



Plaza

Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months.

The opening line of J.G. Ballard's 1975 dystopian novel, *High-Rise*, foreshadows the eventual downfall of its characters and their surroundings as its principal character, Laing, calmly tucks into a canine dinner. Yet the real protagonist of the novel is the high-rise itself—a 40-storey, 1,000-unit, modernist apartment block—a building that, by the very nature of its design, inspires its residents to abandon all form of humane conduct and descend into social chaos.

If Ballard's cautious tale had any bearing on the minds of architects and urban planners today, we would not find ourselves surrounded by acres of high-rises, an architectural typology well known to the city of Vancouver. Typical of the genre, Ballard's text suggests that architecture scripts social stratification, where hierarchical relationships between residents are determined, quite literally, by the level of one's apartment. By this logic, if we were to conceptualize architecture in a fundamentally different way, would this also produce alternatives for social relationships?

Heather and Ivan Morison's site-specific public artwork, *Plaza*, re-imagines this architectural form—the modern skyscraper—at its very limits. *Plaza* is an open wooden structure that, by the nature of the material alone, stands in stark contrast to its concrete and glass surroundings. Its base is balanced on stilts and raised above a pool of water. Its walls rise nearly three storeys and lean out toward the street as if a massive seismic shift has torqued their right angles askew. The walls are made of heavy timber beams, burned to a dark charcoal using a traditional Japanese technique called *shou-sugi-ban* for preserving and protecting wood from the elements.

LEFT: *Plaza*, 2010 (detail)

The walls are braced by enormous diagonal supports, forming a complex interior scaffolding with wood that is left raw as if to suggest this is a more recent addition to the structure, temporarily holding it in place. *Plaza* is built entirely with wood—a material with particular resonance on the Pacific Northwest Coast with its lush rainforests and rich history of wooden construction. Wood for *Plaza* was salvaged from beaches, development sites and construction yards throughout Vancouver, forming a veritable index of available material in the city at the moment of construction.

An opening on one side of *Plaza* invites visitors to enter the space via a long ramp. Inside, the structure opens up into a spacious pavilion, its roof open to the sky. Depending on one's position in the space, different slices of the city become visible through the angled louvres in the walls. The skewed grid of *Plaza's* walls clashes with the grid of the city's surrounding buildings, at times appearing as if the city itself has started to tilt. The space is open all day and night—an invitation for people to access the site and, as they enter, become part of the artwork.

Plaza is situated at Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite, an outdoor space designated for a rotating series of temporary public artworks. The site is located adjacent to the tallest building in the city at this time: Living Shangri-La, a 62-storey skyscraper development. This area of the city is home to many similar structures—a sea of grey concrete, steel grids and glass reflecting the sky and surrounding mountains. Against this homogeneous landscape, the Morisons' utopian proposal stands in stubborn contradistinction.

A frozen moment of decline. A forceful reordering, held and kept in a perfect new geometry. The grid of the modern city and the lives within them need a violent realigning to create the conditions for happiness. It is these events that can move the collective consciousness of a city towards a new more dynamic view of itself, and a



ABOVE: *Plaza*, 2010

city more suited to our psyches. Only through individual violent and subversive acts and larger societal shifts alongside cataclysmic events will its residents find true happiness. A blueprint for happiness.¹

Following this logic, *Plaza* mimics the most prosaic form of the urban built environment—the gridded box—but forcefully twists it by a mere eight-degree shift, enough for its walls to seem on the verge of collapse. This warping is halted at a precise point, suspending the structure in a play of distortions and perceived imbalances, where it appears to be carefully poised between falling and flight, weight and levity, solidity and transparency; a precarious tension often held in artworks by the Morisons. *Plaza* evokes a pivotal moment of architectural and societal transformation and metaphorically suggests that the mechanisms that underpin the urban fabric are far more fragile than we imagine. We can infer from its burned surface and collapsing form a cautionary tale for the future, and an invocation to transform the modern city.

