

Making History Become Memory: The Architecture of Richard Henriquez

In February 1994, the Canadian Centre for Architecture in collaboration with the Vancouver Art Gallery opened an exhibition devoted to the work of Vancouver architect Richard Henriquez.¹ Titled *Richard Henriquez: Memory Theatre*, the exhibition explored one of the central issues in Henriquez's work, an architecture inspired by memory and history. The exhibition examined his efforts to establish an awareness of past, present and future that may also be understood as an attempt to create a sense of place. In this paper I present some of Henriquez's projects from the 1980s in the context of, or in contradistinction to, the notion of West Coast regionalism.²



By Howard Shubert

Richard Henriquez has practiced architecture in Vancouver for more than 25 years. He was born in Jamaica in 1941, studied at the University of Manitoba and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and opened his own practice in Vancouver in 1969. Although his work relates strongly to local context, he has consistently refused to be associated with the Vancouver or West Coast “style” often invoked to describe the local work of Arthur Erickson, Ron Thom, and others. In a 1989 interview he asserted that “it wasn’t until I came to Vancouver that I began to question regionalism as a conception. I began to think about a place that’s unique in the world, rather than designing buildings that had to do with a part of the country.”³ While Henriquez’s emphasis on memory and history represents, on one hand, his response to the power of technology, which can erase memory, it also represents a strategy for building contextually in a region with a shallow architectural history. For Henriquez, contextualism extends beyond the consideration of locally specific materials, vocabulary or landscape to encompass the history and archaeology of site. His approach is part of a larger effort to ground his buildings in the *memory* of place, where place is both physical reality and temporal continuum.

Except for a brief 20-year period from the late 1940s through the 1960s, when Arthur Erickson, Ron Thom, Fred Hollingsworth, Barry Downs, and others created a series of distinctive houses in and around Vancouver, there has never been a regional style of architecture on Canada’s West Coast. Vancouver, and the country’s West Coast, had no previous regional architectural expression on which to build a contemporary “regionalist” architecture—notwithstanding the buildings of its aboriginal population, which in any case have been overlooked, with rare exceptions, in favour of European and American models. Therefore, most of what is today called regional architecture in British Columbia is at best contextual, a response to local conditions.⁴

To build regional architecture in the contemporary context is to do one of two things: to continue to build according to local traditions (as, for instance, the contemporary Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy has done); or to adapt or transform native forms of building through the adoption of new materials or technology. In both cases, reference is made to existing or native architectural traditions. Native architecture has usually developed over many years in response to local conditions—such as geography, climate, religion, customs, what we refer to as contextual or regional characteristics, depending on our perspective—while incorporating elements from other architectural traditions. A consequence of this process may be the creation of locally distinct architectural features—minarets, onion domes, enclosed verandas, exterior spiral staircases—that help identify this architecture as belonging to a specific region, whether that region is defined by geography, politics or religion.

What unites the work of early- and late-20th century West Coast architects such as Samuel Maclure and Ron Thom, then, is their recognition and response to common regional imperatives—site, climate, and available materials. Their work is not the logical continuation of an existing architectural tradition but the isolated response to a similar set of problems. If their work stems from a “well-established cultural pattern,” as Kelly Crossman contends,⁵ then this factor alone is too general to unite their work or mark it in a specifically regional way. And it must be pointed out that an important aspect of that cultural system is the negative tradition of a colonial mentality that still afflicts us as Canadians today.

Perhaps critics and architects in Canada have needed to believe in the existence of a West Coast style as a means of distinguishing Canadian architecture from the imported models on which it has been based, and from the work of the Modern movement, which contemporary regionalist architecture is understood to implicitly criticize. While some examples of West Coast domestic architecture in the immediate post-Second World War years do exhibit shared characteristics that could be interpreted as regional, it is difficult to find a similar expression for public and commercial architecture located in an urban setting. For instance, Harold Kalman, in his recently published *A History of Canadian Architecture*, discusses the B.C. Electric building of 1955-57 by Thompson, Berwick and Pratt, noting in particular what he refers to as the building’s individuality and the architects’ use of colour and texture, all qualities apparently associated with the West Coast.⁶ Such decorative features may have been intended by the architects to suggest a point of reference with the West Coast region, but do they sufficiently distinguish this building from similar efforts in any other major city of the day? Kalman points out in any case that the building’s distinctive general

