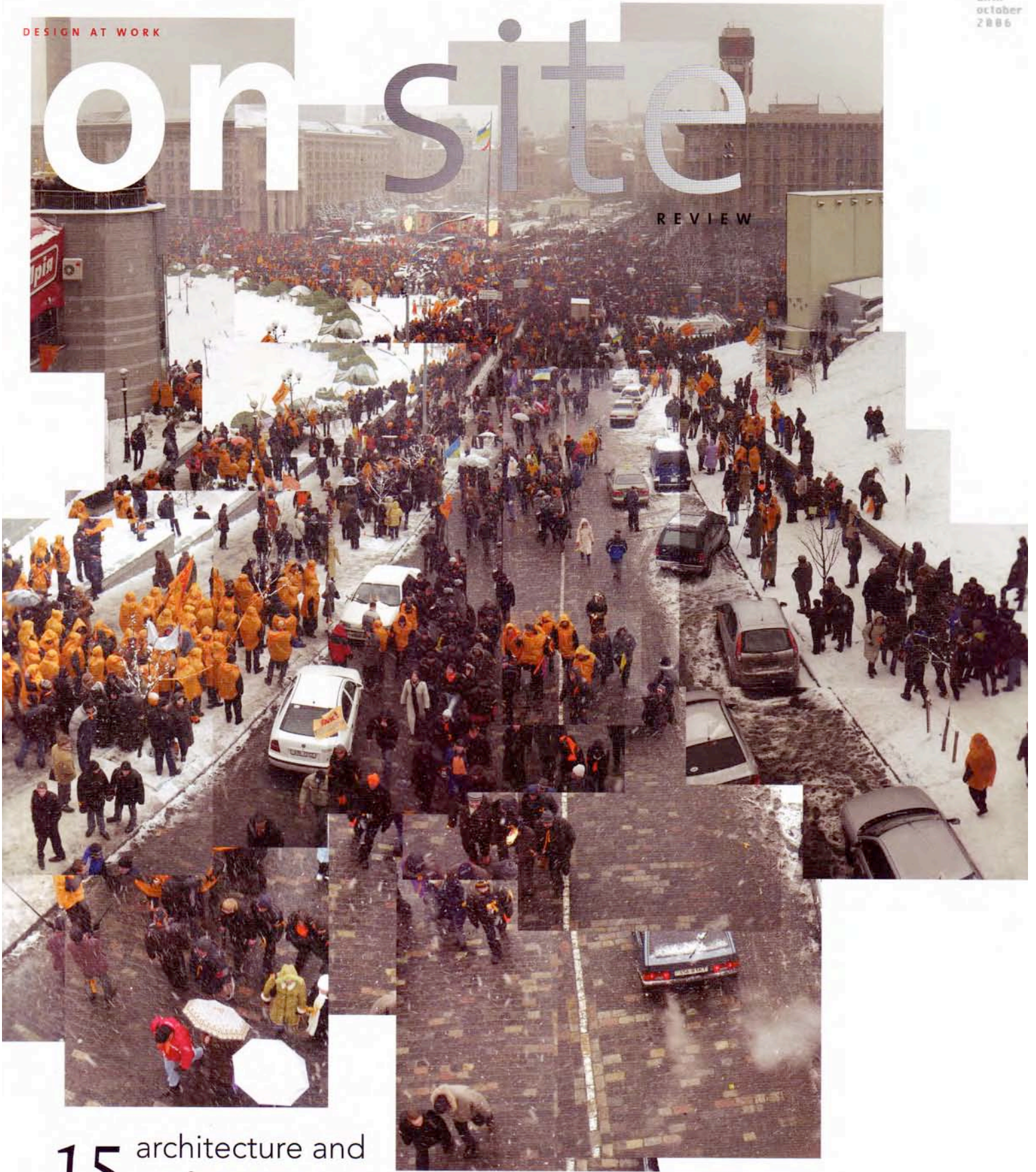


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2006

DESIGN AT WORK

# on site

REVIEW



15 architecture and  
performance

**original program:** to make a device for observation and reflection on an abandoned pier on the Dartmouth side of Halifax Harbour

