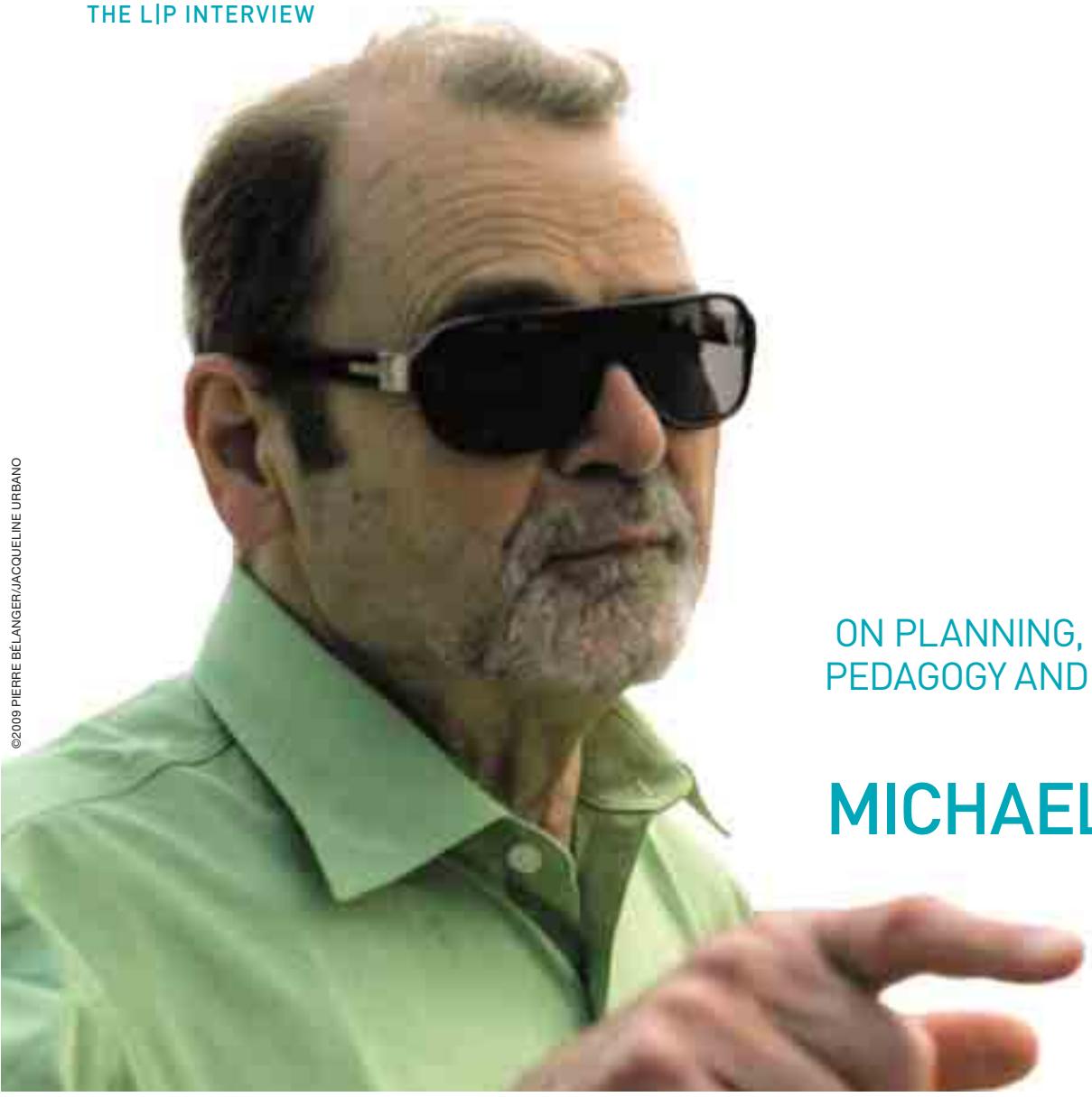

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ON PLANNING, PRESERVATION, PEDAGOGY AND PUBLIC WORKS

PIERRE BÉLANGER SPEAKS WITH

MICHAEL HOUGH

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"Ecology is urbanization and urbanization is ecology."
L'écologie est l'urbanisation et l'urbanisation est l'écologie.

