The House That Refused To Become A Parking Lot

Malcolm Reid

In 1969, I moved to Québec City to become Quebec correspondent for the Globe and Mail. My wife, Françoise, was already living in Quebec. Our daughter, Anne-Marie, was also living in Quebec. We moved into a house on the rue des Jardins in the Plateau. At first, the neighborhood was not so good. It was a bit run down, but we made the best of it. We lived there for almost 30 years.

In 1999, I received a call from the city authorities. They wanted to demolish our house to build a parking lot. At first, we were shocked and upset. We had lived in that house for so long, and it was our home. We didn't want to move to another house. We decided to fight the decision.

We organized a protest and we brought in some artists and musicians to perform in front of our house. We also wrote letters to the mayor and the city council. We made a lot of noise.

In the end, the city authorities gave in. They decided not to build the parking lot. We were overjoyed. We felt like we had won a small victory.

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bourgeois, which of the two counted most for you? Art, or social action?

LT: It was always art that I... No... really I've never been able to separate the two.

MR: For me, I guess the two have always gone together for a simple reason. I was educated that way. I was taught we had to deal with politics and society at the same time, my parents would take me to the National Gallery. I'd see the paintings of the Group of Seven. I was absorbing the idea that the paintings done at different periods in history — especially the twenties, the time of Modernism — were, well, great things of life. What I've never been able to tell is whether this marring of art and struggle was simply my will at work, my wishing them to come together, or whether there was a conjunctural, a reality in the nature of art itself that made it move towards social issues. Artists a disinterested group, perhaps, more available to the left than to the right?

LT: Yes, that's a very good question. It's central. It's close to the heart of what I'm always thinking about. I'm at work slowly building a kind of ethic of art. I look at a work and I try to see if it's the work of a committed hand, or a non-committed hand. I know I'm perhaps caricatured, making them too simple. But the question is always working on me. All I can really do is ask the same question over again, in new words. For me, it is visceral. It's not an outside force that makes me draw. It's that I don't want to be subject to orders from somewhere. I don't want to live in inequality. The need to draw is in me; it's chemical. It's very chemical. How can I answer you on this? It isn't all sorted out in my mind. I'm trying to sort it out. Artists... but you know there, so many artists who succeed, who manage to sell their work and who sell it to anybody. To anybody, any old way, they don't care. That's my fear, I have to have the point where it's crazy to say this 'I fear finding some success, because I don't want to sell my work any old way, to anyone, to decorate any room. I couldn't! Art isn't just something decorative. It's a form of speech, a declaration. Art seems to me to be treated as something prehistoric when it is put under glass, when it is labeled "do not touch," when it is kept in an office, a nothing space... Works treated that way seem to me to have been killed, to be mummified. Perhaps I'm in love with art you can throw away, art you consume, art which is popular, widespread, accessible, almost free of charge. Yet I admit that there are works which take months of work and which are superb. What to do with them? I'm perhaps getting away from the question, but how do you link that kind of work with a commitment, with a politicalized life, or political, or maybe even a life that isn't political, but... but then, everything being political... I don't know, but art that talks to itself in a corner... we'll need education, we'll need links between art and forms and people. We'll need to find ways to popularize. We'll need to invite everybody, even our aunts, you know what I mean? When I was in art at university, in my first course, early in the morning, a guru of the faculty said: "Show this to Mrs. Côté or Mrs. Gagnon, and of course they won't understand, we can't ask them to understand." That was maybe five years ago, it hurt me. I don't want to make an artistic work that has contempt for people, yet the same time the artist is isolated from the world and the world is commitment.

MR: I know that for me, the great way of solving that one in my head is a liking for print.

LT: Yes! That's it.

MR: I have an idea that that is why you've worked as a graphic artist.

LT: And that's why I like working on a newspaper.