- 1 establish a line along magnetic north with a transit on site and set 27 modestly sized concrete footings (*installation site*)
- 2 get permission to build from the Port Authority (*to occupy land*), CN Rail (*to traverse property*), Dalhousie University (*liability and waivers*)

**revised program:** to get the materials to the site and then make a device for observation and reflection

- 3 make a raft and float it from the shop yard (*worksites*) to the pier (*installation site*)
- 4 transform the raft into the installation: disassemble and install verticals; suspend and calibrate buoys
- 5 observe behavior of the line with respect to: existing meandering path, new paths drawn by footprints of activities, prevailing wind, eccentric loading (*shaping a corridor between vertical rebars and suspended buoys*)
- 6 dismantle
- 7 transport all the material off site by hand and rail
- 8 plan next installation considering site, formal arrangement and program

Special thanks to Halifax Port Authority (land owner), CN Rail (owner of access property), McGraw's Marine (owner of adjacent site) and to Dalhousie University and the School of Architecture for their support.



# Raftwerk | bouys, rafts and a Halifax pier

Roger Mullin

This is a site of unusual phenomena. At the point where the pier connects to the mainland, a rail yard cuts off access to the pier. On the other side, toward the Atlantic Ocean, a pair of passenger ferries slide silently past one another, narrowly missing a goliath-like container ship moving in the opposite direction. The concentricity of these prone figures create a distant, varied and panoramic horizon that is foreign and humbling. The pier punches into this buoyant agora of shifting interstices, a place of repose and a place of transport.