PIERRE BÉLANGER EN ENTERVUE AVEC MICHAEL HOUGH : CONVERSATION SUR LA PLANIFICATION, LA PRÉSERVATION, LA PÉDAGOGIE ET LES TRAVAUX PUBLICS

Michael Hough est l'un des architectes-paysagistes les plus en vue du Canada depuis longtemps. Pourtant, il est né sur la côte méditerranéenne française; il a grandi au Royaume-Uni; il a étudié l'architecture au College of Art d'Edinbourg, en Angleterre; enfin, il a appris l'architecture de paysage à l'Université de la Pennsylvanie (Philadelphie). En 1963, il démarre le programme de baccalauréat en architecture de paysage de l'Université de Toronto, puis se joint à la faculté d'Études environnementales de l'Université York, où il lance un programme de design de paysages écologiques en 1971. Ensuite, il fonde l'un des premiers cabinets-conseils en paysagement au Canada (qui deviendra Envision-The Hough Group).

Michael Hough est reconnu mondialement comme un pionnier de l'écologie et du paysagement urbains. Il a publié plusieurs livres, dont Cities and Natural Process *(1995),* Out of Place *(1992),* Restoring Natural Habitats (1995) et People and City Landscapes *(1987), qui proposent une approche originale : l'intégration des processus écologiques aux processus urbains. Ses carrières de professeur et d'architecte-paysagiste lui ont valu de nombreux prix, dont le Prix d'excellence pour l'ensemble des réalisations (2009), le titre le plus honorifique décerné par l'AAPC.*

Pierre Bélanger s'est entretenu avec Michael Hough à deux reprises, en 2008.

Theory is for the blind.
Les théories s'adressent aux aveugles.

Although he has long been recognized as one of Canada's foremost landscape architects, Michael Hough was born off the coast of the Mediterranean in France, raised in the United Kingdom, studied architecture at the Edinburgh College of Art, and trained as a landscape architect at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. In 1963, he founded the University of Toronto's undergraduate degree program in Landscape Architecture, and later joined the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University where he established the Environmental Landscape Design program in 1971. He also taught at Harvard, and founded one of first landscape consultancies in Canada (now ENvision-The Hough Group).

Michael Hough is respected worldwide for his pioneering work in urban ecology and landscapes. His many books, such as Cities and Natural Process *(1995),* Out of Place *(1992),* Restoring Natural Habitats *(1995) and* People and City Landscapes *(1987), were unique in their integration of ecological processes as part of urban processes. As a Professor and Practitioner, Hough has received numerous awards including the 2009 Lifetime Achievement Award, the highest honour conferred to a landscape architect by the CSLA.*

Pierre Bélanger spoke with Michael Hough on two different occasions in 2008.

PB: During the past three decades, your work has honed in on the urbanization of ecology and the landscape of infrastructure in cities. How did this focus emerge?

A lesser-known article written earlier in 1984, "The Urban Landscape – The Hidden Frontier" is the backstory of *City Form and Natural Process: Toward a New Urban Vernacular* (1994*).* The early 1980s saw the failure of the Port of Toronto thanks to the proliferation of trucking, and a significant shift from industrialization towards urbanization. The aim of the article and the book was to up-end the boundaries between natural and urban processes to see them as part of an overall synthetic ecology. The book is a critique of McHarg's 1969 *Design with Nature*.

PB: But you are known as McHarg's protégé.

MH: Not exactly. He was extremely influential during the 1960s and 70s across the U.S., when I was there finishing graduate work. His ideas – his theories – had limits. Except for the Woodlands project in Texas, he rarely put them into practice. Over long periods of time, theory has a limited shelf life. Several projects developed with the Wallace, McHarg, Roberts and Todd partnership were unsuccessful. Planning for the new capital city of Abuja in Nigeria is a textbook case. Neatly illustrated, flawlessly executed from a regional perspective. On paper, all the diagrams and details were worked out except for one thing: the new city was located in the middle of nowhere and plans never accounted for the service infrastructure required. By the time it was built, no one could afford to live there except for diplomats and government officials.

