

The sculpture gardens

ICONS AND

of Melvin Charney

ALLEGORIES

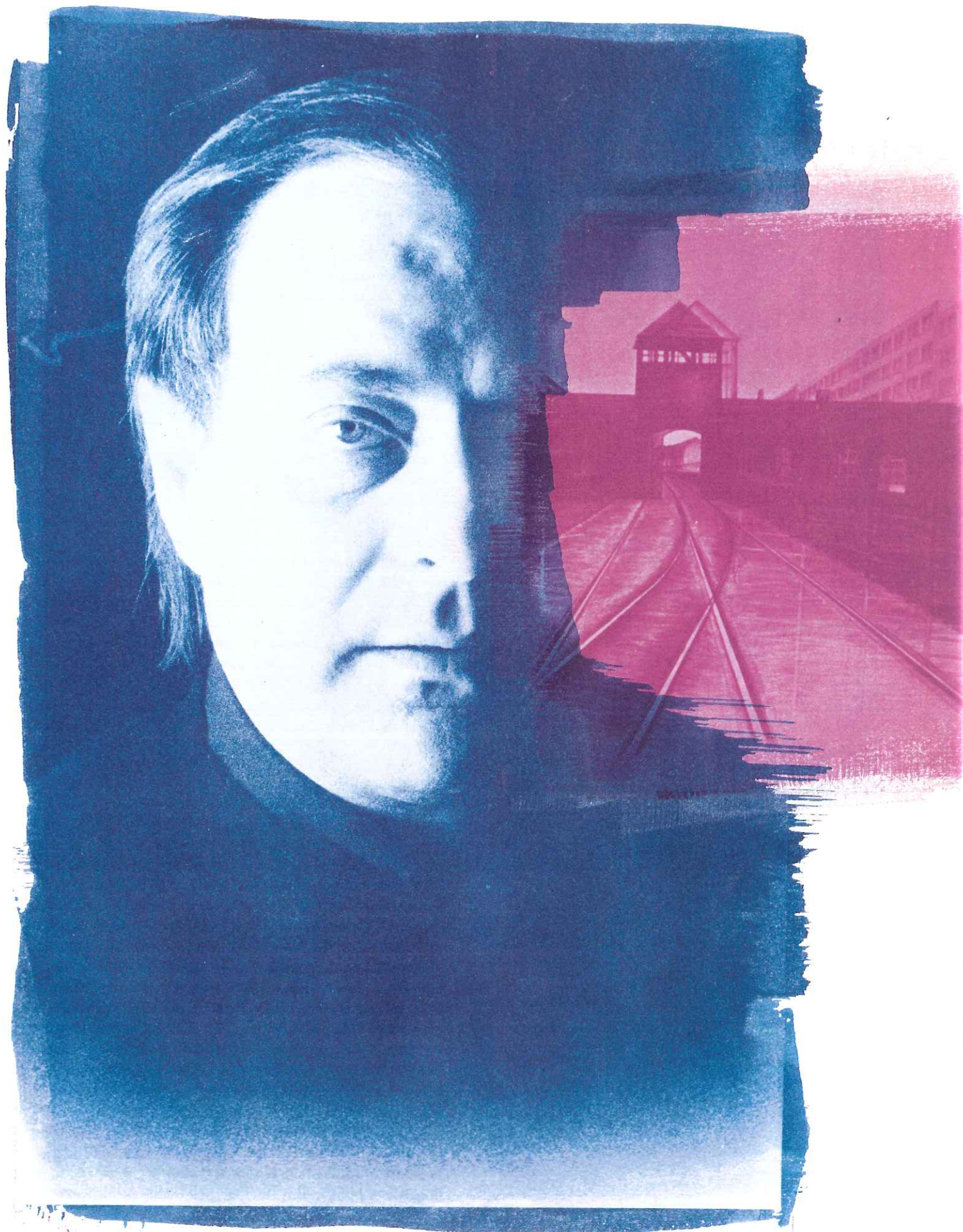
By Robert Fulford

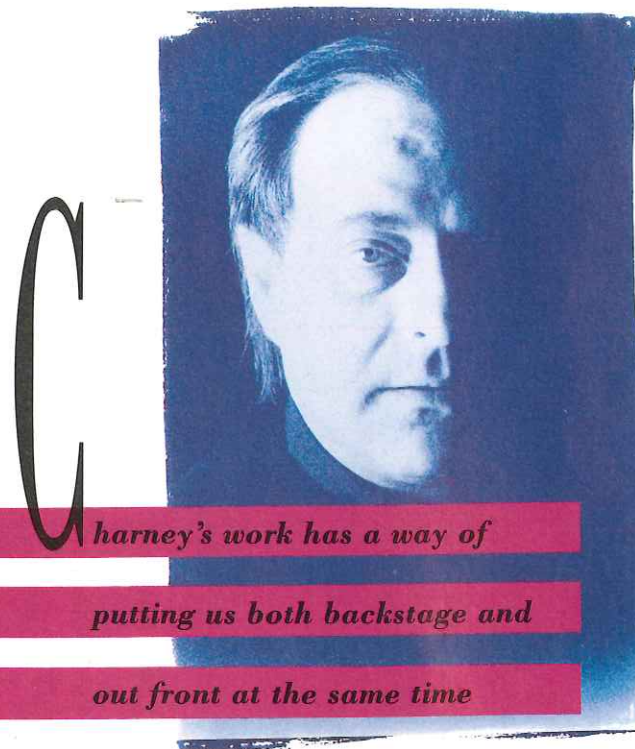
The way most people first see them, through the windows of cars rushing down the autoroute exit ramp and into Montreal by the Boulevard René-Lévesque, the ten tall objects sparkling in the sunlight look vaguely like the work of David Smith, the greatest of American sculptors. They're vertical and totemic, they're metal and some of them have arm-like sections that shoot out, Smith-style, in unexpected directions. But when examined closely, these aren't at all like Smith's sculptures, or like the many pieces of ironmongery by his imitators that now litter American cities. In fact, these are as far, aesthetically, from Smith's work as it is possible to get and still remain within modern culture. Where Smith's art is as instinctive as Jackson Pollock's, the sculptures beside the autoroute are the product of elaborate research and intense thought. And where Smith's subject-free sculptures deny any purpose except the romantic expression of form, these works not only refer to history but are frankly called *Allegorical Columns* and fulfill a specific function: they exist not only for their own sake, as handsome shapes, but also as silent commentators on the buildings around them. They are the focus of the garden of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, which — in the words of Phyllis Lambert, the major benefactor, founder and first director of the Centre — "metaphorically reinterprets the CCA as a place dedicated to architecture." Heavy with symbols and signs, they are as self-conscious as any work of our time. They are also, taken together, the most ambitious public art produced in Canada in this generation.

