

Friend to the martyr, friend to the woman of shame

The following piece of email correspondence was shared, in late 2024, within an informal discussion group concerning the contemporary built environment in Canada, of which the email's recipient was a member.

It is presented here with permission from sender and recipient, and has been lightly edited for orthography, as well as to preserve the anonymity of individuals mentioned. The views expressed are those of the author alone.

The exchange is included as an accompaniment to Simon Petepiece's The Cobbler's Bridge, as it offers an unvarnished statement on built-form today, from the perspective of individuals working within the AEC sector. Parts of the correspondence tending towards the personal or the digressive have been left unredacted, to preserve the quality of remarks exchanged in confidence or 'off the record,' allowing the reader a fly-on-the-wall perspective. It is our hope that, here recontextualized, this brief and informal epistolary essay finds resonances with the artworks on display.

*Editor,
M.A. Marguerettaz
Thursday, February 26, 2026*

From [Redacted]
Subject Re: Zombies, Loos' kid
To [Redacted]
17/08/2024 1:17 AM

Dearest Chris,

As always a joy to read. Much to get into. I really wanted to get back to you before the holidays but everything was so busy with work that I got maybe halfway done writing and had to put it on pause. So please accept my sincerest apologies for the delay.

Gathering together what we've been circling, I think the question reduces to A) beating the dead horse of once more asking ourselves where and when things went so horribly wrong for the built environment, and B) wondering 'What is to be Done'? Will try to spool out using that structure.

(As always, nothing new under the sun. But what is new with you?)

A. Grasping at a diagnostic outline of 21st-C. built environment

i. Gathering threads

To your point about Loos' kid, I think there's a more fine-grained, on-the-ground account waiting to be written of how Modernism degenerates into 'Zombie Modernism.' I know it's old ground for us, but for the sake of pulling it into one place, let's outline the sad story... I could imagine it told as a dance between the following:

1. **Economic pressures**

a. Market displacements in building materials and techniques

This is always your bit, which I think is obviously the main thing driving the ceaseless junkification. I'd like for someone to do the more detailed breakdown of this, though, because the particulars driving the adoption of each new garbage-thing are not all the same. The market can be searching for any of the following:

i. Greater performance

With respect to some narrow property (thermal, hygric, weight-to-strength, etc.); said property, though, is always measured completely in isolation and *never* at architectural timescales;

ii. Lower material costs

e.g. MDF crown moulding vs. hardwood. It's not easier to install, it's not more performant along any criteria, it's just cheaper;

iii. Lower labour costs

That is to say quicker assembly, or requiring less-skilled labour.

I saw, in Laval the other day – for the first time – *telescoping, PVC, click-in window trim*. Amazing. But most anything prefabricated to a significant degree (drywall, panelized systems, etc.) is motored by the same force.

Here we were, all of us (you and I), members of that class of manufacture that was once, to a degree, the backbone of the third estate. Now where are we? If you've planed your own baseboard profiles, if, when you imagine a surface of wood you imagine rail-and-stile instead of machine-glued layers of veneer, if you can carve a lintel, you are a museum species.

iv. [Others]

The important thing here is that these 'supply-side' 'market forces' (to use the jargon) produce specifically *displacements*. As in, something that was once cheap and abundant (like what we'd today call 'custom fabrication' in less-processed materials) becomes *rare* and *expensive* simply because it was pushed out of the market – never mind that the newer, cheaper thing can eventually become expensive, often more expensive than the old thing was...

b. Market displacements in architects' work

The imperative towards efficiency that pushes materials and techniques off of job sites does the same in architects' offices. You have to go faster, so you have to use the tool that lets you go faster – even if it tacitly guides the end product into being the same homogenized nightmare as everyone else's. (Remember when you used to point out Revit-buildings? What a laugh – today you'd be pointing at the blue sky.)

