raff likens to being behind a waterfall. The piece offers a softened, gently fractured view that plays with light and echoes the serenity of the neighbourhood. At the same time, Raff has powerfully harnessed glass as a material that absorbs, reflects and refracts light.

Over the course of his career, Paul Raff has played a significant role at the intersection of art and architecture. His hugely creative interventions perform an artistic function: they encourage awareness of space within the language and material of architecture.

#### Jury Comments

Paul Raff successfully utilizes a minimalist approach, using simple materials, and focuses on doing more with less. His most recent work demonstrates the creative use of light refraction and its kinetic expression. The “waterfall” panel is a successful intervention which changes the experience of an existing space in a dramatic fashion. Challenging and edgy, his work enhances and contributes to the architectural experience.

artist’s garden co-op. The deceptively simple wooden structure, with an open, lattice-like surface, is constructed from knotty cedar two-by-fours—“the cheapest, non-toxic building material we could find,” says Raff. The pavilion sits five people, as stipulated by the client. *Garden Pavilion* is exemplary of Raff’s geometrically

complex experiences created from simple materials and embodies his philosophy that each project increases the resonance of the relationship between people and place.

Similarly, *Cascade*, Raff’s most recent project, is a glass sculptural piece set directly in front of the entire front window of a Toronto residence.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT A DRAWING DEPICTING THE 28-SECOND VIDEO ENTITLED *LUCID DREAM* THAT WAS INSTALLED INSIDE AN ELEVATOR CAB; TIME-LAPSED PHOTOMONTAGES OF *LUCID DREAM*; RAFF’S LATTICED *GARDEN PAVILION* ACTS AS AN EXPERIENTIAL GARDEN SCULPTURE.



PAUL RAFF STUDIO



STEVEN EVANS