



José Luis Torres

# The Observatory

# Manifesting Metaphors

“Nothing is built on stone; all is built  
on sand,  
but we must build as if the sand  
were stone.”

-Jorge Luis Borges

Calgary is a city driven by urban development. Traffic is persistently rerouted around building sites while makeshift walkways funnel pedestrians out of harm's way. José Luis Torres is an artist who uses the tools of construction to build metaphors. During his residency here, he saw a community determined to renew itself with bricks and mortar. Using the building boom as a thematic touchstone, he brought the concept of rebuilding into focus on a human scale. He introduced ideas of transition and displacement — which often haunt rapid growth — and assembled a trio of wooden 'interventions' at three distinct points on the Bow River's banks. Temporary structures made with basic methods, they stood in poetic contrast to developers' sweeping plans. Reverberations of the city's detours and bustle were mere background to the internal reflections his works inspired.

Torres understands the impact of displacement. In 2003 he left his native Argentina for Quebec where he and his wife are raising their two daughters. While he maintains contact with his homeland and kin, the physical and emotional break was profound and transformed his artistic practice completely. He concluded a 10-year teaching career in order to focus fully on making art. Working in solitude towards gallery exhibitions gave way to nonpermanent experimentation in public spaces that integrated his previously distinct expressions in architecture and sculpture. He rethought the idea of the studio and adopted a migratory, site-based approach. In 2010 alone he designed and built outdoor structures in response to environments in Fredericton, Calgary and Halifax. These works were created



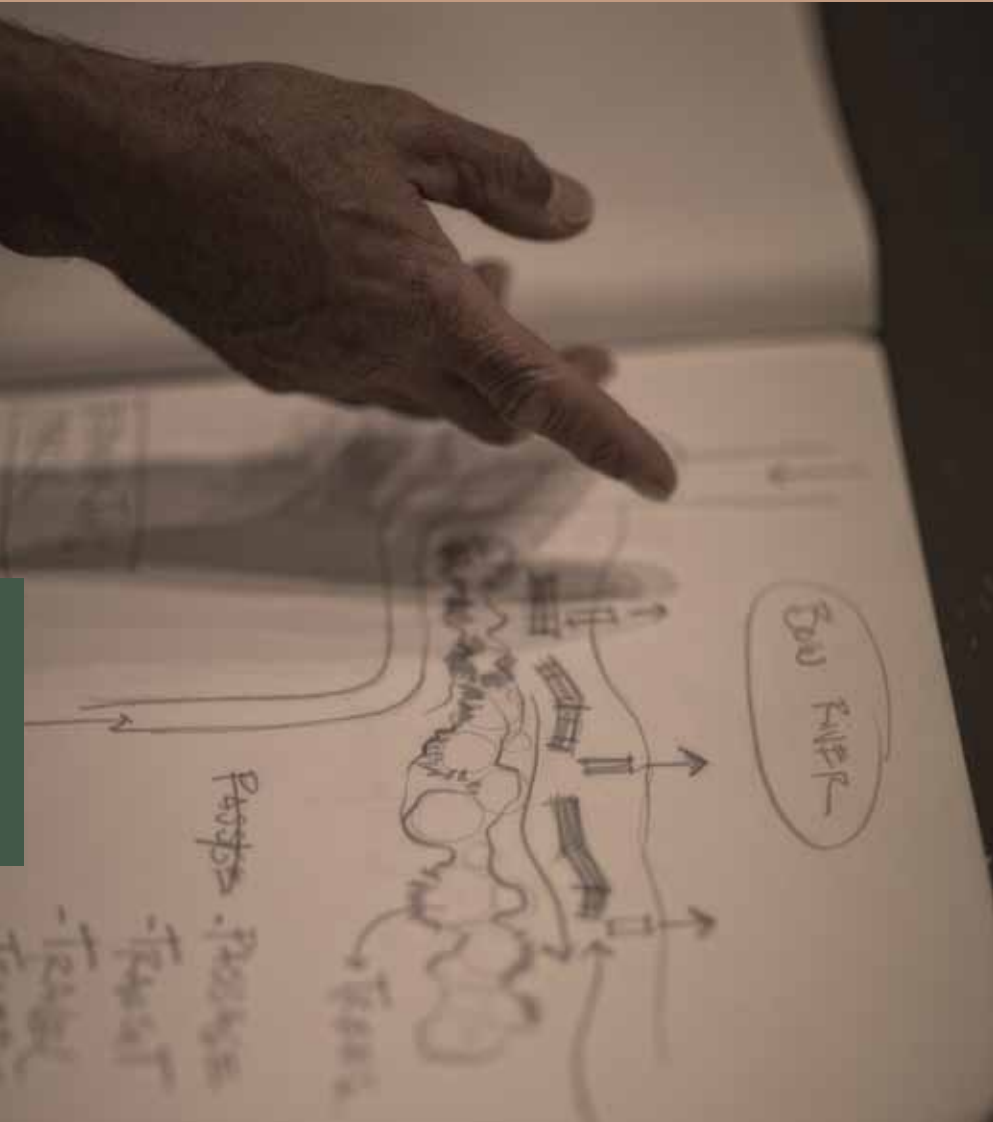
▲ The artist's first intervention offers a place for contemplation.