And perhaps the most challenging as well. Melvin Charney, the 55-year-old architect and artist who designed both the garden and the sculptures, has been making challenging and difficult art for two decades, but usually within the comparative privacy of museums and galleries. With the opening of the CCA garden (and the almost simultaneous dedication of his smaller *The Canadian Tribute to Human Rights* monument at the corner of Elgin and Lisgar in Ottawa), Charney moved his unusual sensibility outdoors and gave it permanent and public form for the first time. The results are impressive, but they are not comfortable. Charney deals in social memories, metaphors of history and puzzles of culture. At any given moment we can find his art both broadly historical and intensely personal.

He has an unsettling way of raising in our minds symbols and even facts that might otherwise remain forgotten. Looking at his drawings and sculptures over the years, I've several times remembered, always with a freshly experienced shiver, a disturbing image from my 1940s Toronto childhood: a house was sliced in half so that a road could be widened, and on the exposed brick wall of the remaining section you could see the outline of a staircase that had connected the second and third

Portrait photography by Renzo Cattoni





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floors. That sort of spectacle later became commonplace in cities constantly destroying and rebuilding themselves, but my first glimpse of it — ghostly steps from nowhere to nowhere — aroused in me a peculiar guilty anxiety, a sense of voyeurism combined with a sudden melancholy awareness that the physical world was not, after all, as permanent as it looked.

