As We Write, So We Build

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN VISUAL ART
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

April, 2014

ABSTRACT

This thesis support document accompanies my Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition *as we write, so we build.* My work explores themes of place, placelessness and memory in relation to the built environment. Using typical construction materials I create sculpture-based installations to investigate our relationship to our everyday surroundings. I draw from my personal experiences and observations of my surroundings to construct architectural fragments that provide an immersive, embodied experience for the viewer. The research images that are included in my Thesis Exhibition contextualize my practice by relating it to my investigation of the built form of the city, while this support document provides further context through reference to my artistic process and influences.

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The shaping of space which goes on in architecture and, therefore, in the city is symbolic of our culture, symbolic of the existing social order, symbolic of our aspirations, our needs, and our fears. If, therefore, we are to evaluate the spatial form of the city, we must, somehow or other, understand its creative meaning as well as its mere physical dimension.[1]

David Harvey

INTRODUCTION

Home is the site of some of our earliest memories. It is both a physical shelter from the outside world and a metaphorical container for our memories and imagination; it is the site of life lived and daydreamed.[1] Home is where we develop our first memories of place, and a collecting continues throughout our life. It is where we experience our first relationship to our surroundings, enabling us to develop both a sense and a meaning of place. The surroundings with which we are most familiar are often at risk of seeming unremarkable as our prolonged acquaintance causes us to take them for granted – until they change or cease to exist. It is this change and loss that has inspired my thesis exhibition *as we write, so we build*.

I am interested in the experience of place and placelessness as they relate to architecture and the city. Place is characterized by identifiable history and culture, as well as geographical signification within the built environment.[2] In contrast, placelessness defines an area lacking in meaning or reference for its inhabitants. What I find unsettling is how this quality of placelessness is becoming increasingly common throughout our city streets. The now familiar presence of retail park developments is just one example of urban placelessness across urban centers. Cycles of demolition and construction, decay and renewal are part of the life cycle of cities, just as the memory and identity of individuals and groups within cities gradually change and transform over time. As the pace and scale of development and renewal accelerates to accommodate swelling urban populations, however, I am witnessing a disheartening homogenization of the built form within the urban landscape.

As Alain de Botton explains in his book *The Architecture of Happiness* we are inconveniently vulnerable to the materiality and form of the built environment[3]. In other words we are affected by our surroundings, for better or worse. My art practice aims to testify to this claim through an exploration of the themes of place, placelessness and memory in relation to the built environment.

My Master of Fine Art thesis exhibition *as we write, so we build* is composed of three parts: *Shelter, memory recaptured through daydreams,* and a collection of research images. *Shelter* is a mobile structure that relates to place in the public sphere, *memory recaptured through daydreams* is a sculpture-based installation that relates to place in the private sphere, and the research images contextualize my practice. I use typical construction materials because they speak directly to this materiality and form of the built environment. My works encourage the viewer to confront the familiarity of these built forms and to participate in a direct embodied experience to explore tension between place and placelessness.

DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTS

Place is Personal

What began as simple curiosity of the apparent 'sameness' I was witnessing in cities where I lived or visited has developed into an ongoing project of private contemplation, theoretical research, and artistic production. When I began my research into the subjects of place and placelessness I was somewhat surprised by the depth of literature on the subject. In nearly all instances, including the earliest examples, the concern over loss of place and increasing placelessness has been associated with industrialization, modernization, and most recently globalization. Despite the availability of literature on the subject I have come to realize that there is no concrete definition of sense of place that is transferable to every individual and group.

While varied in definition, there are shared unifying traits from which I am able to formulate my personal understanding of place, which might be best described as a geographic location which holds meaning and reference for its inhabitants through cultural, historical, and geographical signification. The experience of place develops through a recognition of, and connection to, the meaning that we can interpret in our surroundings. Where this meaning resonates within us is where we have a strong sense of place.

My relationship to place has often been fraught with tension. I grew up in Windsor, Ontario, one of two daughters in an immigrant working-class family. My father is from Italy, and my mother is American with a largely unknown lineage, but can trace her First Nations roots through many generations. For most of my life I have chosen to identify as

Italian-Canadian, opting for the less complicated cultural-hybrid and simply omitting my mother's heritage. I think I have always been aware of the unstable sense of identity my parents have, a consequence of feeling disconnected to the place they call home. In fact until recently my parents avoided accepting a Canadian citizenship, believing that it somehow represented a kind of finality or conclusion, deflating remaining hopes of returning to their roots that are slowly being lost to memory.

As a child we were a family repeatedly threatened with the possibility of being uprooted as my parents struggled financially. Both my mother and father also wrestled with personal battles which created a home environment that occasionally failed to provide a sanctuary from the outside world. I learned early on of the fragility of security and I carried this anxiety into my adulthood.