2. Architects (or, Ideology)

This is your bit about the rationalist strain of Modernism having provided a more pliant aestheticization of the above market forces.^

(We agree this isn't a criticism of rationalism, per se. Initially ofc the compliance was deliberate, and therefore muscular, interesting, etc. – then everyone forgot and made it the Law. See:)

3. Pedagogy (Ideology)

This is only the same as the previous, but tailing it.

Having adopted (and hopelessly maintained for a full century) the benevolently idiotic Bauhaus model, the possibility of a progressive synthesis with previous built-form regimes is deliberately forestalled: Don't look at history, precedent, liberal arts, the canon – just show us your big ideas, kids!

4. Market preference

I suppose not a mover unto itself, only the symptom that groups together the effects of the above, and helps lock them into a self-perpetuating cycle. Keeping up with the Joneses doesn't mean paying someone to use their head and hands to leave you something that's only for you, only by them. It means bigger expanses of drywall. It means work harder, play harder. Right?

It's very much a boring story, obviously. The question is only begged by the *persistence* of this long cycle of terrible, terrible built form. If it was only the same "all-that-is-solid-melts-into-air" cheapening as everything else driven by the force of nature of capital, you would've expected at least a cosmetic reaction by now. But even this is unforthcoming. The Junkspace refuses to die or change its spots – that's the main thing warranting an answer, while we're all waiting around. It's the fact that *Junkspace* is already a quarter-century old, man! The above explanation is no doubt insufficient.

ii. Bigger Picture

That said, of course, as much as built-form seems uniquely fucked, it *is* the same story as everything else (as evinced in your anecdote about your niece's assessment of the ice cream flavours.)

To ask the architectural question in isolation would be ridiculous, and to re-discover the cantankerous response anew, all the more so: It's Ruskin and, generalized or transposed onto other objects, it's Marx, Adorno, etc. It's forever unprecedented:

The ugliest time ever — not a stretch, and not the whinings of leisure. It's genuinely the most interpersonally and ideologically (and so, aesthetically) sundered world we've yet made. Or one of them. The fact that it's too trite to be worth saying, this *itself* gets folded into the crapscape.

You need not look further than the paper of record: A patient description of how the children are de-literating yearly; the ultraprocessed food discourse; the "loneliness epidemic" – whose depths cognitive-behaviourized psychology doesn't know to gauge (Laura's line about how if the SSRIs and the rest disappeared overnight, it would be Planet of the Apes).

You walk into the pharmacy and the music you hear is bad like it was in the 2010s, 00s, 80s, 50s-10s, fin de siècle, surely forever (since 'mass culture'), but it's also worse – and not just because we're old. The good movies are bad with few exceptions, riven with exposition, advancing all their concepts by way of crude inversions; so the bodies, faces, vocal fry, are throwaway symptoms. Even the pornography has exceeded its defining cheapness, no..? Then we have our ultraprocessed buildings, Temu buildings, with adhesive shit and plastics in every assembly that can't perform 35+ years.

The high point of our material culture continues to speed briskly into the rearview mirror of roughly a ~quarter-millennium past? (Appearing, to the new periodization, as posthumous-medieval.. against *our* world in gestation since ~1830s).

And, maybe I'm repeating myself: The group knows to name these things (slop, enshittification, brainrot, being fried, and so), but the names themselves only bob and pulse away on an en-defecated sea...

Yet though faced with such a creeping implosion at large, the body-politic, in this present slice of history, cuts a figure so vanishingly emaciated as to blow away entirely.. There is no sanguine and redemptive march, to raise the sick made visible by their ugliness.. (How could there be? As always, in parallel to the piddling concerns of people like us, and ever impossibilizing the future, there is the accommodation to the timeless barbarism, canon of nightmares affronted to all progressive humanism – and to most other moral rubrics – : the sleepers in the parks, the natives on suicide watch, the kids with their heads blown off in a dozen places worldwide at this hour, the slaves.)

