

Introduction of Phyllis Lambert

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When the Americas Society invited me last August to introduce Phyllis Lambert this evening, hurricane Andrew was approaching with its 150 mph winds and the news broadcasts were full of reports of its impending impact on the coast of south Florida. Anyone who knows Mrs. Lambert will understand why a connection took place in my brain; I asked myself, how on earth do you introduce Hurricane Phyllis? I could, of course, take the easy way out by reciting the innumerable honors she has received from every conceivable organization and institution concerned with architecture; but that would be stuffy and boring, the two things Phyllis hates most. So instead of evacuating the danger zone I thought I would take refuge in a sort of double triple whammy defense, by summarizing what I consider the three salient features of her character, the three Phyllisological virtues, as it were, and the three greatest achievements of her life so far. The first virtue, believe it or not, is humility—hard to imagine in someone of her background and stature, but I stand before you as a witness. For who am I to introduce P. L.?—not some famous person of stage screen or radio, many of whom would have been as pleased and honored as I am to be called upon to introduce her, but merely an ivory-towered academic, totally unknown to this audience, who spends his life writing scholarly books nobody reads. If I am appropriate for the occasion it is simply because I am an old and admiring friend, and I am able simply to bear witness to her utter lack of pretention, and her dedication to excellence.

Dedication, in fact, is the second Phyllisological virtue, and it takes two forms. I do not

believe I have ever met anyone who works as hard as P. L. Whatever she undertakes she carries through with an almost demonic vengeance that defies description, not only for the sheer energy and intensity of her commitment but also because it is never, ever, for her own benefit. She is first and foremost driven by righteous causes, whether it be a great building, or urban responsibility or the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. She is so driven that it is impossible even to take a walk with her; I run three miles a day, play tennis, and generally try to stay in pretty good shape, but I cannot keep up with P. L. on the "leisurely" strolls we sometimes start out on together; she marches ahead as if in hot pursuit of some distant, unseen goal.

What she pursues is indeed a distant, unseen goal—that is, her third virtue, excellence. Quality is what counts; not necessarily the most expensive, and certainly not the fanciest, but the best, whether it be in persons, places or things, and especially in dogs. If you are fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to be a big (I mean big, like three feet high, 200 pounds), slobbery pooch, she will love you to death.

P. L.'s three great achievements all reflect these qualities. The first chronologically is of course the Seagram building, one of the great monuments of modern architecture. It was designed by Mies van der Rohe, but it owes its existence to P. L. because she, still in her twenties, persuaded—bludgeoned, might be a better word—her father into accepting the kind of responsibility that she herself defined in an article she wrote over thirty years ago about the building's genesis; she said, "The responsibility for superior planning and painstaking detail required to make a building pleasing to the eye and spirit, and eminently habitable, would appear to fall solely on the architect. But the moment business organizations and institutions decide to build, they claim responsibility and take a moral position; and upon the choice of architect

depends the quality of the statement" (the emphasis is hers).¹

The second great achievement is the Canadian Centre for Architecture. I refer not just to the magnificent, prize-winning building by Peter Rose, and not just to the unparalleled collections and library it contains, which have in a miraculously short time made it the leading institution of its kind. I refer above all to the spirit in which it was created, for Phyllis conceives of architecture as the very embodiment of our awesome intellectual capacity to shape our environment and therefore of our awesome moral responsibility to make the world a better place.

Her third achievement is the comprehensive, documentary history of the city of Montreal, on which she has been for years passionately engaged; a taste of the first fruits is currently on view at the Centre. Just as the Centre has made Montreal a world leader in the study of the built environment, so her research will make Montreal stand out in another way: the physical development of no other city will have been so carefully (I use that word advisedly) and completely recorded. I said she pursues knowledge for its own sake, but of course that isn't really true; for her study will make Montreal into a veritable mine of information and a test case for understanding how well we have used our intelligence to fulfill the moral responsibility we assume in transforming the wilderness God gave us into a reflection of our values.

Montreal is the last note I want to sound in introducing P. L. After spending many years abroad, she returned to Montreal and settled there. Since then, she has helped create in her home town a model for humane urban conservation and development; she has given Montreal a unique, world-class Institution, and a unique, world-class record of itself, from both of which

¹ Phyllis Bronfman Lambert, "How a Building Gets Built," *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, XLIV, 1959, pp. 13-19, cf. p. 13.

works future generations will have much to learn and much to be grateful for. Heaven knows, P. L. did not have to do any of those things; or she could have done any of them in other places, where it might have been easier and would certainly have brought her more fame and glory. I hope you Canadians fully appreciate all she has achieved on your behalf (this occasion is certainly a good sign), and I hope you will continue to help her pursue her dreams; the rest of the world envies you, and it will be much better off if you do.

Well now, at least you have been warned: ready or not, Here comes Phyllis!