When I was 20 years old I moved to Italy for the year. I spent time with family, exercised my spoken Italian, and traveled the country. Curiously, instead of the familial connection I was anticipating, I felt an overwhelming and uncanny sense of place among the ancient architecture. Quite unlike my home town, the atmosphere throughout Italy is dense with human history and deeply contained in the architecture and landscape. This was when my interest in architecture was first formed and I began to understand that the built environment is not necessarily neutral but can be truly affecting.

These experiences have led me to an understanding of the variety of ways in which a sense of place can exist or be absent in the private and public spheres. My personal experiences have reaffirmed this notion that place is not concrete but is subjective and fluid. The experience of place is personal.

I have come to believe that the importance of home grows throughout our adult lives. As more and more of our modern lives are spent moving throughout the predictably similar, homogenized space of modern cities, the intimate space of the home can offer feelings of not only protection but also rootedness and identity. In the *Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard investigates the interior of human mental space and uses the intimate dwelling of a home as an appropriate metaphor or site for his exploration. To this end, he also makes a strong case for the home as the possible cornerstone of individual human identity, evident in "the subtle shadings of our attachment to a certain spot."[4] Bachelard writes at length of the role home plays in the creation, retention and recollection of memories, which he further asserts is foundational to the experience of space[5]. Memories form our attachment to our past, and they help us to understand both our present and future. Memories and personal history colour each individual's perception of place and are therefore fundamental to my own investigation of the private experience of place.

The Shared Experience of Place

The understanding of place as subjective should not distract from the importance of the shared experience of place. According to writer Robert Bevan in his book *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture At War,* the collective experience of place can be very powerful and last for generations[6]. In the urban environment this experience of place is reflected in the built form as architecture becomes a storehouse of memories and shared experience through its use and presence in the cityscape. As the Finnish architect and architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa points out, however, buildings are not necessarily

significant just because they are buildings.[7] I am unable to connect with many buildings in my neighborhood, for instance, and some of them I interact with regularly. I pass the Shoppers Drug Mart at the end of my block daily and yet I cannot really say what it looks like. The structure exists only to provide a place for consumption and its design communicates this clearly. Aside from its puffed-up and oversized false front, it is not meant to be looked at, and obligingly I do not look. This introduces the theme that I am most interested in regarding sense of place in the public sphere; if corporate and economic forces continue to promote culturally, historically and geographically anonymous structures, then will the result be increased placelessness in the urban environment? I fear the answer is yes.

In 1976 geographer Edward Relph published the first study of place through an examination of place identity and its antithesis, placelessness. Relph's study suggests that placelessness arises from the uncritical acceptance of mass culture and/or the overemphasis on efficiency and profit for developers. One consequence of this is the erosion of place for both the individual and the group as diverse and locally significant places are casually replaced with "anonymous spaces and exchangeable environments".[8] The demolition and erection of buildings by private developers continues to accelerate, aided by advancing technologies and society's insatiable appetite for both 'progress' and newness. At the same time the effects of expanding communication and mobility has resulted in the perceived shrinking of space, replacing the deep historic layering of a location with widespread uniformity. As a result, individual and group identities are sought through other means, namely consumption, and this predicament is often described

as the plight of 'modern man.' The feelings of estrangement and alienation that are often associated with our inability to find rootedness in the flux of a constantly shifting urban context is deeply symptomatic of placelessness. Those anonymous spaces and exchangeable environments that Relph refers to are increasingly prevalent with the expansion of consumer culture.

In response to anonymous placelessness, those areas that maintain and preserve collective memory retain a sense of place. The thesis exhibition title that I have chosen refers to a quote from Alain de Botton in his book *The Architecture of Happiness* which I feel poignantly captures this tension between place and placelessness. de Botton is concerned with ways of sustaining a sense of place, in opposition to a casual forgetting that leads to anonymity and placelessness. The full quote reads: "As we write, so we build: to a keep a record of what matters to us."[9]

DEVELOPMENT OF WORK

Research Images

My research into the significance of the built environment developed through an ongoing observational and experiential investigation of my surroundings. This requires a keen attention to both the atmosphere of my environment and its material form. In 2012 I began photographing the city to document my observations. Through this exercise my focus shifted away from the sameness I was seeing throughout the city. I became less interested in examples of urban renewal and growth that appear to support the developers interest in profit over design, quality and longevity. Instead I began documenting sites of demolition and construction, details that indicate the passing of time, and alternative human-scale architecture. These photographs are an important beginning for both my studio based research and aid the direction of my theoretical research by creating an awareness of the many layers of the urban fabric. A selection of these research photographs accompany my work displayed in the thesis exhibition.

