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The most culturally and technically ambitious home in Canada is a fold-up box encased in aluminum that still carries smears of road dust from a cross-country truck ride.

The All Terrain Cabin (ATC), a 480-square-foot home that folds up into an 8-by-8-by-20-foot container the size of a standard shipping container, travelled for four days from Vancouver to be the centrepiece of this weekend's Metro Home Show at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre before continuing on a world tour.



The development of the [ATC](#) is as much a proposal for renovation of Canadian national identity as it is a possible prefab housing product--from the lifestyle of outdoorsy thrift its layout suggests, down to the origins and configurations of its appliances, fittings, and finishes. It's prefab with "[Can-con](#)":

"As we become a global economy, our cultural identity has to define us, or we just become non-descript," says Robert Studer, a member of the [B.C. design collective Bark](#) that dreamed up the idea. "We'd love the ATC to be Canada's icon — not the log cabin that was at the Turin Olympics...."

The wooden slats that cover the deck and interior floor are larch (also known as tamarack), a wood that is honey-hued, hardy and grows a lot faster than fir or cedar. It is plentiful in all of Canada's boreal forests and has been underutilized because consumers don't know about it, Mr. Studer says.

The walls and ceiling are made of strawboard, which comes from wheat. "Why clear-cut our forests when we can clear-cut our wheat fields?"...

Bark's aim is to increase Canada's "cultural currency" by promoting the things it's creating now rather than in the past.

"There are things that are very contemporary in Canada — like the Blackberry. Why are they not promoted as part of our cultural currency?" he asks. "We think it's funny that Americans are dumb enough to think we live in igloos, but in fact the joke's on us. We haven't told them anything else."

There will be a Blackberry on the coffee table in the ATC, and show-goers will also be able to listen to Canadian music and leaf through Canadian art books.

The ATC, according to [Bark's website](#), can house a family of four, and all of the components needed for its assembly fit inside one standard shipping [container](#). (Although it allows you to "live off the grid" amidst pristine wilderness, and "cabin" implies retreat from civilization, it would be neat to see ATCs pop up around the city, too.)

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Extreme Transparency

News about vertical living is everywhere these days: [NYC](#), [Dubai](#), [London](#), and [Chicago](#), to name but a few.

I'm reminded of last June's issue of [Azure](#), which featured an interview with William Pedersen (of New York's [Kohn Pederson Fox](#)), principally about the firm's work on the design of the new [Ritz-Carlton](#) residential tower in [Toronto](#), but also touching on some interesting impulses connecting architecture and urbanism. (Below, a graphic from the [Toronto Star](#))

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Putting up the Ritz in Toronto

Ritz-Carlton

Toronto will have the first combination Ritz-Carlton hotel and residence in Canada. A look at some of the details:

- Total of 700,000 square feet of space
- 53 storeys
- \$300 million to build
- to be completed in 2009
- Hotel has 267 rooms and suites
- Unit prices for residences, excluding the top penthouse, will range from \$700,000 to \$8 million.
- Building slopes outward above the 26th floor so that the largest suites are at the top.

See story, C4

Sapphire Tower

- 337.5 m
- 81 storeys
- \$300 million to build
- to be completed in 2008

Trump Hotel and Tower

- 325 m
- 70 storeys
- \$500 million to build
- to be completed in early 2009

TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

The building will be located among the towers of Toronto's central business district:

The project is partly a hotel -- levels six through 20 -- and there are all the associated spaces, such as the lobby, restaurants, meeting rooms, and so on. A hotel like this has very public aspects at the ground level. I don't want the building to be insular; I want it to be accessible....Rising above the base, the expression will be about transparency and lightness and gesturing to the city.

In other words: through its transparency, the [slender glass tower](#) connects to its [civic](#) context as well as its physical one. The interviewer asks: but isn't that the same as so many other glass towers proliferating around the world these days?

Let's be honest. People love living up in the sky. They want as much light as possible, and this means a lot of glass. The marketing analysis confirms this....It's really about a new kind of urbanism. People want the [density and excitement](#) of urban living....They want the energy and vitality of living in the city. The [extreme transparency](#) creates another, very promising form of urban connection up in the sky.

Where does extreme transparency come from? Is it the thrill of visibility in a [securitizing](#) world? Is it the euphoria of immediacy produced elsewhere in our lives (by the boundlessness of the [Internet](#), say)? What of the fact that the

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Ritz-Carlton, and so many other towers like it, are primarily *residential*? How does extreme transparency redefine our notions of public/private, home, region?