Figure 3 (previous page). Richard Henriquez, architect: “Conceptual Sketch for an Office Building on the University Club Site, Vancouver,” 1988. Collage, red dye, black marker, and coloured pencil over photocopy on three sheets of wove paper taped together, 39.0 x 21.8 cm. (Collection of the architect)

1 The exhibition was presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery from 5 February to 4 April 1994, the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal from 20 September 1994 to 23 April 1995, and the Carleton University Art Gallery in Ottawa from 6 August to 29 October 1995. See Howard Shubert, ed. *Richard Henriquez: Memory Theatre* (Montréal: Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture and Vancouver Art Gallery/Musée des beaux-arts de Vancouver, 1993).

2 I am grateful to Jean-François Bédard at the CCA and to Geoffrey Simmins at the University of Calgary for discussions concerning regionalism that substantially clarified my own ideas on the topic.

3 “Richard Henriquez: Architect of Radical Memory,” interview by Robert Enright, *Border Crossings* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 76-85.

4 William Curtis has suggested that “Regionalism draws part of its sustenance from dramatic contrasts between urban and rural worlds, especially when climatic conditions are extreme and the reminiscence of aboriginal wisdom is still visible in the architectural heritage. These conditions are rarely found in Western Europe and the United States....” William Curtis, “Towards an Authentic Regionalism,” *MIMAR* 19 (January-March 1986): 28.

5 Kelly Crossman, “Vancouver Architecture in 1960: The Case of Ron Thom,” a paper read in the SSAC session of the Society of Architectural Historians annual meeting in Seattle, Washington, 1995.

6 Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2:792.



Figure 1 (above). Richard Henriquez, architect; Henriquez house, Vancouver. Living room. (Peter Timmermans)



Figure 2 (right). Henriquez house. View of dining room, Memory Wheel, and stairs to upper floor.

outline, its most striking feature, closely resembles Gio Ponti and Pier Luigi Nervi's contemporaneous Pirelli Building in Milan. Such recent critical efforts to perceive uniqueness recall Toronto architect John Lyle's attempt to create a distinctive Canadian architecture in the late 1920s and 1930s by grafting Canadian decorative motifs onto the shells of Beaux-Arts buildings, a process that resulted in columns with wheat sheaf capitals or, at the Runnymede Library in Toronto (1929), in pilasters in the form of totem poles.

It is a peculiar aspect of the Canadian psyche to seek self-identification. Anthony Jackson, in his book *The Future of Canadian Architecture*, suggests another dimension to this search when he quotes Margaret Atwood, in turn quoting Northrop Frye: "It seems to me," Atwood states, "that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts identity. It is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'"⁷

Most critics who use the word "regional" in connection with Canadian architecture define regions geographically, in terms of an apparent response by architects to the distinctive, often powerful, features of our natural environment—mountains, trees, lakes—and to the climate. By contrast, Richard Henriquez proposes an architecture of place that extends beyond three-dimensional visible reality, one that seeks inspiration in the fourth dimension, the *history* of a site and of the people who have lived on it. In so doing, he may be trying to answer the riddle "Where is here?" His buildings challenge viewers to reconsider the site, to stop taking it for granted, to consider anew their relationship to the visual world.⁸