Fig. 1

memory recaptured through daydreams

> The house is not experienced from day to day only, on the thread of a narrative, or in the telling of our own story. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days... Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams.[10]
>
> Gaston Bachelard

memory recaptured through daydreams (which I will henceforth refer to simply as *memory*) is a sculpture-based installation created for the Gales Gallery at York University. Each section of the work is constructed using different combinations of lumber, styrofoam, plexiglass, fiberglass, mesh screen, steel strapping, electrical components, paint and wallpaper. The scale of each section differs slightly, although the average height is 8' while the average length is 6'. The ambitious scale of the installation is important for conveying an experience that physically relates to actual architectural places. The materiality and concept of the work has developed slowly over time through the process of drawing, collage, and the collection of materials, laying the preliminary groundwork and perimeters for the project. The physical construction of *memory* required the negotiation of the shared space of the studio, producing certain challenges caused by these limitations. Yet throughout its construction I continued to trust my intuition. The result is a work that is much more intuitive and self-reflexive rather than contrived.

Minimal in composition, *memory* is an exploration of interior space with the aim of investigating the themes of memory and affect in relation to place. Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* was frequently referenced and I looked to his terminology for inspiration while

developing the work. For instance, the use of several 'fragments' of places in the creation of one cohesive project is informed by Bachelard's description of both the house and memories as fragments. I reflected on places that hold personal significance when determining how to represent inhabited space. During this process there were certain memories which, once resurrected, continued to rise into my consciousness again and again. These strangely assertive memories of place I have reimagined in the various fragments that are *memory.* These fragmented artifacts of my own memory of places were then stripped of any details that I felt may be too narrow or directive for the viewer, since I am not interested in creating work that is exclusively personal. I am instead interested in work that has a sense of familiarity for the viewer, and to this end, broad points of reference were necessary in order to activate the work.

The aim of *memory* is to bring to light the affective quality of our surroundings, and I believe it is especially through consideration of the home that these affective qualities are most clear. To illustrate this idea de Botton asks,"What will we experience in a house with prison-like windows, stained carpet tiles and plastic curtains?"[11] Surroundings resonate with their inhabitants to varying degrees and outcomes. Although *memory* is only representative of place it has similar affective qualities when the work is engaged directly. For example, early this year the fragmented stair section (see fig. 2 and 3) was exhibited as part of a group show, *to tell of things changed,* at P|M Gallery in Toronto[12]. The repeated response to the work was how effectively it aroused personal memories of place within the viewer. I believe this response confirms the work's ability to connect with the viewer and solicit authentic memories of place, regardless of the in-

authenticity of the project as actual place. Bachelard claims that "it is always more enriching to *imagine* than to *experience*"[13] and by this logic, perhaps *memory* is capable of effectively persuading the viewer to consciously acknowledge the affect of our surroundings by virtue of being a work of art rather than an actual place.

Fig. 2   Fig. 3

Tonality and colour are also recurring terminology used by Bachelard when discussing memory, and consequently inspired the palette of the installation by encouraging me to imagine literal colour in my recollections. By doing so I realized that I cannot recall most memories in a full spectrum, but rather something closer to black and white. Depth and volume, texture, even sense of touch are easy to recall, yet colour requires special focus and concentration. When colours occur I suspect they are imaginary and not genuinely being remembered. Although the use of black is inspired by my inability to recall colour it functions to introduce abstraction to the architecture and living environments within the work. This speaks to *memory's* grappling with its own

inauthenticity.

Finally, the floor plan of *memory* continues this grappling with place by inverting each of the gallery's corners and turning them inward toward the center of the space (fig. 4). This deliberately subverts the spatial properties of the gallery. While *memory* references authentic places, it itself is inauthentic in that it is only a representation of places from my memory. The gallery, conversely, is in itself an authentic place, though as a 'white cube' it attempts to be placeless. The gallery does in fact have its own history and meaning, as the ideological 'white cube' is not a neutral space.[14] Therefore *memory* is only simulating place, while the gallery is authentically place masquerading as no-place.
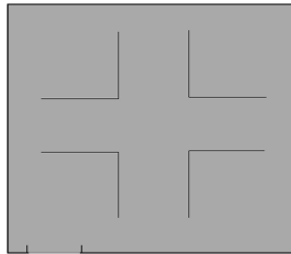
Fig. 4

The artist Gordon Matta-Clark has long been an influence for my art practice. Trained as an architect, Matta-Clark became well known in the nineteen seventies for his 'building cuts,' where he cut into buildings with a power saw to reveal the layers of material and blur the distinction between interior and exterior. Some of the fragments removed with the cuts are then exhibited in galleries. These architectural interventions are at once both aesthetically beautiful and inherently violent. Matta-Clark's powerful reflections on the built environment have inspired a generation of artists working at the intersection of art and architecture. Samuel Roy-Bois, a contemporary Canadian artist who

works within this lineage, has similarly influenced my practice. Using typical construction materials and found objects, Roy-Bois constructs immersive, experiential environments within the gallery. These installations suggest fictional narratives while also operating as meditations on space and the built environment.