The sentiment of the Pedersen interview is echoed in *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, currently on my shelf. The book, a survey of provocative essays from a variety of academics and practitioners in architecture, planning, and landscape, puts forth practice of "landscape urbanism" as way to address possibilities for how these three can intersect, overlap, and intertwine.

Landscape Urbanism is an exciting read: it provides an important vocabulary for necessary discussion about meditation between disparate architectural, urban, and regional scales, and any project's cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic ramifications.

Editor Charles Waldheim's introduction quotes Rem Koolhaas, discussing how the form of today's booming metropoli (such as Atlanta) differs from older cities:

Architecture is no longer the primary element of urban order, increasingly urban order is given by a thin horizontal vegetal plane, increasingly landscape is the primary element of urban order....Atlanta does not have the classical symptoms of the city; it is not dense; it is a sparse, thin carpet of habitation, a kind of suprematist composition of little fields. Its strongest contextual givens are vegetal and infrastructural: forests and roads. Atlanta is not a city; it is a landscape.

It's interesting to think of the opposition between the tall glass tower and that endless ground plane. The residential glass tower becomes a vehicle to interact with that landscape; our homes, and by extension ourselves, are brought into closer proximity with it.

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Global Place

At the University of Michigan, starting today and continuing through Saturday: an interdisciplinary symposium on "practice, politics, and the polis" that sounds fantastic:

Forces such as global technology and information flows, ethnic diasporas, climate change, expensive energy, transnational corporations, religious fundamentalism, and the loss of local cultural identity, challenge designers, planners, researchers and scholars in many fields....

A century ago, the planet was primarily rural; today it is half urban; and in twenty-five years it will be predominately urban. What does this mean for the design, production, sustainability and experience of our buildings and cities? For the sense of community and place?...

"Our conference title, Global Place, seeks to capture that paradox—that is, the challenge of creating place in a world dominated by the forces of placelessness," says Robert Fishman, Professor of Architecture and Urban Planning and one of the conference's organizers....

The conference draws from an appealingly wide spectrum of planners, architects, landscape architects, economists, urban designers, and philosophers--from Liane Lefaivre, to Teddy Cruz, to Ken Yeang, to Saskia Sassen. Check out the list of speakers.

If you're fortunate enough to be around Ann Arbor, I strongly urge you to go. If not, though, you can tune in!

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The Relevance of Content

Architectural Record profiles the work of (M)Arch Studio, a Los Angeles-based office whose design expertise spans from business cards to buildings:

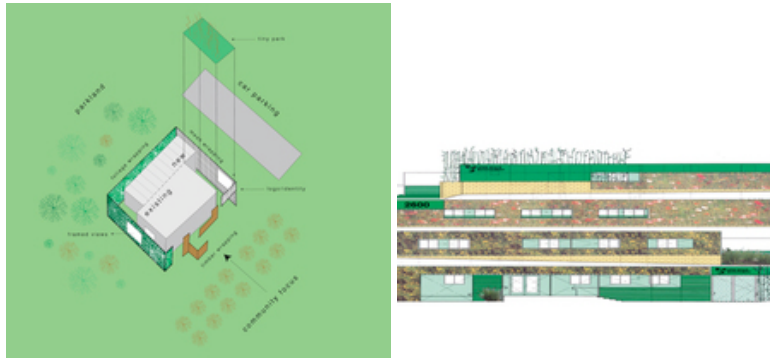
While some architects might scoff at a firm that puts its own star power aside to focus solely on a company or community's identity, these three are happy to concentrate on creating a holistic brand experience for clients that includes good design as part of the strategy, and keeps their egos out of the picture. "Becoming stars is the antithesis of who we are," says Erlandson, who has worked for Richard Meier & Partners and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and teaches a course about branding and architecture with Hoffman at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. "We are focused on creating significant work, not signature work."

The result of (M)Arch Studio's efforts: buildings that synthesize and communicate ideas of identity and values in ways that mirror those of their occupants. Their work is not just an exercise in surface treatment and signage, either; several projects demonstrate how interior configuration, siting, and finishes can all contribute to the definition of a brand, an organizational mission,

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a sense of place, or a community's identity--hardly foreign concepts in the world of architecture, but often treated as secondary results of design.