From Cleaves, 1908:

Woe cries the watcher
Huddled in crenellations,
Blue sky burning him,
And straining hard to swallow
bubbling vomit.

That disgust should reign is obvious. It presents as the single, obsessive-compulsive hammer with which to beat back the encroaching world. What operates in its place is less clear.. But my point is that the built environment is only a trivial symptom of a larger whole, ofc. (Know I'm preaching to the choir.)

iii. Footnote: Lives of the rich and poor

Re: your trashy British TV show, I love it. Doesn't get more succinct than that: 800 years of noble blood, and now she's working as a self-employed Disneyland usher in her own ancestral home. The sleeping in the maid's quarters bit feels too on the nose though.. You think it was just for TV? Haha.

The wires get crossed, though: Too many see the fall of the aristocracy into proletarianization and celebrate the defeat of hereditary privilege and the forward march of 'equality,' when they ought instead to see the annihilation of leisure and humanism: Wasn't the point for us all to become them, not the other way around?

The other image I came across recently that resonated with this was some podcast segment about the Mitford sisters. Give them a quick Google search, I'm sure you'll find it interesting. Exactly the same as your debased aristocrat (or, I suppose as her grandparents): The 'Bright Young Things' of the interwar social scene in Britain, almost all of them landed peers, all of course totally Ox-Bridge educated in the traditional liberal arts, classicists, journalists, etc., none with a clue what a utility bill might be. Who would they be today? The software engineers?? The Rockcliffe set of gov insiders and consultants?

The passage from a patrician humanist elite into a credentialized, technocratic one.. (A certain someone saw it a good century in advance.). The former leisure class (illegitimate, yes, of course, with no better claim to their privilege than their descent from warlords, Horse Lords, yes) become pseudo-meritocratic middle managers.. And we think this is good.

The backdrops say everything: your 800 y.o. castle vs. the drywall monstrosities I was doing for Chris Simmonds. When we lose even the concentration of *sensual* privilege – however opposed to its unevenness we might've been – we lose a guiding star of what Bourgeois society is supposed to be aiming at, don't we??

And to be clear, while what we'd call leisure and sensuous experience has been redistributed, expanded in legitimate and significant ways, it's also been uniformly diminished in others. The tide has both lifted and lowered all boats. Look at the 'Quebec Framing' / 'Montreal Framing' that I encounter every day (sent you pics but didn't explain very well): Houses of the early 20th-Century labouring class, framed in solid 3"-thick Eastern Pine planks, *stacked row-on-row* like a kind of milled log-cabin, dovetailed at the lintels... I've seen some of those planks 2 feet wide and 16 feet long, just hidden in the wall of a house that would've belonged to a framer. Imagine the price, today.. You can take any number of other examples. Plaster crown moulding, done in-situ in all of the working class housing of that period? Oh the displacements...

And, sorry, my last note on this:

To focus in any way on the common *aesthetic* debasement of elite and non-elite alike when their economic situations are so literally *unprecedentedly* divergent is treated as a grave, arch-Bourgeois sin.

But there's no coherent, salvific image without this shit.

Of course the base of the pyramid of needs, precaritized and under assault as it has been for the past ~50 years is the first order of business. But they (who? The NDP??) have been trying to sell bandaids exclusively to that tranche of problems for decades to almost no avail – probably counterproductively. Without a unifying vision that goes to the top, that articulates an unreasonably complete portrait of the *future world*, you have no product to sell. (The fascists, of course, understand this perfectly, and they tend to do well when history lobs them a ball.)

Sorry, last last note:

When the Left-pundit you mention talks about how the working class is harder to organize than 100 years ago because they no longer live and work in tight-knit, socially dense settings, don't you think he doesn't go far enough? Offshoring, workplace balkanization, suburbanization – these feel like diagnoses for the 90s. Today it's not clear that there's even the psychosocial equipment necessary within the single, atomized individual for them to be reached by some disciplined party operative trying to salt their workplace.