The work of both Matta-Clark and Roy-Bois relates not only in theme and subject to my own practice, but in the ephemeral nature of their work. As with *memory...*, Matta-Clark's building interventions and Roy-Bois' gallery installations are eventually demolished or disassembled. The affective quality of these artists work has influenced me, and motivated my own exploration of affect and memory in the built environment.
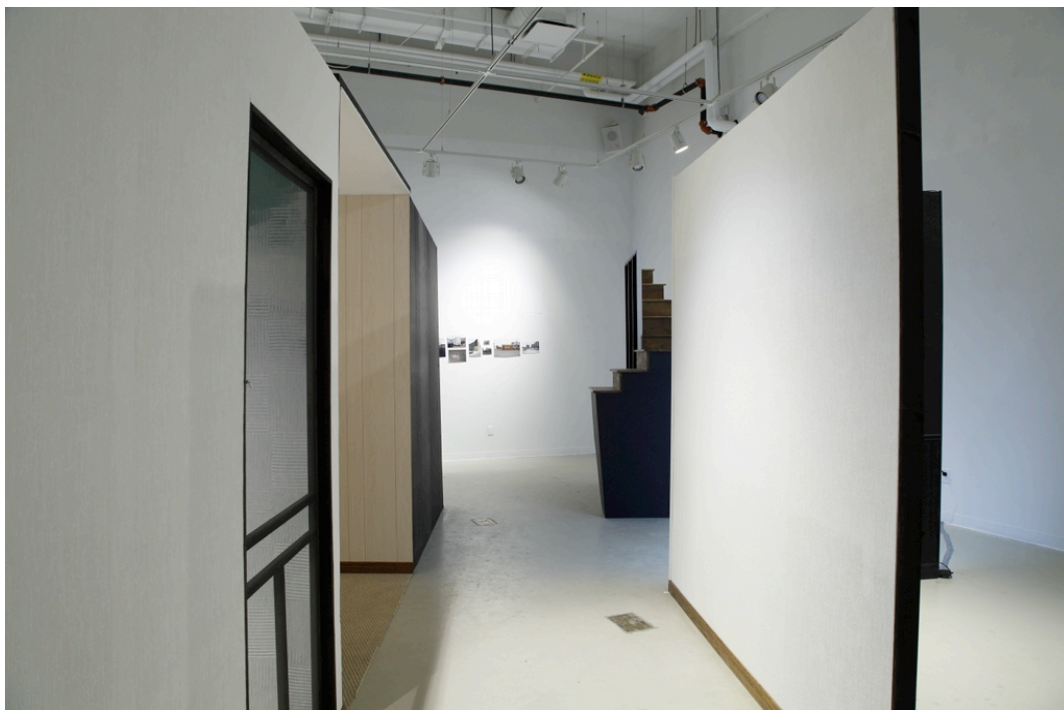

