

Rewriting Place

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[amery Calvelli](#)

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Rewriting Place:

What progress has to do with ideology, architecture, and how we inhabit the city



In response to Cedric Bomford & Jim Bomford, Jasmina Cibic, and Larissa Fassler

Two palaces, two metres tall and composed of foam board and materials often used in architectural study models, are situated at the Esker Foundation entrance, their facades propped vertical with dozens of foam board sticks. *Palace/Palace*, by Berlin-based artist Larissa Fassler, manifests the

veneer and ambition of public buildings built to lay claim to social ideals of new futures. Their materiality, raw and temporary, manifest political appetite.

One of the palaces features a Baroque dome of the Berliner Stadtschloss, also known as the Berlin City Palace, resting on a hollowed plinth of columnar relief sheathed in copper film. It's an embodiment of dual histories: the dome, fabricated of honeycomb-embossed foam and tethering nuanced Baroque 17th century roots of the Stadtschloss, blended with a copper-filmed plinth, a nod to the Palast der Republik—a replacement building completed in 1976 that would be the seat of the German Democratic Republic parliament in East Germany.

Clearcutting mothballed ideology and sweeping medieval roots and perhaps more importantly, Prussian imperialism under the carpet, the newly-formed East German state had pushed to demolish the war-damaged Stadtschloss in 1950. Instead, a palace for the people and a house for German parliament was to be built. Financial challenges, however, would not see rebuilding effort take hold until the 1970s. The new design was a modernist box made of honest materials, a steel frame clad in a reflective bronze glass envelope. It featured all the amenities that bring people together: there was conference space seating 5,000 but also a theatre, restaurants, a bowling alley and a discotheque. In 1990, the treaty of German Reunification was signed in the *Volkshammer*, a “people’s chamber” and that same year the building would close due to asbestos contamination.



Had the Palast served its purpose? Occupied a mere 14 years, the discussion of demolition or reuse was kept alive with recommendations to enclose rather than remove the asbestos. Numerous cultural and art uses, and even a library conversion were offered up but none took hold. Once again the Bundestag (German Parliament) stepped in to settle the fate of the palace. It was demolished and replaced with a park while plans for a new design ensued. Interestingly, the third building, Humboldt Forum, will feature the Baroque facade of the Stadtschloss upon completion in 2019.

Through the rear view mirror, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, we observe the present. Thirty years might be considered a long term politically, but rarely does it qualify a building for heritage listing. Fassler’s cunning interpretation of the demolished palaces blurs imperialism and socialism into one. A facade propped upright with sticks, the “new” palace is candy-cane, holding the weight of shiny capitalism. Progress moves onward past wilted ambitions. Or does it?



Power as protagonist

A script in the adjacent gallery strings together quotes from political leaders, architects, and critics: “Blast! Blast! Let our north wind blow through this musty threadbare, tattered old world of concepts, systems, ideologies.”¹ The words of German architect and early modernist Bruno Taut, reveal his utopian desire to approach architecture with a new language, a reaction in part to war and unrest.

The film, by Slovenian artist Jasmina Cibic is called *Spielraum: Tear Down and Rebuild*. In this third part of a trilogy, four actresses debate a hypothetical destruction inside the former Palace of the Federation in Belgrade. It is ripe with power dynamics. Confident female characters espouse the words of Adolf Hitler, Josif Stalin, Walter Gropius, Ronald Reagan and Frank Lloyd Wright among the speeches, texts, and public debates collected from Cibic’s deep research. Propaganda and progress try each other on for size.

The character of Nation-builder wants a monument while the Pragmatist questions the sensibility of holding onto a building that no longer represents contemporary values. The script’s Chorus recites Margaret Thatcher, “We are not only building architecture, we are preparing for the commerce of the future.”² Her words foreshadow a future of subservient architecture dedicated to the whims of the market.