Not to overstate the case, but the only place anyone *is*, is glued to their phone and living half parasocially, half keeping it in the nuclear family. So how can you have a successful politics be anything other than direct-to-consumer and... messianic. Again, this is an aesthetic exercise.

I will put a Chat-GPT-esque stamp on this, a posteriori, so that it hasn't all been schizoid ramblings:

We see a sea change in the situation of elites and non-elites alike;

Elites:

Patrician humanists → techno-meritocratic functionaries (workers)

The castle → the maid's quarters of the castle,

OR, if you're a new elite, not descended from warlords:

The castle → stick construction not worthy of a dog cabin

Workers:

Dense socialization → atomized (not just workers, elites too)

The Quebec Frame → stick construction not worthy of a dog cabin

(not just for workers, but elites too, who are workers)

B. Alternative Directions

Here at least I can be brief, there are so few ideas.

i.

Your buddy who fought the city to let him do the mass-brick envelope a few years back and then gave up when they said no, that's the thread to pick up. Or, to mix metaphors: Throw down the gauntlet. Return to structural masonry, return to leaky envelopes. What exactly are the consequences, legally?? I ask every architect I meet and no one has a clear idea. They make you tear it down? How? They fine you, yes, they never close out your permit, they never give you legal occupancy status, even. So? With the money some of these young professional DINKs are willing to spend on raw square-footage, they could pay the fines till the day is long. If the Old Port wasn't a terrible desert full of tourists, everyone would want to live in it – within building envelopes that are now illegal to build new.. Paying the fines to do just that *can't* be more expensive than buying the existing, 'heritage' thing.. You see what I mean?

And of course I hate even having to push this line, in these terms, because the moment you start talking about ancestral materials/techniques or less-processed materials, you're easily mistaken either for one of these eco- granola types who wants to do hemp huts, or for someone interested in the strictly period-piece, reactionary nonsense Prince Charles (King, I guess) was sponsoring years back.

All we're arguing for is a synthesis of what's pre- and post- the Modernist turn, yes? And against naked vanguardism, braindead individualism at architectural scale, etc. – what's killed every city in North America.

That, as a prescription, is so unoriginal, such an obvious, formulaic inversion of the diagnosis – but it's taking the logic to a substantive material conclusion that's totally lacking. (Probably for all the reasons at the top, and many more I lack the perceptiveness to see). On that note:

ii. Re: Fin-de-siècle

I'm beginning to come around to your view on the Belle Epoque stuff.

The particulars are not so important, some of it is a bit whooshy for me, but, in the English, Scottish, French, Belgian, Spanish, German, Austrian material I'm familiar with mostly from photos, in most cases I think you're right that it's a reasonable compromise between,

- On the one hand, something resembling the older, more 'transparent' assemblies, with their kit of legible parts and corresponding loci of ornamentation;
- On the other hand, the evolving vestigialization of that ornamentation, becoming more and more appliqué due to the use of hidden iron and then steel framing (relevant to us, ofc);

I think it's well clarified even by reference to our version of this here, in the vernacular that tailed that period: I have no problem with the fact that the Plateau triplexes of 1900-1945 use brick *cladding* and not triple-wythe walls (à la slightly older Toronto stock), nor structural stone. It's at least self-supporting brick, self-supporting arched headers, or stone lintels, even stone jambs in the nicer stuff. The tin cornices are hollow and often feature mass-produced, stamped panels w decorative motifs.. So what?

As always, ofc – sorry to preach to the choir so much – a main point is that because all of these materials are less-processed and more modified in-situ, this allows for variegation in ways that the current material regime doesn't. A tinsmith back then *could* make you a one-of-one cornice for basically the same price as a duplicate of your neighbour's cornice. And so *alllll the cornices are different*, but *alllll the cornices hang together*, in an identifiable whole (the city). This is, again, old, old, very basic theory.