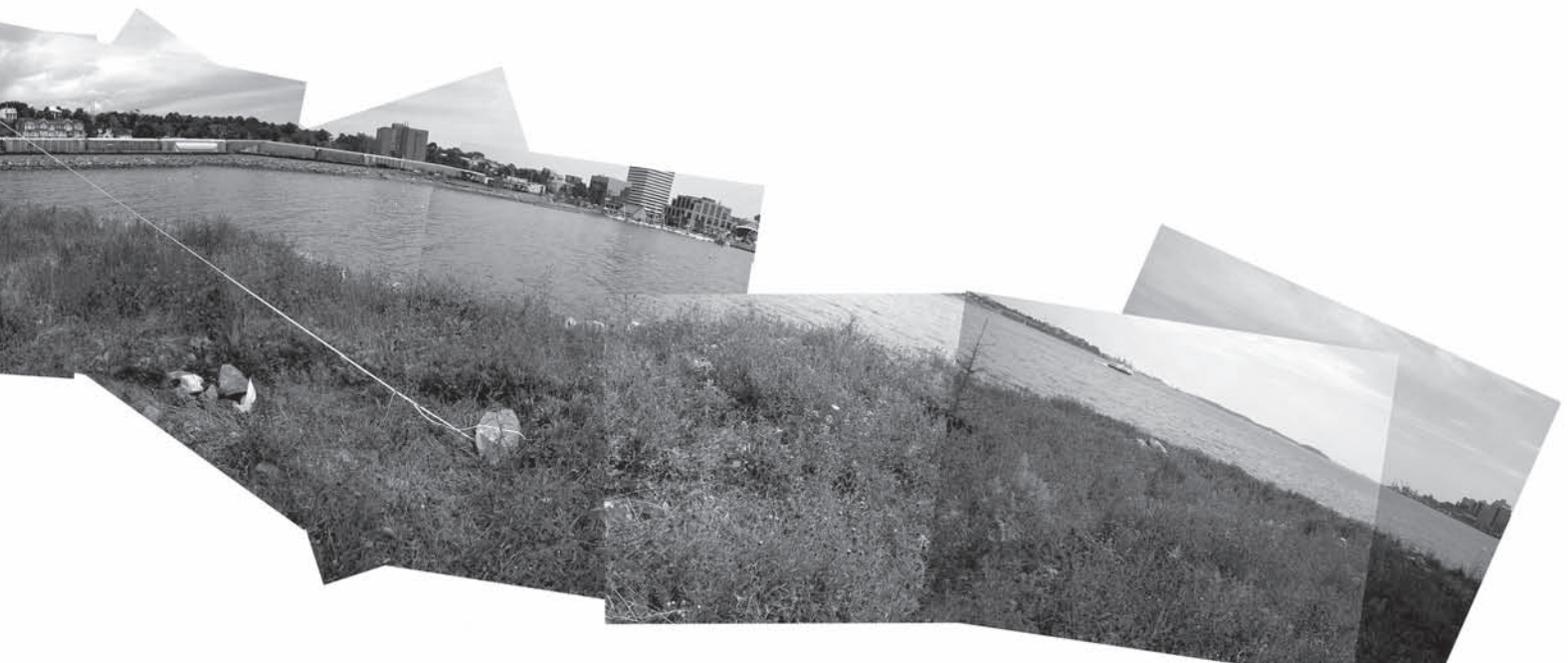


*last* summer twelve young architects in Halifax did an installation on Dartmouth Pier: with a firm budget and schedule, permissions to get and a design to develop, aspects of the work seemed typical. The site sits between land and sea; the project, marking an axis across Halifax Harbour, had to be light enough to move, strong enough to climb and elegant enough to change.

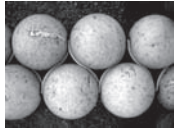
The site is a singular space, long, narrow and bleak. A site forgotten, perhaps even to itself, it was formerly a pivotal place where freight changed from rail line to container ships. Dartmouth Pier, owned by the Halifax Port Authority, is 200 metres long, its usefulness abandoned now to larger container ports and the weather. Wind carries sounds from place to place and fog muffles them. Deep harbour surrounds the site on all but one side.

Because of delays in access permission to the rail yard blocking access to the pier, work began on a different site nearby. McGraw's marine repair shop became a kind of side stage. To get to our inaccessible site, pulling the project across a cove between the yard of the shop and the pier became the legal way to get there if CN Rail withheld permission. Having designed the project to float, even with the eventual permissions from all parties to cross the tracks, we still floated our seafaring creature from one site to the other, from the site of preparation to the site of installation.

The material palette for the project was simple and clear: 27 pieces of 12-foot, 1/2" rebar, 85 flotation buoys made of ethylene vinyl acetate (11" diameter and donated by a local marine salvage company), solid braid polyester rope, castaway iron rail-line sleepers and shallow concrete footings. The materials were made into a raft to get to the site, then disassembled to make a 125 metre marking line of suspended bouys that ran down the pier and into Halifax Harbour.