MR: It seems to me it makes you an artist who has lived one of the essential experiences in art in the modern world. Even when the great, famous painters whose works sell for millions, or the artists who are avant-garde and whose works don't sell, are finally present in society, it is often through art books, reproductions, posters, calendars. I said to myself: Much of visual art's presence among us is through print, even when, officially, those are not graphic artists. And so for me, to bring together my desire to do something social and my desire to enjoy the pure pleasure of line and colour, I make... I think... letters. I print letters.

LT: Yes, especially a magazine page. Or a poster. I know that my teenage daughter Jolliet especially likes the greeting cards you made a few years ago. For the beauty of the drawings, the funny tenderness of the faces, but also because they are cards, they're part of her world. And in "Dis ans de lutes, dis ans d'art", didn't we have something of that in that the whole house was a magazine, whose rooms you leaped through?

LT: Yes!

MR: The rooms of the house were... LT: Public. They were public, out amid the public like a newspaper, because events were taking place in them all through our exhibition. Meetings of committees, meetings on urban issues, meetings with owners and tenants. It was like a TV news cast, there were kids, people taking care of kids and day care centres bringing in their kids to see the show...

MR: It was a bit like dazzle, the public poster-board in China a few years back, where all sorts of viewpoints were pasted up. But a dazzleboard that was full of festive spirit.

LT: Exactly, all of that was happening, all through the two weeks.

MR: And if we never once used the fashionable art word performance perhaps we were in a still earlier form called the party. The party.

LT (laughing): Yes!

MR: And music! I was astonished at how many musicians turned up.

LT: Ah! That's the essential element.

MR: I kept partitioning. No one wanted to say yes when I tried to set up music, but when the evening came, they just showed up.

LT: Hey, this quarter is full of musicians. MR: The quarter is full of musicians, and they don't have the places they need to play in. And the occasions. Like we, with our visuals. We lack walls. That's what made me want to organize this thing! I looked at Richard's walls — so high, so empty, so white, so gray, High, high ceilings, square meters and square meters of space, all with nothing on it. And me with my dozens of collages at my place, stashed away, and all my friends with their works stashed away. So I said to myself: Richard has a house problem. And we have a wall problem. If we want to put our colours up on his walls, maybe we have to get involved in his problem with his house.

LT: Ahah!

MR: Michel Saint-Onge, a sculptor who joined us halfway through Dix ans de luttes, dis ans d'art, told me he thought we'd had a surprising impact on people in the neighbourhood, arts people and other people. That encouraged me.

LT: It encourages me, too. It gives me a strong desire to organize another event like that one.

MR: Yes, and to create spaces for the kinds of meetings of different classes that we hope for. Create spaces for them even if we aren't yet sure they're inevitable. At least we know we desire the classes to meet.

LT: Yes. Simply wishing for it is already something.

MR: And it's a struggle just to get people to build the base for new kinds of art. Here in Saint-Jean-Baptiste, we are less an "art-neighbourhood" than they are in the Old Port: we're more a "save-this-house-from-demolition" kind of neighbourhood. Yet we're really better able to group ourselves than other artists, because we have all that neighbourhood experience with co-ops and citizen's committees...

LT: The kind of event I'd push for would be this kind: you go to it. The children leave the day care centre and go to it. The parents go to pick up their children at it. And then the shopkeeper that we always buy from hears us talking about it. At the end of the day he locks up and goes to it. It's formidable to organize something like that, an event that gets into everyone's life, children's lives, grandparents' lives, everybody's lives. That's the important thing.

MR: Isn't there an element here of the very artistic, and also very political, Quebec of the 1960s and 70s?

LT: Well, I don't like the idea of going back to something.

MR: I see what you mean. It's okay to preserve something we love. But let's make it work for the future, too.

LT: Precisely. It's something new, too.

MR: Right, and there are kids coming along who weren't even born when Charlebois and Mousche sang that old song "Mio Peplo" about the girl who practised tap dancing and won all the contests: I won them all but that was did it get me?

Malcolm Reid's column is a regular feature in Borderlines.