The film opens with an ascent up a grand staircase in a natural light-filled atrium. Reaching a full-sized modernist mural on a marble wall at the top, the camera enters a conference room of wood paneling, large mosaics and a glass dome skylight chandelier in the shape of a sun. This is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* building of total design where materials, finishes and Modernist Yugoslavian artists are synthesized with grace. It’s a powerful setting from which the characters debate the merits of saving or destroying architecture.

The Palace of the Federation, muscled to completion by Yugoslav Prime Minister Josip Broz Tito in 1961, was the site of the First Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement. Constructed in the Communist era with influences of modernism, the building reflected a desire to impart a contemporary face of Yugoslavia on an evolving world stage. The building was designated a cultural monument in 2013.

Exploring “soft power” and the relationship of ideology, building and culture, Cibic inserts a thread of pastiche with a wallpapered entrance to the screening room. Real and imaginary images from Tito’s photography archive depict a non-existent landscape of Yugoslavia. Artists on ladders guild the wall with vignette titles: “Do Not Tamper with High Standards,” “Fight the Formalism” and “Desire to be Distinct Not Original.” One wonders if “Be Part of the Energy”³ might also be gold-crested on this wall.

Amidst aims for timelessness, architecture is representative of a moment’s collective desire. British architecture critic Rowan Moore writes, “At its most obvious level, the symbolic nature of architecture can be described in terms of display and propaganda; buildings are used to send out messages, true or not.”⁴ It’s a question of mutable complexity. Can we envision new uses for old buildings laden with tired messages? A city fabric relies on the multiplicity of form and time period. Overstepping the “old” and “rough” buildings that went before with fresh architecture of the moment is like a stew made with a single ingredient. Both are bland and lacking depth.

Through their installations, Fassler and Cibic allude to the limitations of a heritage debate on material preservation. Intangibilities like cultural values matter. And yet, social expression is complex, forcing the debate to stretch beyond the utopian and beautiful. An ideology based on the wisdom of markets and faith in big business, taken to the extreme, finds design not worth the expense, thereby failing to recognize the intangible assets at play. A quote in *Spielraum* by the late architecture critic Ada Louis Huxtable implores a rethink of tearing down an old-but-good building: “Any city gets what it admires, will pay for and, ultimately, deserves.”⁵





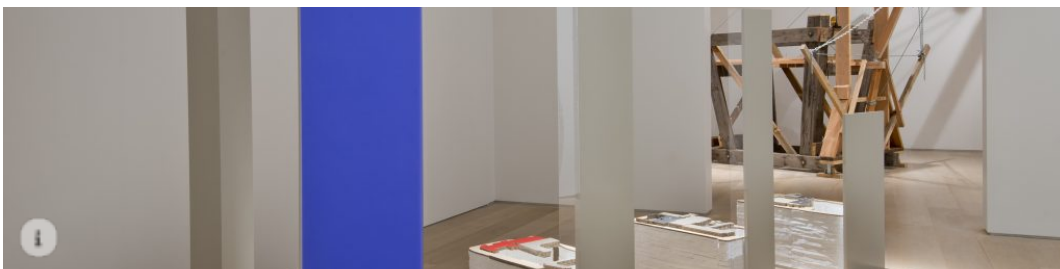
Re-evaluating progress

In a blurring of an industrialized past and urbanized future, Calgary's downtown is animated with freight traffic carrying daily loads of grain and lumber, but also coal and hazardous materials. In the next gallery, an oversize installation of rough cut timbers called *The Traveller* dissects the notion of progress. Built by artist Cedric Bomford along with engineer and father Jim Bomford, three re-constructed temporary structures signal the handmaiden tools of industrial growth and a Colonial past. The largest of the three resembles a machine used to lay rail track during the Canadian Pacific Railway's push westward across the country in the 1880s. A crane and a rocket launcher—representing of one of the structures at the Churchill Rocket Research Range, complete the installation.

Stunning as these structures are in the gallery, impressive both as a feat of engineering and for their ability to navigate vast landscapes, it's worth contemplating the nuanced complexity with which progress has played its hand.