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

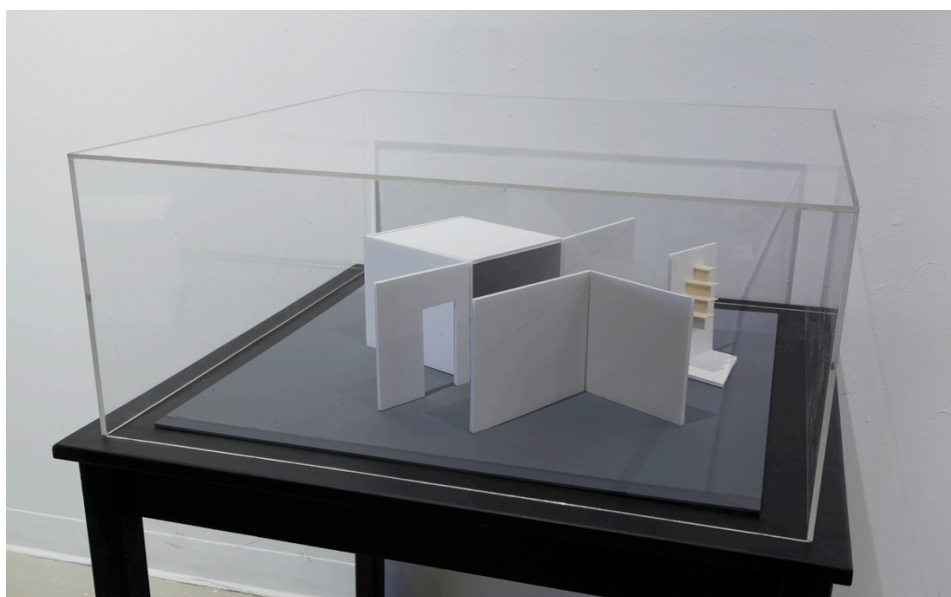Fig. 11

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

Shelter

The mobile project *Shelter* allows for an investigation into various dimensions of the urban fabric. It is an ongoing project that will continue past my thesis exhibition. The structure *Shelter* is built onto a 6' x 8' single-axle steel Trailer and stands 7' tall from the bed of the Trailer. I began the construction by laying pine boards for flooring which I then stained. The walls are framed with spruce 2" x 3" boards which I cut down to size from 2" x 6" boards. The interior walls are covered with 1/4" sanded plywood, and the exterior is 1/2" african pine, with the exception of one wall which is paneled with 6" knotty-pine tongue and groove siding. The roof is 1/2" flex-plywood laid over curved ceiling beams that peak at the center to allow for precipitation run-off. The roof exterior is sealed and waterproofed with several layers of black rubber. The windows are 1/2" clear acrylic (plexi-glass). Moulding was used to frame the windows from the interior and the exterior, as well as the doorway. Each piece of wood used to build this project was first weather sealed, and all of the seams were covered with silicone to help prevent damage caused by moisture. Later the exterior woods were stained followed by several layers of urethane, the interior walls were painted white, and the ceiling and ceiling beams were stained black. The doors where constructed with 1/2" plywood, overlaid with african pine on the exterior and reinforced with 1 1/2" lengths of poplar. The trim around both of the doors is 1" aluminum angle-stock. Finally, aluminum flashing was attached to the four exterior corners.

Fig. 18

Fig. 19

Fig. 20

I first took an interest in portable architecture when photographing the city in my research. I began to see sites of demolition and construction as sites of transition and transformation, however I was most attracted to the portable and temporary shelters for the workers. Seemingly indispensable to sites of construction, this spatial relationship raised questions of how we assign value to the variety of structures around us. Furthering this investigation I began searching for small scale vernacular and ad-hoc structures throughout the city of Toronto. Through this process I came to understand that such structures, however small, are one of the innumerable layers of the city's fabric. Despite

demonstrating resourcefulness in the use of materials, I believe these structures are sorely undervalued.

According to R.W. Brunskill's often cited definition, vernacular architecture is designed by an amateur, likely the building's intended occupant or user, and will reflect local building traits using local materials[15]. Ad-hoc architecture, on the other hand, is a type of building that includes structures that are constructed for a particular use, often built with recycled materials that are available at hand. *Shelter* avoids a standardized aesthetic, which I attribute to my interest in these types of architecture.

I relate *Shelter* to the definition of place by virtue of its aesthetic reference to traditional timber buildings – which I will discuss in the following section – however the work is simultaneously placeless because of its mobility. This mobility is central to the project's aim of engaging with the city and streets directly. For this reason *Shelter* posed particular challenges for me such as identifying and understanding the delicate complexities involved in a work of public and socially engaged art, as well as converting my convictions about spatial politics into an art work that is not authoritative, but is open and inclusive. I intend for this work to physically intervene into, and respond to, various urban sites throughout the city. Each time the project moves it provides a different function and derives meaning from its surroundings and location. According to the critic Thomas Crow, site-specific projects are more effective when their duration is limited.[16] He explains:

> ... its presence is in terminal contradiction to the nature of the space it
> occupies. Contradiction is the source of its articulateness, so brief duration
> is a condition of meaning and is presupposed in its founding stipulations. If
> the piece could persist indefinitely, the contradiction is illusory.[17]

By this logic *Shelter's* mobility benefits the project's aim. If *Shelter* were given a permanent site on a city street or in a park, it would no longer operate as an object that encourages a re-imagining of the form and function of the environment that surrounds it, because it would simply become part of the cityscape. This is why I intend for different projects involving *Shelter* to respond to different areas.

Last year I came across a sign to amend the existing zoning by-law within a city park on Bathurst St., where a condominium development was proposed. In response to this, a possible project will be to bring the *Shelter* to parks around the city in order to foster a reconsideration of their value. The project will involve a location-specific archive displayed within *Shelter*, where viewers can see how that location has changed and transformed over time. The archive will include maps, photographs, and anecdotal information about the area sourced from the Toronto Public Archives. As the viewer leaves they will be invited to take a seedling of a plant native to the area. This gesture represents the expansion of the park, through the dissemination of seedlings, rather than allowing for the shrinking of the park by encroaching development. In this way I hope that *Shelter*, which in itself remains placeless, can heighten our awareness of the places that we often overlook.