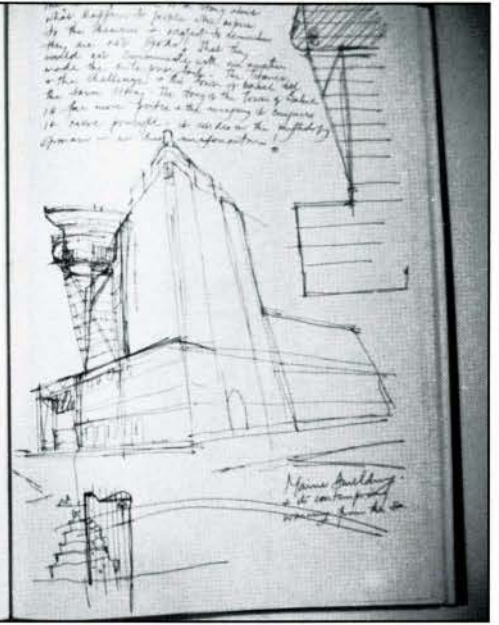
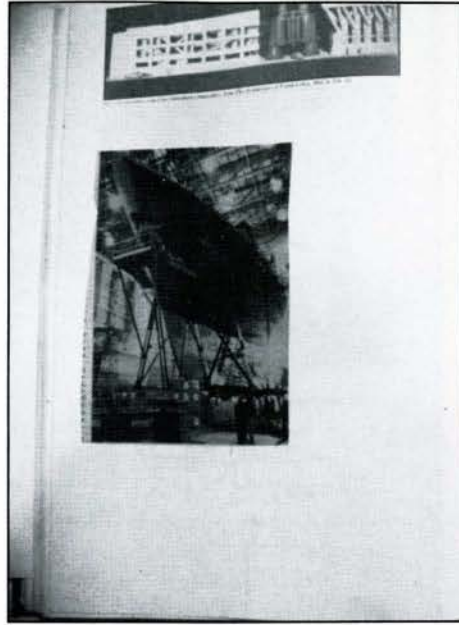
Pondering the design of his own house in Vancouver, completed in 1986, Henriquez asked himself in one of his sketchbooks, "How do I make this truly *mine*?" His answer involved grounding the house in the history of the site. He began by retaining the existing early 20th-century residence, which he then transformed by jacking it up on stilts and inserting an entirely new ground floor beneath. This act of displacement symbolized the physical and intellectual disorientation so common in contemporary life that can lead to loss of memory. Henriquez's retention of the older house as a link with the past was, for him, a clear a sign of respect. Confronted by this house, one cannot help but question its meaning, and this inevitably leads to a consideration of the site and its history.

On the interior, the columns supporting the old house are exposed (figure 1). They appear as sculptural elements, giant screws that recall the process by which the old house was raised. Its ground floor boards and basement windows are left visible, and a folding chair, found in the "old" basement, now hangs suggestively from the "new" ceiling. Such found objects possess an almost talismanic quality for Henriquez; they resonate with the past, acting as both witnesses and reminders.

The present and future are also represented in the form of the Memory Wheel, a hand-crafted installation that hangs from a cantilevered staircase between

7 Anthony Jackson, *The Future of Canadian Architecture* (Halifax: Tech-Press, 1979), 24.

8 Henriquez's approach may also be seen as a reaction against a perceived anti-historical bias on the West Coast. For instance, Edward M. Gibson has written that "In Vancouver nature is a constant companion, not something to which you retreat on weekends or on holidays as is more the case in the east. A corollary of this is that history is something you can hardly escape in the east; in British Columbia it is something you have left behind when you move here." Edward M. Gibson, "The Meaning of Robson Square," *West Coast Review* 15, no. 4 (Spring 1981): 7.



the living and dining areas (figure 2). While the staircase serves as the link between old and new, past and present, the Memory Wheel symbolizes present and future. Each family member has placed inside it a sealed box containing a personal artifact: a drawing, or perhaps a poem. The Memory Wheel is both a memorial to family values and a time capsule for future generations. Henriquez believes that it is the task of the architect to provide “continuity between the past, the future and the present, and [to make] people aware of their place in time and space.” So, for Henriquez, the making of “mine” is inevitably tied up with the making of “here.”

Henriquez has approached commissions in a personal and idiosyncratic manner aimed at discovering meaning, even in barren or banal sites, whether the architect is the client or not. The manner in which a collage prepared in 1988 as a conceptual sketch for an office building for Bell Canada Enterprise Development Corporation was conceived and executed (figure 3; see page 50) is actually a paradigm for the theoretical approach underlying Henriquez’s work of the 1980s. The BCEDC drawing is an evocative and complex image and design, ostensibly made to work out a structural problem—Henriquez has stated that he was experimenting with ways of supporting a cylindrical tower. The site for this unexecuted project was the corner of Hastings and Burrard streets in downtown Vancouver.