PB: So his theories failed?

MH: Theory is for the blind – but his regional planning methods led to the development of GIS (Geographic Information Systems) making possible remote sensing as we know it today.

PB: As a theoretical canon, did regionalism fail?

MH: Regionalism in the second half of the 20th century, as a planning paradigm, lacked depth of field. It cannot – and should not – be practiced as a specialized discipline. As an operative design tool, regionalism (and more precisely, regionalization) survives because it is instrumental.

PB: Is that why you advocated for the Toronto & Region Conservation Authority in its early days?

MH: Exactly. When Hurricane Hazel hit the city of Toronto in 1954, I was strongly involved with the organization. Regional pre-planning, and the structural agency of regional watersheds, was imperative.

PB: Then came the foundation for what is today ENvision – The Hough Group.

MH: The idea behind the firm was to fill the vacuum of post-war planning and engineering with design. At a time when people were discussing the aesthetics of cities, we were rethinking structure. By design, we became experts in the geo-politics of rezoning. We were rezoning different parts of the city, and unravelling the spatial effects of legislative change. Zoning, not design, is one of the most important structural agents in the shape of the North American landscape.

PB: Does this extend to your ideas about single-use zoning in North America?

MH: Yes, it is precisely about the single-use separation of agriculture, housing, transportation, waste and industry in cities today. Zoning laws in the early 1920s saw two-dimensional zoning spread across the continent, carte blanche for dividing land uses at the expense of functional synergies in an overall urban pattern. All of a sudden, the modern landscape in North America took shape and zoning became a licence for blindly separating and classifying forms of land use while neglecting an urban pattern where synergies can be engendered by zoning overlays at a finer grain.

PB: In your Harvard seminars, you talk about zoning and the incorporation of urban agriculture as an answer to the globalization of the food chain.

MH: There are no panaceas, but zoning is a major catalyst. Municipal legislation often prohibits leguminous cultivation or livestock rearing. You can't own chickens or goats for example in downtown Toronto. Woodrow Wilson had sheep grazing on lawn of the White House; they even sold the wool afterwards […] Wilson promoted wheatless Mondays and meatless Tuesdays as emblematic rationing during World War. Barbara Stauffacher Solomon's *Green Architecture and the Agrarian Garden* (1958), and Frank Lloyd Wright's *Living City* (1958) offer a few radical and contemporary agrarian patterns we can aspire to. […]We have so much to learn from agriculture and silviculture, cultivation of plant life in general. I lived off my front yard garden for a year in 1987, and in the final tally, it cost me about $1.25 a day to feed myself.

PB: Scale, not bigness, has always been a precondition to your design work?

MH: Size matters. Below a certain scale, the size of site dictates the nature of the approach. Europe is evidence of the diminishing returns of density. There are diseconomies of scale in certain spatial configurations including the counter productivity of [technological] modernization. The smaller a space, the less room there is for doubling functions, no space for change or failure. Large systems are more interesting than individual sites.

PB: What about self-organizing systems?

MH: This is a popular but naïve idea. Urban landscapes need of lot of management. Inaction, when protracted as deliberate non-intervention, is a matter of design. This should not be confused with the common cliché of laissez-faire, preservation or minimalist approaches. It is about the sustainability of protracted neglect, and the durability of biodynamics.

I lived off my front yard garden for a year in 1987...
| En 1987, j'ai subsisté pendant un an grâce à mon jardin...

PB: Is that why your early experiments call for a long term, successional strategy for constructing sites?

MH: Yes, biodynamics are fundamental to this approach. I was specifically engaged with large urban-industrial landscapes since they allow enough space to develop these strategies. The Leslie Street Spit, a man-made peninsula made from rubble, is living proof of that. After thirty years of protracted neglect, the landfill became a landscape. The Leslie Street Spit is a registration of biodynamic process. What you see is how it works.

PB: But that site is unique, is it not?