There are several examples of artistic inquiry within the built environment that attempt to effect change or understand the relationships between people and their surroundings, and these works inform my practice. The Situationist International, a Paris-based collective active in the 1950's to 1970's, have been particularly influential for their practice of Psychogeography. The group was critical of modern urban development and

the prescribed ordering of urban space that produced the effect of alienation and isolation in its citizens. Psychogeography was developed as an experimental project that re-imagined and re-examined the urban environment. The aim of their project was to re-awaken the participation in ones environment, by encouraging citizens to intuitively drift though their city rather than toward predetermined destinations.[18]

A more recent example of reconsidering the space of the city is the project *Park Fiction,* which took place in a low-income neighborhood in Hamburg, Germany. In 1994 a high-rise office tower was planned for construction on a riverbank site which was the only public land in the area available for outdoor community use. Organized by artist Christoph Schäfer and a local residents' association, the community responded simply by increasing their recreational use of the space, effectively making a non-confrontational argument for the necessity of independent social space. The project was successful in preserving the site as a park eventually earning the support of the city. As written in *Living As Form,* "Park Fiction coined the phase 'Desires will leave the house and take to the streets,' to stress the residents' imaginative transformation of the area."*[19]*

Park Fiction has some parallels to my own interests, perhaps the most obvious being its interest in rethinking the planning process. Though *Park Fiction* sought to effect a concrete change, it did this through a symbolic gesture that informs *Shelter* engagement. The motivation for *Shelter* is not to attempt to bring forth a solution to any specific issue. The project intends to be a symbolic gesture through direct engagement with a broader public, while deriving meaning and context through its location. Although sometimes functional, the projects envisioned for *Shelter* are not conceived to be pragmatically

functional, with the goal of a solution or resolution. Instead, I hope for the projects to be dialogical and reflective.

Though *Park Fiction*'s title suggests that they are operating within the realm of fiction, their activity is in fact firmly rooted within the existing city, within the everyday. Similar to my own work, the relationship to the everyday is crucial. French theorist Henri Lefebvre suggests that art can effectively illuminate and unveil unobserved aspects of everyday life. Likewise, Jacques Rancière states in his essay *Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics*, that the political efficacy of art exists somewhere between art and the everyday. He states that by inventing fictions that frame the real, art effectively challenges the distribution and organization of the everyday[20]

Like *Shelter*, each of the works discussed here aims to offer a way to re-imagine and reconsider the urban site. By constructing *Shelter* using everyday materials, and installing the work within the city, the project aims to develop a dialogue with the everyday, yet by virtue of its mobility never fully integrate into it. The concept of the project is concerned with specific places, while the mobile structure itself is placeless. This tension between place and placelessness reflects the complexity of the urban field. The proposed archive is representative of the collective memory of these places, as it has changed throughout time.

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

SHIFTING LANDSCAPES

> Capitalism perpetually strives, therefore, to create a social and physical
> landscape in its own image and requisite to its own needs at a particular
> point in time, only just as certainly to undermine, disrupt and even destroy
> that landscape at a later point in time.[21]
>
> David Harvey

In 2007 I moved from my home town of Windsor to Vancouver. Geographically Vancouver is beautiful, yet I was never able to warm-up to the coldness of the glass skin buildings that seemed to dominate the city. I happily left the following year, relocating to Toronto in late 2008. I quickly felt at home in Toronto, appreciating the city's walkability, distinct neighborhoods, and layers of history evident throughout the cityscape.

2008 was also the year of the massive economic downturn, during which time Windsor was severely effected. The city's economy was unable to cope with the sweeping closures in its manufacturing industry, particularly in the automotive sector and the impact quickly took a devastating toll on the cityscape. I left Windsor prior to the economic collapse and returned shortly thereafter in 2010. The amount of empty houses and closed commercial spaces was dramatic and the overall atmosphere was perceptibly dispirited. I remember feeling as though I was no longer familiar or well unacquainted with Windsor, weakening the sense of place I had within my home town and diminishing my feelings of attachment.

Returning once again to Toronto in 2012 to begin studies at York University, my observations differed from those between 2008 and 2010 because I was looking at the city through a more critical lens. By chance I was living down the block from my previous apartment at Dundas St. and Ossington Ave. and the area has since gentrified, dissolving

what was once a distinctly Portuguese-Canadian neighbourhood. The pace and scale of the change within the neighborhood was fast and sweeping, and I became acutely aware of the realities of gentrification, particularly the quality of sameness in not only in the culture but also in the built form.