A related photomontage (figure 4) and elevation drawing for this project feature a trident-bearing sea goddess. Her two-storey-tall head atop the building calmly surveys the city while her feet welcome visitors to the plaza below. This nautical theme, and the fiction of a sea goddess rising up out of the water to take her place on the Vancouver skyline, is partly suggested by the project’s intended waterfront site, shared with McCarter & Nairne’s Marine Building of 1929-30. (Another local source of inspiration was, no doubt, the recently destroyed Georgia Street Medical-Dental Building of 1929, also by McCarter & Nairne, a Vancouver landmark with over-life-size sculpted nurses standing guard at the building’s corners.) Nautical imagery pervades the drawings for the BCEDC project. A ground plan, for instance, resembles a ship with red smokestacks (balconies in fact) sailing in a sea of black, while in one of his sketchbooks Henriquez imagines the building as a ship in dry dock hoisted ten storeys into the air on scaffolding (figure 5). Henriquez pasted onto the opposite page an illustration of Frank Gehry and Claes Oldenbergs’s building for the Chiat/Day advertising agency offices in Venice, California (1984-91), and this source of inspiration confirms the kind of surreal dislocation of scale and function that he has in mind. The collage (figure 3) contains many of the elements referred to here; the supporting stilts recall the dry dock and the collaged figures of ancient sculpture suggest the full-scale sea goddess.

The way in which the collage is constructed bears analysis. Henriquez began with a photograph by Bernd and Hilla Becher from their book *Water Towers*, published in 1988.⁹ The water tower at Arras, Pas-de-Calais, France, consists of a cylindrical drum supported on stilts and resting on the rooftop of a warehouse or

Figure 4 (left). Richard Henriquez, architect; “Presentation Drawing for an Office Building on the University Club Site, Vancouver,” 1988. Photomontage. (Collection of the architect)

Figure 5 (above). Richard Henriquez, architect; “Conceptual Sketch and Notes for an Office Building on the University Club Site, Vancouver,” 1988. Black felt tip pen on wove paper, 30.4 x 44.0 cm (open). (Collection of the architect)

9 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988; Munich: Schirmer/Mosel Verlag, 1988), pl. 200.



Figure 6 (above). Water tower at Arras, Pas-de-Calais, France. (Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988; Munich: Schirmer/Mosel Verlag, 1988], pl. 200)



Figure 7 (right). Sylvia Tower, Vancouver, 1984-87 (right) and Sylvia Hotel, Vancouver, 1912 (left).

