

## Not just another brick in the wall

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The greenwall proposed for Gateway Green would reconnect art and architecture.



Patrick Blanc's vertical greenwall at Musée Quai Branley, Paris

Only connect!" Nearly a hundred years ago, E.M. Forster exhorted readers of *Howard's End* to "live in fragments no longer," convinced that if the prose and the passion connected, it would exalt both.

Prosaic architecture and passionate art haven't often connected in the modern period, however.

But perhaps Victorians will soon see art and architecture (and nature) re-connect on Blanshard at Fisgard, when Gateway Green, a 15-storey office building, rises on that corner. The developer commissioned artist Xane St Phillip to create a greenwall, and if this project goes ahead as planned, I'm hopeful it will throw a well-placed curveball at Victoria's received ideas about public art.

As vertical gardens, greenwalls provide numerous eco-benefits: they filter the air, capture seasonal run-off, and evaporate less water during dry seasons than traditional horizontal gardens.

But more importantly, as art, this greenwall connects to architecture: since it's an integral part of Gateway Green, it will discombobulate the notion that public art should be an afterthought tacked onto finished buildings.

St Phillip proposes natural forms (leaves, trees) for his design (an abstract landscape), and he'll create the design itself with plant material, not paint. But the concerns of Modernism, specifically painting, determine St Phillip's approach to the design.

So how will it be done? Imagine creating an image (a forest landscape, say) using one-foot squares, which in turn are filled by nine additional "plugs" for plants. Let's say your hypothetical forest shows trees and covers two sides of three storeys of a 15-storey building. This means you'd use very many of these squares indeed to create your tree figures, and you'd want to fill in the background to complete your "canvas." Remember that each square is plugged with several individual plants, which means that you can control the colours and textures of each square foot.

But that's just the beginning, because if you're a well-versed, serious abstract painter, you'll want to inform your design with what's important to the history of Modernism. One particularly significant concern would be the figure-ground relationship, and the push-pull it generates.

Consider Analytical Cubism, where Picasso and Braque competed against one another to see who could go the furthest into abstraction while still maintaining some notion of salience (three-dimensionality) even as "figure" (woman, violin, ...forest) interweaves with both the "ground" of two-dimensional canvas and the background of what's depicted. Even consider, as St Phillip points out, that during World War I, the British navy used those strategies, reworking cubism-derived approaches to create ship camouflage (called "Dazzle Painting" in Britain, "Razzle Dazzle" in America).

The history of illusionism and abstraction in Modernist painting is well established, and for many abstract painters, the issue of re-presenting salience has been central to their art.

St Phillip will effectively engage these concerns to create his green-



A detail of Xane St Phillip's Gateway Green wall mockup

wall. Keep in mind, however, that Modernism became, for real historical reasons, almost hermetically sealed from everyday life. Recall that by mid-19th-century, art was jettisoned into the market system, and that by mid-20th-century, its independence was threatened by partisan ideologies and propaganda.

Modernism's response was to champion unconditional artistic freedom from political or religious influence. It insisted on several key aspects, including:

- advancing truth-to-medium (painting is about applying paint onto flat canvas; don't dissemble how it's done by attempting decorative "salon" painting);
- eschewing theatricality (anything theatrical betrays audience-dependence, therefore lack of self-referential criticality);
- insisting on autonomy/authenticity (how we define art is independent of external criteria such as *likeness*, *morality*, *taste*; only painting's internal history is relevant).

Ironically, autonomous art effectively aimed at totality: *living in fragments no longer* could be recast as "self-referentiality suffices," which seemed better than "seek connection." The fragments become an archipelago of art styles on which connoisseurs descend. Their guidance might "connect the dots" for the rest of us, but sometimes the price is art's disconnect from everyday life.

The question then is whether artistic autonomy serves us well in delivering really good public art that enhances and humanizes cities.

The answer is yes and no. There are fabulous Modernist artworks in the public realm—Richard Serra's impressive sculptures in public space, for example—but recall that in those masterpieces, the Star Artist very nearly claims *acreage* (parks, large public plazas) for his work.

When we think of art as a public amenity that's more tightly squeezed into an urban building development package, however, even artists of Serra's caliber can have difficulties.

Public art that's plunked down basically as an afterthought on a building's adjoining handkerchief-sized mini-plaza is the worst offender: it reveals artistic limitations as readily as flaws in public art policy.

At the same time, gallery art has in recent decades vigorously—and passionately—explored heterogeneity, theatricality, spirituality, politics, and popular culture: all the things banished by Modernist theory.

Meanwhile, some public art, dispassionately tacked on as architecture's afterthought, is the unconnected island alongside a purpose-built continent (the building).

How much better if the two connected at inception, which is precisely what St Phillip's greenwall promises.



Yule Heibel returned to Victoria in 2002 after living in the US where she earned her doctorate in art and architectural history at Harvard and taught at MIT, Brown, and Harvard. She is the author of a book and numerous articles.