This homogeneity of spaces, or sameness, leads to a collapse in what I refer to as the textures of a city. To elaborate this idea I will use the convenient example of Starbucks, of which there are 151 locations in Toronto alone.[22] While the layout may vary from location to location, the overall design and materials used to outfit the coffee shop differs very little, if at all, projecting the same artificial identity. Even the materials used to produce this artificial identity are artificial; the same plastic acrylic, dressed-up like real mahogany wood, can be found throughout the décor at every location. Such an exercise in duplicity, termed post-modern place invention, is apparently on the rise as corporate forces have discovered that place identity, authentic or simulated, is more marketable than apparent placelessness. People desire a sense of place, and in the absence of authentic place a simulated version undertakes to fill the gap.

I also see the homogeneity of spaces in new development, but on a much larger scale. As urban theorist Jane Jacobs writes in her book *The Economy of Cities*, "It is most efficient for large construction firms to produce monotonous multiples of identical buildings; it is most efficient for architects to design multiples of identical buildings..."[23] Just as details and unique design translate to higher building costs, so do certain materials, and in most examples of contemporary architecture I see a divide between actual construction and apparent construction. Not only do new buildings lack an aesthetic

relationship to their previously existing surroundings, I frequently witness a kind of deception in their construction. Metal is not metal, rusticated stone is not stone, and so on. I relate this quality of contemporary architecture to a physical manifestation of simulacra. Simulacrum is an image without the quality or substance of the original, it is an inferior copy or reproduction. In this context the dissolution of the distinction between reality and representation is reflected in the materiality of new development as well as the manufactured identity of post-modern place-making.

From my perspective on the street, I observe on a regular basis relatively new buildings that prematurely look tattered and worn, these engineered materials do not appear to be aging gracefully (fig. 10 and 11). As architecture critic Rowan Moore explains, the passage of time should not embarrass architecture, time should be foreseen and welcome.[24] In fact, some building experts are concerned about the lifespan of the newer developments, suggesting that many new developments are what should be considered planned obsolescence in architecture, or 'throw-away' buildings.[25] The quality of disposability in so much of Toronto's unrelenting development provides me with the impression that nothing is intended to last or have a history.
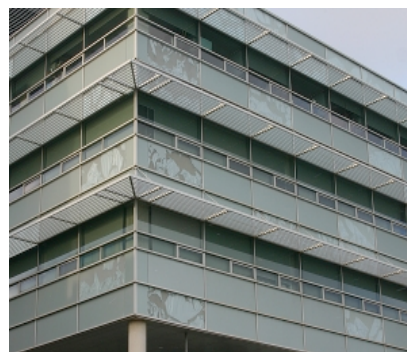

| Fig. 24 | Fig. 25 |

Within the discipline of sculpture there are also examples of the use of simulated materials. One example is Douglas Coupland's *Memorial to the War of 1812* in Toronto is carved out of styrofoam, supported by steel armature, and is resin coated to look like bronze and aluminum. There is a dishonesty in the materiality of these kinds of monuments because the average viewer sees these sculptures as bronze and aluminum. Therefore the viewer is likely to deem the work to have permanence and value – conceptions conventionally ascribed to such materials.

For these reasons honesty of material in the construction of *Shelter* operates to separate the project from works of both contemporary architecture and sculpture that I view as misleading. The simple materials and hand-built quality of *Shelter* makes an aesthetic connection to traditional timber structures, such as a cabin in the woods. It is through this hand-built quality that I loosely relate the structure to Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond. In *Civil Disobedience,* published five years prior to *Walden*, Thoreau lamented that his society was obsessed with commerce and material progress. In quiet protest, Thoreau relocated two miles from the center of town to begin constructing the cabin he would inhabit for two years. This was a act of defiance as well as a project of self-expression, self-reliance, and experimentation.

The fundamental link to my own work is Thoreau's act of building as part of his expression of self-reliance. I view my own act of building and learning through this experience as being in opposition to our habit of taking for granted our material surroundings, including architecture. As writer and researcher Matthew Crawford describes in his book *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, our way of inhabiting the world is

increasingly more passive and more dependent.[26] He explains that today we are less likely to mend or fix things in need of repair. Instead we easily discard things and purchase something new. Such an ambivalent relationship to our material world, he suggests, is in part due to the undervalued and declining manual competence in our society. Through the act of building I am myself learning to respect the labour inherent in the material and built world, and I aim to invoke a similar appreciation of the labour within the viewer. Further to this point, the decision to use only simple materials for *Shelter* separates the structure from contemporary architecture, whose engineered materials conceal the process of construction. It has become fashionable for our built and material world to have little indication of its own making, removing evidence of the human component of labour. I often search the surface of new buildings, examining it to understanding how it was constructed, but frequently I am unsuccessful and it feels as though an entire building just burst into existence. Accordingly, I felt that it was important for most people to be able to look at *Shelter* and understand how it was made. A basic understanding of an object's creation generates a connection to not only the physical object but to people through the evidence of human labour, and therefore raises its intrinsic value by providing more reference and meaning through this connection.