MH: Not really. In fact, not at all. We are surrounded by manufactured landscapes like the Spit that have been constructed by the ecology of urban operations. The Monte Testaccio, a two-thousand year old pottery dump during the Roman Empire, is one of the earliest recorded examples. Most shoreline cities in the Great Lakes are built on reclaimed land built from garbage, debris and waste materials. It is a natural urban process.

PB: Neglect is sustainable?

MH: Protracted neglect – as a wilful act – has an inherent nature and structure. Counter-intuitively, failure to act is in itself an action, an inaction. As strategy, it is extremely sustainable. With biodynamics, the effects of inaction are usually magnified at large scales because they are more visible.

PB: Biodynamics should be controlled or designed?

MH: That is what mid-century engineers used to believe. Total control is impossible. Biodynamics can only be triggered, manipulated, amplified, attenuated or registered. Nothing is new, everything exists already in one form or another. As geo-physical and biophysical forces, they can be amplified to greater or lesser magnitudes.

PB: But those forces are unpredictable?

MH: Indeterminacy determines design. There is a considerable level of incompleteness and approximation, but let's make no mistake, there is a precision to the synergies, the relations, the associations that one builds into the design strategies. Effects become primary, form becomes secondary.

PB: What is the relevance of the courtyard projects at the University of Toronto, which are quite small in comparison?

MH: They were – they are – design experiments in urban ecology and silvicultural systems. From a larger perspective, they are prototypes for a campus landscape based on the afforestation of the entire St. George campus in downtown Toronto. The University is in a unique geographic and cultural position to sponsor change.

PB: Ecology is not a metaphor?

MH: Absolutely not. Landscape ecological principles are indisputable, not subjective. My work transcends the failure of 1960s and 70s environmentalism since I never subscribed to the coalition of catastrophism it sponsored. I believe in the necessity of cities as sentinels of global-regional change, and the need to characterize them as urban landscapes. Ecology is urbanization and urbanization is ecology.

PB: So it is more about the construction of ecology than the restoration of it?

MH: Restoration is a myth. Conservationists and preservationists overlook the reality of the context around them. Take for example, the preservation of specimen trees, especially in North American cities. In the big picture, it is more important to conserve large patches or areas of forests than small ones.

PB: Why do Public Works Departments still practice this?

MH: Maintenance is confused for management. This is an inherited European ideology that neglects to understand the ecology of urban forests. Trees are evapo-transpirating machines and water pumps: biomass that can only work from below ground upwards. Street trees fail because they are seen as specimen objects instead of being part of a larger system. Subsurface infrastructure is a great impediment and a great opportunity.

PB: Preservation is a pictorial logic?

MH: Picturesque camouflages performance, but economics now trumps aesthetics. The logic of engineering and planning is most often based on climax species planning, the romantic delusion of full-grown, mature old growth trees lining city boulevards. This is a passed-down European standard yet to be re-thought. We should concentrate on the implementation of pioneer species in cities, but that practice is road blocked by the conventional pest-free street tree lists of Urban Forestry departments.

PB: When did design professionals become relegated to image consultants?

MH: Visualization is essential, necessary for communicating with project stakeholders. But most professional offices exclusively work as service bureaux to the private development industry, within a realm that is legitimately public. Even governments are outsourcing public realm work to private practices. Public practice is truly the purest form of landscape practice.

PB: Does this call for professional or pedagogical change?

MH: Perhaps both, I'm not sure. Public institutions are good launch pads but there is a considerable difference between teaching and learning, grades and education, diplomas and competence, attendance and attainment. In the context of landscape ecology and urbanism, education within an institution could be an oxymoron. Ivan Illich said this in *Deschooling Society* decades ago.

PB: Should landscape architecture de-professionalize?

H: Not necessarily, but I think that unlike current practice and design education today, design actually starts at the precise moment that construction ends. An operative practice that amortizes design management over long periods of time is rare, but has plenty of potential.

PB: Does this explain why you still provide pro bono advice to urban authorities and regional bodies on large planning projects worldwide?

MH: Unlike any other design discipline, landscape architecture deals with more than just one client or just one property owner. Most of the time, landscape projects deal with one thousand or even one million clients. We design mass-ecologies for mass-populations. Like good advice or foresight, design is a public right. In practical terms, it should be free.