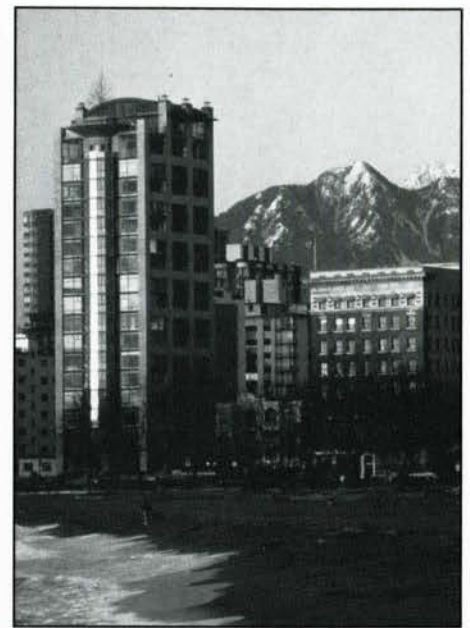


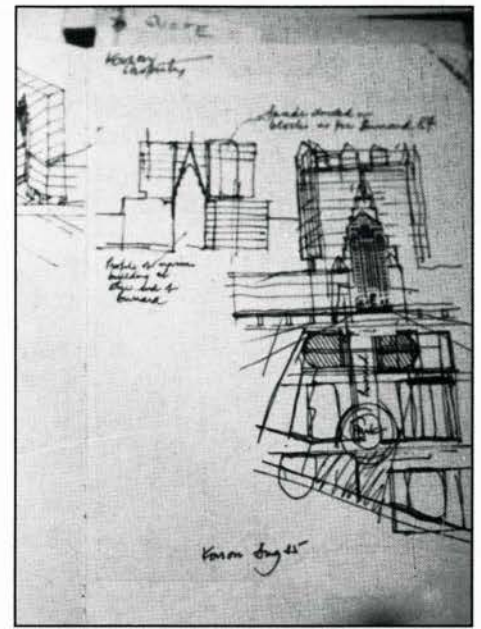
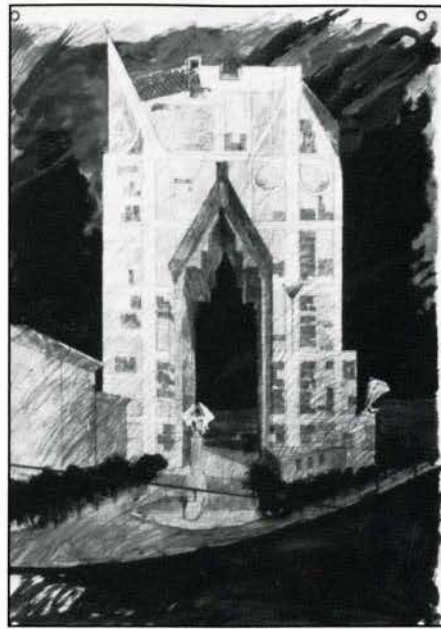
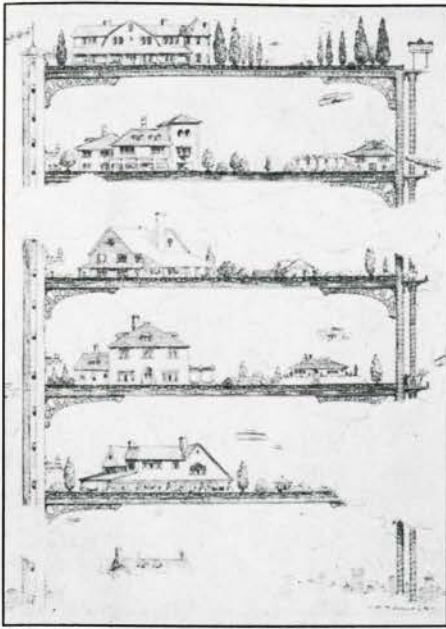
Figure 8 (far right). Eugenia Place, Vancouver, 1987-91.

factory (figure 6). Henriquez photocopied this image repeatedly, reducing its size. He then cropped unwanted elements such as the legs and the rooftop, and finally stacked the remaining drums to create a tower. This formed the base of a drawing to which Henriquez added further supporting legs, the collaged figures, a green pencil coating over the tower to suggest a glass skin, and a dramatic red sky. Henriquez selected the water tower for its structural properties, but his manipulation of the image allowed him to tell the story of the risen sea goddess, thereby going beyond the meaning of the original components to constitute a new and enigmatic reality.

The process undertaken to make this drawing neatly parallels Henriquez's design strategy for many of his buildings of the 1980s, but in place of a found image that is manipulated and transformed, Henriquez discovers site conditions that he weaves into telling narratives. For the Sylvia Tower of 1984-87, on Vancouver's English Bay (figure 7), the fiction depends for its narrative on the classical details and yellow brick of the site's existing 1912 hotel. Henriquez employs similar details and materials for vertical sections of his new tower, suggesting that these parts are actually remnants of the 1912 construction. He then intersects this brick-faced tower with a glass structure, as though he were renovating an "earlier" building. Thus, the viewer is made aware of the site's history and of the process through which it was modified—in the same way that Henriquez revealed the history and modification of his own house.

The Sylvia Tower may equally be read as a subtle and perhaps ironic critique of both contemporary Postmodern architecture, which might simply have replicated the older building entirely, and of the glass-sheathed towers of corporate North America, another possible response to the site. And by orienting the square plan of the glass tower at a nearly 45-degree angle to that of the brick-faced sections of the tower, Henriquez gained projecting balconies and 180-degree views of the bay, something that the rigid architecture of the original Sylvia Hotel could not accommodate. Henriquez's references to the 1912 Sylvia Hotel were not as comforting regional images, nor for validation or relevancy, but as a symbol of the past that allowed him to make a point about the future. For the other fiction implicit in the Sylvia Tower is that of the building as ruin; it may be read as a *memento mori* that foretells and reflects upon its own future destruction.