memory on the other hand, deliberately exploits cheap low-quality materials as many of the walls are framed with lumber and styrofoam, whereas others are framed with fabric. In constructing *memory* I was conscious of its relationship to inauthenticity since it is only a representation of place. Aside from pragmatism, the function of these materials in *memory* is to speak to the often false and unreal quality of memories, while also

referencing the deceptive use of materials in new construction. These materials also underline the commodification of both architecture and place identity by relating it to the qualities of new development and post-modern place invention

Although the act of building *memory* is important to the work, it is the act of dismantling the work following the exhibition that is more significant. Like the cycles of demolition and construction in the built environment, as well as development which appears to have no regard for longevity, *memory* is built and subsequently dismantled. Rather than being discarded I collect and reuse much of the material in later projects. My reuse of material is an ongoing part of my practice and serves two functions. First, I view reusable material as a physical continuum of ideas as each piece of material collects the history of past projects and my own labour. Secondly, each project generates new work, and my reuse of materials sometimes dictates what the literal form a project may take, which in some ways reflects the industrious and resourceful of ad-hoc architecture.

CONCLUSION

My thesis exhibition addresses the themes of place, placelessness and memory, through sculpture-based and site-specific installations, and is contextualized by research images. "As we write, so we build; to keep a record of what matters to us" provides a frame for my thesis exhibition because it speaks to the tension between place and placelessness. A place is a record of what matters to us. A place can provide meaning for its inhabitants through the culture and history that is inscribed within it. *memories recaptured through daydreams* is drawn from my memories of past places that have mattered to me, and is thus more introspective, whereas *Shelter* is more outward looking and involves my current experience of frequently relocating and experiencing different, often placeless surroundings.

Over the past several years I have lived a somewhat nomadic lifestyle and as an emerging artist this mobility has continued. The places that I spend time in leave an impression on me, and I have been collecting these memories like the now disused keys that fill my key-chain. The construction of full scale installations necessitates that the work be eventually deconstructed. It is significant that *memory recaptured through daydreams* is disassembled, as it reflects the ephemeral and fragmented nature of memory itself. *Shelter* represents a new development within my work, however, as I have constructed a place that can now move with me. The mobile structure is a vehicle for the continued exploration and reconsideration of these places that we move through, those that we connect with and those that we do not. I am always motivated by this connection, and my sense of place or placelessness informs my work in *as we write, so we build*.

1. David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1973),31.

2. Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 6.

3. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

4. Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 25.

5. Bachelard 4.

6. Bachelard 5, 8.

7. Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 15.

8. Juhani Pallasmaa, "Newness, Tradition and Identity: Existential Content and Meaning in Architecture." *Architectural Design* 220 (2012), 17.

9. Relph, 143.

10. Alain de Botton, 123.

11. Bachelard, 6.

12. de Botton, 13.

13. *to tell of things changed,* P|M Gallery, 1518 Dundas Street West, Toronto. January 29 – Februrary 22, 2014.

14. Bachelard, 88.

15. Brian O'Doherty*, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

16. R.W. Brunskill, *Vernacular Architecture: An Illustrated Handbook,* 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 22.

17. Thomas Crow, "Site-Specific Art: The Strong and the Weak," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 135.

18. Thomas Crow, 135-136.

19. Although the Lettrist development of psychogeography predates the Situationists, my interest has been exclusively with the Situationist's approach.

20. Nato Thompson, ed. *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2011* (New York and Cambridge: Creative Time Books and MIT Press, 2012), 200

21. Jacques Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics,* Beth Hinderliter et al, ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 49.

22. David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 150.

23. David Topping, "How many Starbucks, Second Cup, Timothy's, and Tim Horton's Locations Are There In Toronto," *The Grid,* February 22, 2012, http://www.thegridto.com/life/food-drink/coffee-chains/ (accessed February 20, 2014).

24. Jane Jacobs, *Economy of Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 101.

25. Rowan Moore, *Why We Build: Power and Desire in Architecture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 28.

26. Ted Kesik, "The Glass Condo Conundrum," *University of Toronto*, http://www.cbc.ca/toronto/features/condos/pdf/condo_conundrum.pdf (accessed: March 10, 2014).

27. *Matthew B. Crawford, Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

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