That sort of awakening, on a more sophisticated level, is among the effects of Charney's work. In his world, nothing stands for itself alone; everything is metaphor — even the blankest slab of modernist architecture, with its technological exhibitionism, represents allegorically the power of the engineering that stands behind it. And in his world, everything is drama. Over the years he's constructed many of his most remarkable pieces — including his famous contribution to Corridart, the aborted outdoor art exhibit of the 1976 Montreal Olympics — in the form of stage sets, or false fronts. Walking around behind certain works of Charney's, we feel like the audience watching the second act of Michael Frayn's farce *Noises Off*, which plays against a set, made of struts and blank canvas, that represents the reverse of the set we saw from the audience's side in the first act. Charney's work has a way of putting us both backstage and out front at the same time. As for Charney, he locates himself somewhere in the middle, moving between the limitations of harsh reality and the infinite freedom of the abstract imagination.

Perhaps the essence of Charney, the reason he does what he does, can be found in a peculiar little paragraph in an article that he contributed 17 years ago to a guidebook called *Exploring Montreal*. Like much of Charney's work, this brief passage violates our expectations, undercuts the form he's supposed to be following and insists grandly on deriving a large theory from a small structure. In the middle of a book filled with the usual helpful advice for tourists, Charney advises Montreal's visitors to seek out not only Mount Royal mansions but also, in the rue Provençal, a certain shack so tiny and so poorly stuck together that anyone but Charney would walk past it without a second glance. This house, he tells us, was assembled by its occupant out of odd bits of automobiles and chunks of destroyed buildings, salvaged from scrapyards. But why should anyone bother to look at it? Because, says Charney, "it stands as a monument to sensibility in the 20th century, as if true modernism is not austerity but the consciousness of a kind of garbage plenitude where abject living conditions thrive alongside technological wealth."

That sentence contains a key Charney word, *monument*, and illustrates a habit of mind that dominates much of his work: his fascination with the most ordinary, most neglected and most despised of built forms. At some point early in his career as

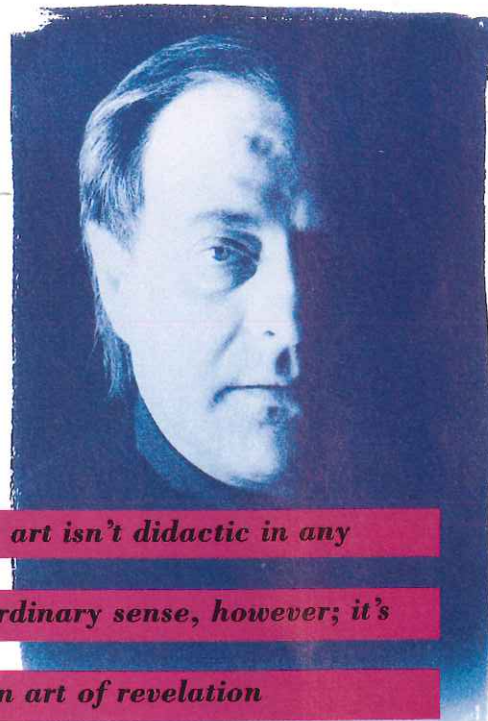


architect, teacher and artist, Charney began thinking seriously about symbols and monuments discovered in unlikely places. He was influenced, perhaps, by Fernand Braudel, the French historian who claimed, persuasively, that everyday life, rather than the lives of kings and generals, is the real stuff of history; Braudel revolutionized the study of the past by insisting that the invention of the fork, for instance, is more important than some of the major battles. With the help of Braudel, and certain architectural critics who focused their attention on ordinary buildings — grain silos, roadside motels, the standardized houses in company towns — Charney came to understand that as a theorist of architecture he should carefully examine not only the masterpieces routinely taught in architectural schools but also the non-masterpieces routinely erected in the streets around us. More than that, he decided he should understand