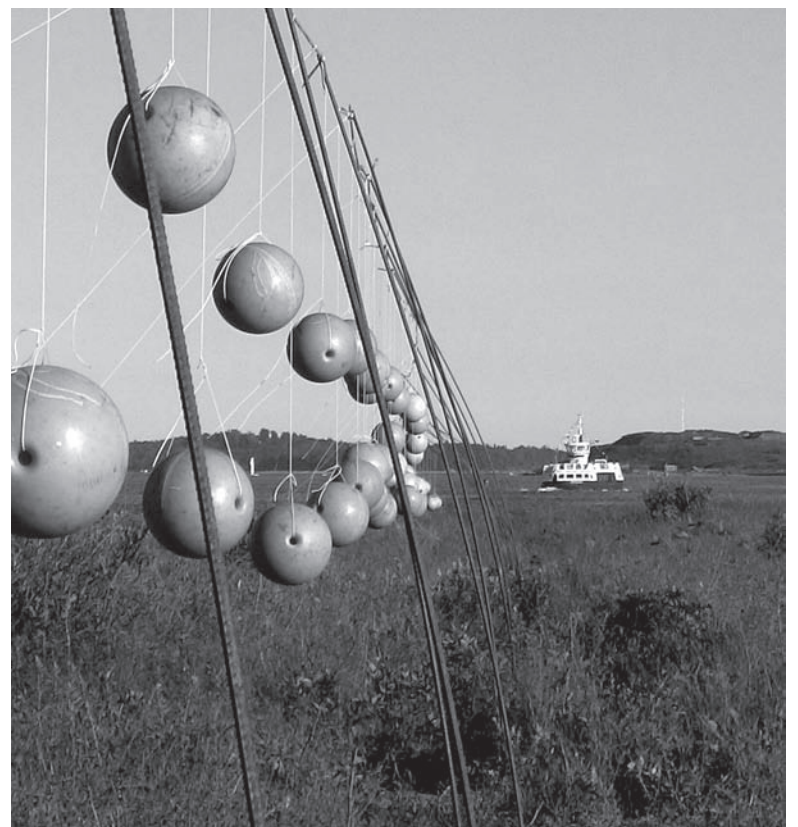
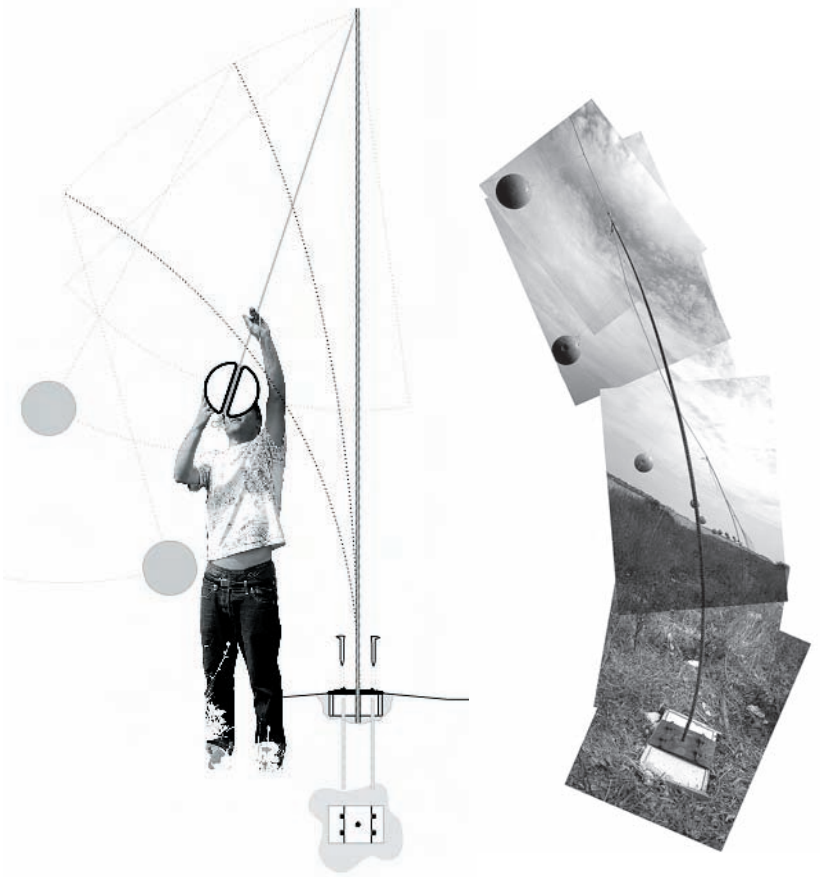


Seen from the height of the bridge or from sea level on the ferry, the buoys dipped in and out of the water. From different angles it changed it from a point of colour to a line of yellow and orange. The line of bouys was up for several days, adding to the festivities and fireworks commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Angus L. MacDonald suspension bridge.



The delay in getting site land-access permission gave us time absorb the character of the place, to select meaningful materials and to develop an alternative system of assembly, disassembly and transport. The raft, simply a transport solution, could have been unravelled in any number of ways. Each buoy has the capacity to float approximately 20lbs — in fact, the entire group could have travelled on the 85-buoy raft. Immediate access to the site would have precluded much of this experience.

The project became a system that that allows for variation and re-use. These are, in part, ingredients for an ethical and sustainable building practice. If we forgot about architecture in a prescriptive sense, it was only our memory of it that was suspended. We paused long enough to sense how architecture informs meaning through a re-vision of place and site. The products of the exercise are not limited to this day or to this site, but will, I hope, extend into the future of other days, delays and other sites. □



Roger Mullin teaches design and construction at Dalhousie University and investigates material culture through both design-build and architectural representation.

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