The related and important point for me about the fin-de-siècle stuff you've been getting into is again a compromise:

- The ornamentation is confined to more or less the same legible, often structurally bearing elements as ever – imparting cohesion across individual buildings and across time – but also,
- Around that period specifically, the ornamental motifs get massively liberalized in their particular forms – imparting the heterogeneity and individuality that we cannot, now, ask designers to renounce (much as we'd all be better off for it).

It makes some sense to me that before you have the total formal explosion of what gets periodized as Modernism (followed by its later total implosion, the one we're living in), you have a more contained, conservative 'explosion' in Arts & Crafts, Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, etc. (These at least look formally flexible and permissive relative to the eclectic-revivalism and strict neoclassical shit that preceded them.)

If we are living in a built environment that today knows only to birth cave-shadow apings of what poorly-educated architects misapprehend as Modernism, then I see your logic in wanting to go back to whatever fork in the road preceded the dead end we're in now, and to see what else is there – paths less taken, or cut short, 'outcompeted' in the art-historical gene pool. (Ofc we both know the story's not that simple or linear, that neither Modernism nor its precursors are reducible to this simple question of formal novelty, and neither you nor I are implying Modernism is actually to *blame* for what we have now.)

The Horta piece you sent, I was surprised to have been previously unfamiliar with. Kind of struck me like a bolt from the blue, to be honest – as much on account of its program as the architecture. *La Maison du Peuple*... speaking of the need for ideology to be aestheticized successfully...

But, as much I agree with you that this period is fertile terrain, I just want to put one final, big asterix on it:

How many times are we doomed to repeat the forgetting and rediscovery of “*reacting to industrial capitalism with ‘handicraft’*”? The British stuff is so self-consciously that. There is nothing – *nothing* – in what we’re forever bitching about that you don’t get in Ruskin, Morris. (To say nothing of good old Karl...)

Bad news, no?

iii. WIP

You were asking about the current project. Never as interesting in words as in photos but I’m having a problem with my Photos app from desktop atm. What I’m aiming for:

Facade / Exterior Reno

- Deep-relief carved stone lintels (all in Pierre St-Marc, from Arco on Beaubien), most to be carved by JP, but I’m going to try and make time to squeeze in one or two myself. Looking at a lot of Henry Clews’ humanoid, alien figures... Also the dashboard of the Fiat Multipla..
- Replacing the disgusting wedding-cake style parging w/ all brick. Finally – after years of searching – I found it: A brickyard in North America that does real-deal, ‘Colonial’ / ‘Victorian’ brick. Not the hideous faux-ancestral shit you see at all the trade shows – just using the same general tools and processing as the turn of the century, obviously updated a bit. You can check them out: Stiles & Hart Brick Co. They’re in Massachusetts (ofc, right?). We don’t have the exact patterns for window/door headers nor for beneath the cornice, yet, but we’ll do figured bricklaying there.
- There’s a French master tinsmith who lives a few blocks from us who’s going to do the cornice itself. Haven’t worked out the exact concept yet for this either.
- Wood windows & doors, we’ll try to get them direct from Martin and his guys without going through the supplier.
- Also, though, I want to push clients to redo the stairs and balcony. It’s funny: Of all the vernacular early 20th-C. Montreal stuff, the ironwork is always the worst part. It’s the most mass-produced stuff: All just square, twisted rod or flat patterns in the railings, etc. But there’s a blacksmith at the shop who has an induction forge and is very passionate, does very detailed work. I have something drawn up for the railings – I think it’d be an unprecedented challenge for him in terms of scale, so I know he’d be thrilled if we could do it.
- For specifically the awning of the top balcony, though, I had a very Art Nouveau concept, actually – sort of fanned, carapace-like, all double-curved in sheet metal. And the only person I can think of tapping for it is this guy I follow on YouTube who does classic car chassis out in BC, LOL. He can do any geometry or condition conceivable. So we’d have to see about getting it shipped out here – I’m 110% client will say no. Probably I won’t bother.