The Canadian Centre for Architecture Garden by Melvin Charney; Looking north, showing the allegorical column, "The Temple-Silo," the arcade and the Shaughnessy House 1990
Chromogenic color print
14.6 x 19 in.
Collection: Canadian Centre for Architecture
© Robert Burley/Design Archive 1990

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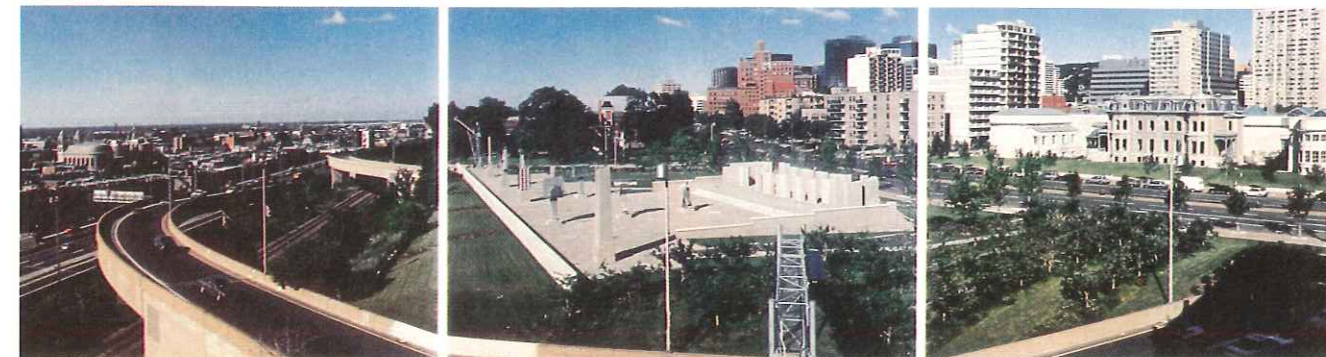
even the streets themselves: what caused them to be laid out as they are, what history lies behind these lines of civilization drawn on ground that was recently raw nature.

Having adopted this attitude, he found it natural to apply to the mundane facts of built life all the theories of architectural and social history he had learned at McGill and Yale and had been teaching at the University of Montreal. He developed, unusually for a Canadian, a broadly European and specifically French intellectual style: he began bringing to the apparently simple buildings in his environment a series of theoretical propositions. And as he came to make sculpture and exhibit it in Canada, the United States and Europe, he used art as a way of exploring these issues.

Charney's art isn't didactic in any ordinary sense, however; it's an art of revelation. His ambition is to reveal what lies behind our humanly created surroundings, to strip away the obvious coatings of perception and find the historical and mythological structure beneath. He sets out, in other words, to make the invisible visible. He dreams, apparently, of a Braudelian world where nothing is lost on us (as nothing is lost on him), and where every layer of myth and meaning shines through in all its vibrancy. As John Russell once said of Charney in *The New York Times*, "Not only does he work big...he also thinks big, in that he can take the most dismal, rundown section of a big city and invest it with order and symmetry.... Mr. Charney in such matters is on the side of imagination, and of a radiant but undeceived optimism."

In the mid-1970s, around the time he tried to send people to look at that shack on the rue Provençal, Charney was working through piles of photographs in an attempt to understand the modern history of building in Quebec. In one photo, taken in Three Rivers, a certain house caught his eye, a one-storey house built alongside a pulp mill on a miserable little street. What struck Charney was the pediment on the top of the façade, a distant descendant of a pediment on a Greek temple; he was also interested in the way the window and door frame seemed to form a cross. This was the house of a poor family, yet it was also a kind of temple — or, looked at another way, a tomb. Working with the most meagre materials, in the most limited space, the builder of the house had nevertheless used archetypal forms to express a sense of the sacred.