An industrialized aesthetic, one favouring function over form, is at work. Similarly to Bomford's earlier work exhibited at the Esker—a formal photographic investigation of underground transportation air vents in Prague, *The Traveller* structures are designed to be overlooked. Their geometric forms animate the gallery, personifying production in much the same way that steel lattice power transmission towers can appear like stick figure drawings when viewed from a distance. Bomford's approach is process-driven. Starting with a pile of wood he learns through making.

Stand under *The Traveller*, a cantilever of approximately eight metres long, and look up at a geometric structure of cross bracing patched together with bolts and screws. The end of the beam is marked by a pair of original explosion-proof light fixtures from the Northern Studies Centre in Churchill. Offset by a vertical two-storey platform on one end, the extent of the floating cantilever is analogous to the ambitious reach for progress, an idea tied to land as opportunity. The Trans-Canada Railroad had followed Treaty signings with First Nations, a history that Canada is beginning to reconcile. Land ownership, let alone resource abstraction was anathema to the earlier peoples. How could one "own" that which is a giver of life?



Belonging

In the next gallery, Larissa Fassler's series mapping the language of the public realm offers a counterpoint. Styrofoam and cardboard models identify four blocks of Calgary's Civic Centre defining public, non-public, semi-private and semi-public realms. Two red masses represent the Municipal Building and the Central Public Library, both spaces that are open to everyone. Symbolism has been traded in for exchange. Everyday human interactions are given tenor.

Walking the four blocks north from the Municipal Building to the YWCA after viewing the installation



in the gallery, I was surprised by the spaces that I had overlooked before. Represented in corrugated and black cardboard are interstitial spaces: an elevated plaza by the YWCA connecting to the Plus 15, an L-shaped street alley, a parking lot between Imagine Health Centres (former Catholic Board of Education building) and the new Bow Valley College building. Can the public gather or sit in these spaces?

The accompanying paintings—narrow, two metres in height, a response to the verticality of Calgary's downtown—subjectively reveal the social interaction of this four block radius. The amount of time Fassler has spent on-site is apparent. Markings on the paintings indicate time, temperature and measurements taken at the scale of the body (height plus arm length plus hand, etc.) but also leave trailings of personal encounters and overheard conversations. Detailed tallies of people passing through note fist bumps, backpacks, suits, and coffee in hand, but also the number carrying garbage bags. Collectively, they bare the daily rituals of place. Her observations inside Calgary's Central Library: "Man with completely destroyed, swollen puffy face. Wearing sunglasses inside: 8. Chairs and tables occupied by homeless / out-of-work mostly men." ⁶

Layer upon layer are added to the paintings. Plans, tallies, arrows of movement, observations and encounters, the value and hue of daylight in February, and local signage render spatial form as complex, perceptual and far from pristine. The signage blends aspiration with a hint of paternalism: "Proud to be Building in Calgary. See the humanity behind homelessness. No Trespassing. Customer and Employee Expectations. You Will Rise. Sanitize and Cover Your Cough. No Household Garbage. Camera Surveillance." ⁷

Finding the Municipal Building designed with its back to the East Village a curiosity, Fassler ended up identifying a nerve. Societal ambition is writ large: attempts to renew a Civic Centre date back to the late 1970's but threads can also be found from a Mawson plan that drew upon ideas in London and Paris in 1914 with hopes of drawing settlers to Calgary. Progress continues with a new Public Realm Strategy for the Civic District completed last year. What Fassler's body of work implies, however, is nuanced renewal. If "new" is better, for whom? Where will the fist bumps move to next?

Fassler's paintings and models of busy intersections, train stations and Calgary's Civic Centre unmask raw, crowded public spaces that are overlooked yet significant. It's a subtle throat clearing, reframing top-heavy palaces, ideologies and pioneering ambitions with a sense of belonging. Subjectively sampling public experience, she re-contextualizes the threat of power dynamics into one of de-personalization.



Cedric Bomford & Jim Bomford: The Traveller

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Larissa Fassler: CIVIC. CENTRE.

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