This invocation is equally evident in the process and the incredible energy Heather and Ivan Morison brought to this ambitious large-scale project. The construction of *Plaza* generated a broad community-

based effort in which a wide range of people generously donated materials and labour—lumber, hardware, propane, architectural and engineering expertise—while an army of volunteers offered their time and energy to mill and burn countless feet of timber. The coming together of various people in this enormous undertaking evoked how a community might respond in the face of a catastrophe by building collaboratively with shared skills, available resources and salvaged materials—a process that suggests a strategy for survival in the face of unexpected change.

As a result of this massive effort and its resulting imposing presence in the streets, *Plaza* has become a destination for many, a site to frequent and to explore. People gather to eat lunch, take haven from the din of the city or marvel at the sheer scale of an artwork that resists its surrounds with a sculptural grace. As the sun sets and the lights on the upper posts cast an ethereal glow on the space, illuminating the structure from within, *Plaza* becomes a beacon of possibility for the future.

Kathleen Ritter, Associate Curator

¹ Heather and Ivan Morison, notes from a talk titled "Strategies for Survival," *Big Ideas in Art and Culture*, Contemporary Art Forum, Kitchener, Ontario, October 5, 2010.

About the Artists

Heather and Ivan Morison explore architecture as it relates to ideas of escape, shelter and refuge. They work collaboratively and make art as an active engagement with materials, histories, sites and processes. The Morisons have made site-specific projects internationally and recently established an arboretum in a remote village in Wales.

Heather and Ivan Morison are based in Brighton, England, and Arthog, Wales. Their work has been exhibited widely in the UK and abroad, including at the Tate Britain, the Barbican and the 52nd Venice Biennale. Their book, *Falling Into Place*, a fictionalized account of their large shelter works of the past few years, was published by Book Works in late 2009. The artists are represented in Canada by Clint Roenisch Gallery, Toronto.

CREDITS:

Heather and Ivan Morison
Plaza, 2010
(front and inside images)
timber
Courtesy of the artists and Clint Roenisch Gallery

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Offsite is the Vancouver Art Gallery's outdoor public art space featuring a program of rotating projects. Located downtown at the foot of the Living Shangri-La skyscraper development, Offsite serves as a hub for local and international contemporary artists to explore issues related to the surrounding urban context. As artists consider the site-specific potential of art within the public realm, projects may inspire, bemuse and stimulate broad audiences, and will respond to the changing social and cultural conditions of our contemporary world.



LOCATED on West Georgia Street between Thurlow and Bute Streets, Vancouver

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CURATOR: Kathleen Ritter
COORDINATOR: Elia Kirby, Great Northern Way Scene Shop
ARCHITECTS: Greg Lewis and Julia Khorsand
STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING: Ian Boyle and Christian Frandsen of Fast + Epp
FABRICATION AND INSTALLATION: John Popkin—Lead Builder; Marietta Kozak—General Manager, Great Northern Way Scene Shop; Ryan Murcar—Crew Lead; Jarrett Knowles—Lead Labourer; Lucas Bateman—Labourer; Duncan Paterson—Labourer; Melinda See—Labourer; Ben Sullivan—Labourer; Randy Biro—Carpenter; Dave Derkson—Carpenter; Dylan McHugh—Carpenter; Micheal O'Sullivan—Carpenter; Kyle Sutherland—Carpenter; Steve Thompson—Carpenter; Peter Wells—Carpenter; Grant Windsor—Carpenter; Katherine Witts—Carpenter; David Benedict Brown—Assistant Carpenter; Timothy Furness—Assistant Carpenter;

Dustin Vox—Assistant Carpenter; Kaen Valoise—Production Assistant; Onii Aho—Head Rigger; Chris Bamford—Rigger; Philip Piper—Metal Fabricator; Ray Miller—Log Miller
BLADERUNNERS: Patrick Baptiste, Virgil Goosehead, Sheldon McGillivray, Jessica Warland, Mary Wolfchild
VOLUNTEERS: Joshua Bartholomew, Lindsay Brown, Anthony Carr, Ed Chan, Allison Hrabluik, Cameron Kerr, Reta Koropatnick, Jane Lee, JiSu Lee, Michael Markowsky, Jonathan Middleton, Marina Nazarova, Laura O'Quin, Demian Petryshyn, Natalie Purschwitz, Seongmi Shin, Jessica Snook, Steven Tong, Yi Xin Tong, Alex Turgeon, Holly Ward, Jen Weih
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