[\(M\)Arch Studio](#)'s work engages directly with issues of corporate and civic identity. As one of the principals notes, "brands are creating the landscapes of our cities;" to ignore this in favor of arbitrary form-making is to forego opportunity to figure out significant ways to enhance the design and character of space, at both an architectural and an urban scale. Below, [\(M\)Arch Studio](#)'s unifying redesign of parkland and facilities offices in Santa Monica.



[Anna Klingmann](#), a NYC-based architect whose [work](#) also actively engages questions of branding, speaks to [Architectural Record](#) about how a sensitivity to concepts of identity in architecture and urban form can enrich and transform a city in meaningful ways:

As an educator, [Klingmann](#) knows that brandism is still not quite accepted as a viable way to go about the business of architecture. **"Academia is so concerned with 'shape making' that it often ignores the relevance of content,"** she says. "Architecture is more than just creating a cool object. It can make economic impact, improve a depressed area, and communicate a long-term strategy. We visit certain places because they are unique, so as the world becomes smaller, it's important that architects keep it from becoming homogenized."

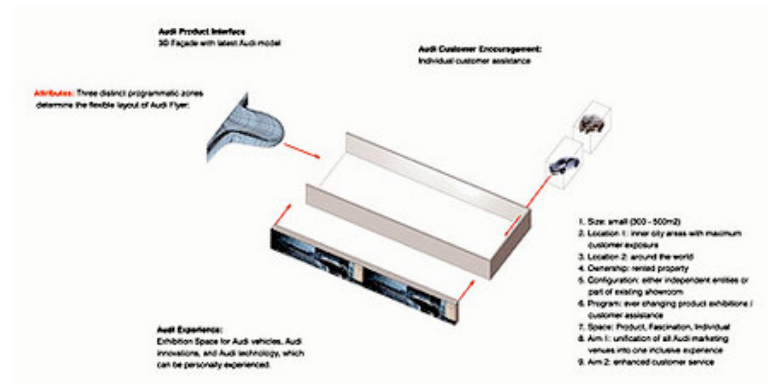
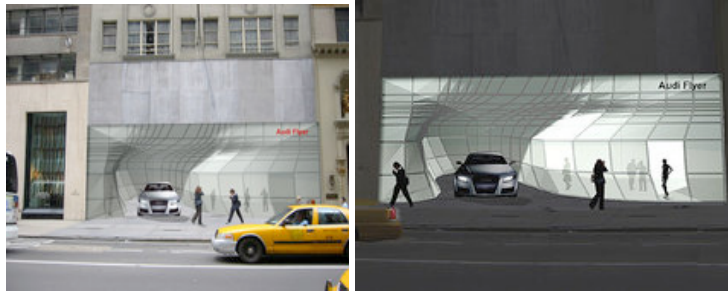
Klingmann's [website](#) sums up the potential of brand identity in architecture quite beautifully:

A brand is not a product—it is something much less tangible—a charismatic aura of meaning. A brand is anything for which people believe there is no substitute. A brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, a service, or a company. A brand builds relationships by evoking particular associations and values. A brand develops a culture of unforgettable emotions. A brand remains true to its underlying identity while allowing appearance to vary with time, place, and circumstance. A brand focuses on the most compelling aspect of the human character; the desire to transcend material satisfaction, and experience emotional fulfillment. The bottom line is that branding isn't just for companies, cities, or celebrities. People in all walks of life are starting to use personal branding strategies to get ahead in the game of life. Architecture, as people's most immediate environment, is a central component of branding, allowing

corporations and individuals to build their own 'special brand in three dimensions. The concept of inhabiting an idea, of becoming that idea, is an enormously transformative process that allows people not only to associate with a lifestyle, but also to build their own customized lifestyle. Through a holistic synthesis that operates from the inside-out, architecture can effectively brand projects to achieve a lasting identity that communicates content in meaningful and enduring ways. Architecture allows a brand's essence to be communicated in three dimensions, tapping into the aspirational drives that underlie human motivation. As a strategic communication device that provokes lasting and meaningful transformations, architecture cuts through the noise, the email, the myriad of marketing messages and says: **experience me.**

Potent ideas to consider, that are absolutely present in the design process. I'm vigorously nodding my head in agreement here.

Below, a prototypical kiosk for city streets, designed by Klingmann's office, to promote German auto manufacturer [Audi](#).



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