▲ José Luis Torres walks through his OBSERVATORY at Shouldice Park.



▲ A complement of eight benches stretch from woods to river's edge.



▲ The artist sketches his plans for the second OBSERVATORY site.



▲ TRUCK Gallery becomes a workshop where ideas are assembled.



▲ Torres uses common tools and materials to construct metaphors.



▲ Elements are considered from many angles.



▲ Calgary's many construction zones and detours influence the artist.



in situ in full view of anyone who cared to observe. Viewer interaction with the work became a key component. In Calgary, three separate sites comprised *The Observatory* — in essence, Torres asked his audience to become temporarily nomadic in order to see them all. With the immigrant experience now a persistent theme in his work, the artist explores transition as a permanent state of being.

Located along the Bow River about 10 kilometers west of the city centre, Shouldice Park offered a convergence of perspectives that intrigued Torres. There, where nature, community and city intersect, he constructed his first intervention. A series of eight benches created a meandering line from wooded path to riverbank. As visual research, the artist used the site to explore how the basic materials of construction — power tools, wood screws and two-by-fours — can co-operate with the natural environment. He positioned the benches to offer diverse views from within a small segment of the park — participants could variously contemplate and reflect on trees, field, river or each other. At the water's edge, viewers found that from one bench they watched the river come and from another, they saw it flow away. Beyond the opposite bank, the landscape rose in benches of its own with railroad tracks, thoroughfares and sprawling suburban residences layered upon each other. The lush greenness of an unusually damp summer softened the visual cacophony. The steep incline behind the riverside bench amplified the burble of the water and the calls of attendant birds but the presence of the city was never forgotten.

The benches themselves were comfortable and sturdy yet had a playful, off-kilter demeanor. Their two-by-four uprights reached beyond functional proportions, echoing nearby tree trunks — like a drawing in space. A sense of settling upon something not entirely settled interrupted the feeling of security that

accompanies sitting on an ordinary park bench. From a distance it looked like a friendly fort or impromptu fence had sprung up. This community of constructions engendered curiosity, but up close its intended purpose was abundantly clear.

Dogs and people frequent this site. The rocky platform at the water's edge is a perfect launching point for eager swimmers. Dog walkers treated the benches as a natural addition to their environment — they appreciated the artistry but never questioned the practical purpose. When a young man<sup>1</sup> clustered several benches together to create an overnight sleeping enclosure, Torres said it was “a sign of appropriation and of taking possession.”<sup>2</sup> The artist had the benches returned to their original position and cabled in place out of “respect for their basic function” and so that others could use them as they were intended.<sup>3</sup> He knows that participants’ ‘interventions’ come with the territory of working in public space. Without public interaction Torres believes that the work is meaningless.<sup>4</sup>

The Bow River connects all three of *The Observatory* sites. The entire project acknowledges the river's dual nature as a gathering point that unites and a border that separates. Settlements are organized around rivers; cultural territories are defined by them. Universally, histories are entwined with them. On a high bank overlooking fast flowing waters, Torres explored ideas of identity, boundary and passage in his second construction.

This installation featured a series of connected boardwalks that met walkers along a footpath parallel to the river at Edworthy Park. A section of platform lay directly over the path. Angled rails sporadically bordered either side like a symbolic fence and directed participants from one end to the other. The platform's hollow sound, slight flex and measured shifts in elevation lifted

◀ The structure intervenes with a path in the park's green expanse.



walkers out of nature and into an imaginary no-man's-land. The structure provided a singular point of reference in the park's green expanse. At right angles, another constructed walkway presented a crossroad, a dock, a diversion, a surprise ending. It led to the edge of the embankment and a view of the rushing river. The idea of passage was made visceral as participants absorbed the temporary feel of the structure, the mix of sensations it triggered and its suggestion of separateness. Like the artist, those who have made major transitions understand that a place of residence is "a consequence of inhabiting space"<sup>5</sup> and home is a feeling you carry inside. Home is self-identified and inextricably linked to who you are. The paradox of leaving home while you carry it inside you is fundamental to understanding what it means to be an immigrant. And the very foundations of Calgary are built on immigration.