At the Eugenia, a condominium tower begun in 1987 (figure 8), Henriquez continued his preoccupation with displacement and with recovering, or discovering, the history that might bind a building to its site. The fictional archaeology of vestigial house foundations and sculpted concrete tree stumps that form a part of the building's landscaping were intended to recall the single family residences that formerly occupied this site and the trees that would have shaded their inhabitants. (The tree stumps, which were stained a brownish hue and used as planters, caused a minor scandal when residents, lacking both a sense of humour and history, mistook these concrete stumps for the stumps of real trees that had been cut down in order to clear the site for construction—thereby illustrating the peril of employing irony in architecture.)



Like a massive screw suggesting the dynamism of its construction, the building rises upward, carrying with it a single tree. It symbolizes the displacement of first-growth forest resulting from the development of this high-density neighbourhood earlier in the century, a forest whose trees would by now have reached the height of this lone stripling. But read at its actual scale, this tree represents the literal displacement of the ground. Henriquez was influenced here by his reading of Rem Koolhaas' 1978 manifesto *Delirious New York*, particularly by an illustration originally published in *Life* magazine of 1909 (figure 9), which shows each floor of an 84-storey skyscraper supporting a replication of the ground.¹⁰ If, according to Koolhaas, a tower represents a multiplication of the ground, and of single family houses on the ground, then the problem Henriquez set himself was how to express this origin on the repetitive exterior of the contemporary skyscraper. At the Eugenia he suggests the presence of a typical two-storey cottage through a superposed concrete grid that encompasses two floors within each square.

Henriquez took this idea to its logical conclusion with the unbuilt Burrard Embankment Tower of 1985 (figure 10). Whereas at the Eugenia and at the Presidio¹¹ Henriquez viewed the tower as the multiplied footprint of the site, for the Burrard Embankment Tower he looked upon the building as a vertical street. In an earlier drawing he had explored how a portion of the city's ground plan could generate the facade for a generic skyscraper. The resulting tower, named the Vertical City Concept, was imprinted with the surface pattern of a reflected street grid; floors corresponded to horizontal cross streets and elevator lines to principal vertical avenues. The Burrard Embankment Tower takes this design strategy farther still.

In one of his sketchbooks, Henriquez studied the possibility of situating two such towers on a real site, Beach Avenue, facing Burrard Street near the Burrard Bridge (figure 11). The facades of the two towers mirror the site before them and are joined at the top to create an arched opening with the profile of the Marine Building, that 1929 landmark located at the other end of Burrard Street. In his sketchbook, Henriquez toyed with interpretations of the building as mould or "mother" of the Marine Building, and there is a circular logic to this. As the Burrard Embankment Tower becomes the city by mirroring its plan (and this is also a visual pun on downtown's mirror-faced buildings), it also becomes the embodiment of the city's history, making it literally legible. Henriquez appears to suggest that if it must now be understood that the tower is the city, then it should also be understood that it was the dense urban fabric of the city centre that made such towers necessary in the first place.

Underlying Henriquez's work is an overall strategy to uncover and express his own interpretation of the history and possible meanings of a site. By making an architecture that looks to the future *and* to the past, Henriquez hopes to alert people to the significance of their own history as something vital, and through the particularity of which they may locate themselves within the larger universe. While no one would call this a regionalist architecture, it is most definitely an architecture of place.

Figure 9 (far left). "Meadows Aloft," *Life* (1909), illustrated in Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 69.

Figure 10 (left). Richard Henriquez, architect; "Perspective for the Burrard Embankment Tower, Vertical City Concept, Vancouver," 1985. India ink, watercolour, coloured pencil, graphite, black felt-tip pen, white-out, and plastic adhesive strip on vellum with brass grommets, 99.7 x 70.5 cm. (Collection of the architect)

Figure 11 (above). Richard Henriquez, architect; "Plan, Elevation and Perspective for the Burrard Embankment Tower, Vertical City Concept, Vancouver," 1985 (detail). Black felt tip pen and photocopy on wove paper, 20.3 x 28.0 cm (open). (Collection of the architect)

10 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 69.

11 Henriquez's wish to express the tower as a multiplication of houses on the ground—a memory of the site—became still more explicit at the Presidio, another condominium in Vancouver's West End, built in 1989-91. Here, an actual two-storey house, Adolf Loos' Villa Karma (imported for the purpose, according to a fictional narrative that I won't describe here), appears first as flanking, self-contained townhouses at ground level, and then is literally replicated nine times to produce an 18-storey tower.

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