Interior Reno

- The existing is 800 sqft footprint, two floors and a full-height basement. They want to add a small mezzanine level that's permitted by zoning. Carla and I wanted to propose that plus gutting the whole thing back to the original 'Quebec Frame,' putting all the private spaces, stacked, to one side, then putting all the shared spaces to the other side, at basement level, with the triple-height volume (including the smaller shaft of *quadruple* height) above it, maybe with a small platform for office or guest bed hung off that triple height wall near the top; this would ideally be married with a walkout basement w/ garden, so you'd have full-height windows and glazed door at basement level, facing the kitchen/living. But they weren't having any of it. Absolutely no double or triple heights happening except for stairwell.
- Lathe-and-plaster in living, kitchen, and master bed (drywall elsewhere, gotta pick your battles).
- We met two young guys (actually through your ex – lol) who do traditional plaster crown moulding, really sweet guys and just perfect work – the old fashioned way, no bullshit, dragging the profile along a track around the perimeter of the room. And thankfully the clients were really keen on it.
- Going to do hardwood, wide-plank pine floors like the thing we had at our old place south of Duluth, if you remember (will be planed and prepped by Darius and myself in shop).
- Also doing all custom trim that Darius and I will be routing together – we've got a flush baseboard detail with a moulded profile, only it's the 'negative' of the profile, goes into the wall (in order for it to not stick out past the finished wall).
- Ovoid bathroom in plan, fully tiled, fully filleted edges (not circular radii but also ovoid), on top of which two friends of mine who work at a ceramics place will be doing a full 360 pictorial mosaic – can't believe we get to do this. Fifth or sixth time pitching it to a client, first time getting a yes. Carla is working on the painting for it at 1:4 scale.
- A fair bit of built-in millwork – an entranceway in nailless, glueless rail-and-stile partitions that Jack Bell had taught us how to do. Quite happy about that.
- Also the Gepetto guys are doing a custom bookcase unit in glossy black, curved lines, very space age. Couple more things like this that I can't think of atm.
- Pitched a carved stone basin for shower surround and bathroom sink, plus continuous carved stone countertop-sink for kitchen, but they said yes to bathroom sink only, so JP gets to have fun with that.
- Besides the more 70s-esque black lacquered built-in,^^ it's mostly stuff Carla is sourcing off of Marketplace and at the estate sales and flea markets, doing the rounds every weekend, that we're relying on to break the otherwise more strictly 'traditional' choices we're making architecturally (more traditional than we normally do).
- Ah, I almost forgot. The wide-plank pine floors in the whole place, yes, but in the front entrance and extending a ways into the front hallway: Versailles Parquet – with a kind of cuneiform dark walnut trim that's skew and oblong in places. Hard to explain. It's one of the Gepetto guys doing it, Ukrainian master.
- Things I didn't try my luck pitching:
 - Custom light switches and outlets

- Custom curtains from Solange, the ones she does where the panel of fabric hangs from the long silks attached to the curtain rod, to sit only at the height of the actual window
- Custom upholstery (for a breakfast)

But soon. Next project.

Even just in a 2km radius, you have all the skilled trades hanging on, surviving. And you have all these kids in the trades schools – in the heritage trades even – or who are self-taught at the shop, and they're serious and energetic. I want to fast-forward to the moment where we have the scale that allows everyone to be working continuously, and, more importantly, where we're doing projects at an economy of scale where it can be more than ultra-boutique millionaire homes.. To one day do something like nonmarket, triplex row-housing for a cooperative would be a life's dream, sentimental as it sounds.

Of course this is all a throwaway gesture against the rising tide – a drop in the bucket. The problems are elsewhere... We could do 300 meters of nonmarket row housing and we would still be serving primarily ourselves, for the pleasure of doing it.

Anyway, that's more than enough for now.

See you next week for dinner? Lmk which day.

All my love,

L