Torres constructs memory. When he says "My work is my life,"<sup>6</sup> he means it literally *and* metaphorically. Each screw drives into layers of the past and attaches a new, momentary sense of place; each cut refines his understanding of home. So, Torres consciously builds his way to his next project. With tools and materials commonly used to erect homes, he assembles subtle metaphors about transience. He measures by eye and applies his circular saw to make fine adjustments the way a painter corrects a line on a canvas. The transparency with which he works is disarming — it is rare to have such an unmediated view of the creative process. Torres uses this public laboratory to investigate and build ideas, then offers it as a place for viewers to conduct their own reflections and discoveries. His works are left purposefully unfinished — no paint or stain protects the wood. Unlike builders of cities, he intends these works to be temporary. They will remain in place for a few weeks before they are dismantled, in keeping with ongoing cycles of life, memory and culture.



▲ A series of elevated boardwalks suggests ideas of passage.



▲ Angled walkways funnel pedestrians in distinct directions.



▲ Walking through the structure evokes a visceral sense of transition.



▲ Torres continues his second construction in situ at Edworthy Park.



▲ The artist's third intervention straddles indoors and out.



▲ Benches line opposite sides of the structure's two-level platform.



▲ Torres works in an open, public studio on St. Patrick's Island.

To complete his triptych, Torres sculpted a frame and composed city, nature and local history within it. A transitional space between indoors and out, the vestibule-like structure welcomed visitors into a viewpoint rather than a building. Benches lined opposite sides of its generous two-level platform. A suggestion of walls rose behind them: boards parallel and evenly spaced on one side; angled and random on the other. Torres drew architectural details from the horse stables of his boyhood. Buttresses and nonstructural additions sketched playful lines around the perimeter. Between overhead beams, sky invited passage from one open end of the platform to the other. A threshold to contemplation, the structure directed our gaze across the river where the landscape revealed complex layers of human experience.

This sculptural vestibule stood among the trees on St. Patrick's Island near the Calgary Zoo. From that spot just above the Elbow River, the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP) crossed the Bow to establish Fort Calgary in 1875. In the foreground of his frame, Torres placed the reconstructed fort bordered by the two rivers. Themes shared by Torres and our city's beginnings hung in the air: the migration of the NWMP to Western Canada; the dislocation of First Nations peoples as result of Treaty 7.<sup>7</sup> Reinforcing these connections, the simplicity of Fort Calgary's architecture echoed in the vestibule, reminding us that our city, like much of the developed world, was built on appropriation and displacement.

The middle ground of Torres's composition was Calgary's east side, where homeless populations congregate to access services.<sup>8</sup> Ongoing attempts to gentrify this neighbourhood raise questions about further displacing the displaced. The district comes into focus against a busy background of new downtown construction dominated by a crescent-shaped building in

progress called The Bow. Its 58 storeys are unmistakably built on the promise of the new.

Torres's three-dimensional window is a richly textured vantage point that stimulates both objective and reflective observation. Our collective pivotal moments, current ambitions and consequent realities are pushed into the same frame much like the plurality of an individual's experience is layered in his life. Torres creates temporary spaces where these layers can be unfolded and examined in relation to the external world — a process that enables memory to become metaphor. It follows that the outcome of observation — the work of deep, profound, active looking — is the creation of metaphors.

Responding to Calgary, Torres made constructions about construction that expressed his experiences of transition and relocation. He believes in their transformative power because he has been transformed by art. The interpretation of collective experience through personal reflection is where meaning is made. Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinean writer who influenced the consciousness of his country and inspires Torres, understood this when he wrote: "It may be that universal history is the history of different intonations given a handful of metaphors."<sup>9</sup>





▲ The final OBSERVATORY places past and present in one frame.

◀ Boards are parallel on one side, playfully angled on the other.

#### Endnotes:

- 1 "It was really cold last night. I saw these benches and put them together. They are comfortable. I had a good sleep."  
– Anonymous man in conversation with Carlos Amat at the Shouldice site, August 11, 2010.
- 2 José Luis Torres, email correspondence with the author, August 11, 2010.
- 3 Torres email, August 11, 2010.
- 4 José Luis Torres, conversation with the author through translator Carolina Piedrahita, Calgary, August 17, 2010
- 5 Torres conversation, August 17, 2010.
- 6 José Luis Torres, conversation with the author, Calgary, August 16, 2010.
- 7 Treaty 7 was an agreement between Queen Victoria and Blackfoot First Nations, implemented by the NWMP and signed in 1877. It was also a collision of world views. The western concept of land ownership was imposed upon the aboriginals who ceded rights to their traditional territories in exchange for a government-administered reserve system.
- 8 Calgary Drop-In Centre is just one example. The largest homeless shelter in Canada, it operates at capacity providing beds for 1250 people per night.
- 9 Jorge Luis Borges, *The Fearful Sphere of Pascal*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan; reprinted in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp, 1964).