"And," Charney wrote, "if this building is refused its place in the consciousness of a culture, is it not because this culture denies the consciousness of its people?" Though Charney lives in a world of intellectuals and artists — people who work all day in the consciousness business — his impulse is to reach toward other, less easily articulated ways of thinking and feel-



ing. He's a psychological archeologist, digging among our images in hopes of finding out who we are.

When he saw that photograph he went to Three Rivers to study the building and take his own pictures of it. He found that it had recently been destroyed by an urban renewal scheme, so he photographed the surroundings and made some drawings. Finally he decided that the only way to know the building was to rebuild it. He constructed a kind of false-front version of it, 13½ feet high, shown as part of a 1975 exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. "The act of physically assembling the building ritualized it," he wrote: a destroyed and forgotten piece of constructed history was now turned into a piece of drama and given another life under the spotlights of a museum. He titled his construction *Une histoire...Le trésor de Trois-Rivières*.

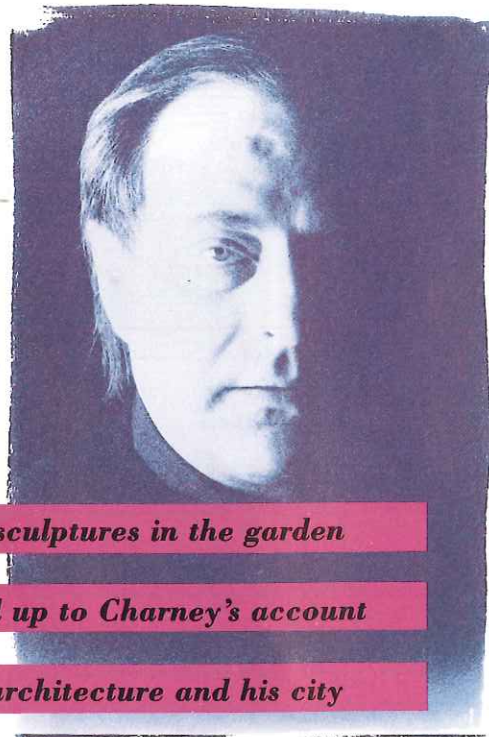
The following year, 1976, Charney played a starring role in another kind of theatre, the scandalous municipal drama called Corridart, which turned out to be — until the CCA garden — the most widely discussed event in his career. He was the principal organizer of a team of 16 artists chosen by a jury to prepare Sherbrooke Street as a grand processional boulevard, the official approach to the Olympics. They transformed the street into an art object by building a nine-kilometres-long series of distinct but connected projects, many of them related to history, some of them implicitly critical of land developers who had destroyed much of the old Sherbrooke Street in the 1960s and '70s.

Charney's own piece, titled *Les Maisons de la rue Sherbrooke*, went up on an empty lot that had been cleared some years earlier for a project that never materialized; a piece of the past had been demolished to prepare for a future that had so far failed to appear. Charney obviously relished the irony in that fact, and his response was richly ambiguous. He didn't simply praise the old street by reproducing a big chunk of it, life-size. Instead he imagined something grander than Sherbrooke had ever dreamt of being. He designed another stage set, reproduc-

Tripartite panoramic view showing the Canadian Centre for Architecture Garden by Melvin Charney. Located between the Guy Ramps of the Autoroute Ville-Marie, and the CCA building facing the garden across Boulevard René-Lévesque. Three chromogenic colour prints forming a panorama 7.5 x 28 in.(overall) Collection: Canadian Centre for Architecture © Gabor Szilasi 1990



Les Maisons de la rue Sherbrooke 1976
Wood, steel and concrete construction.
Site construction installation on
Sherbrooke Street
51 x 54 x 48 ft.
Photo: Melvin Charney



**he sculptures in the garden
add up to Charney's account
of architecture and his city**

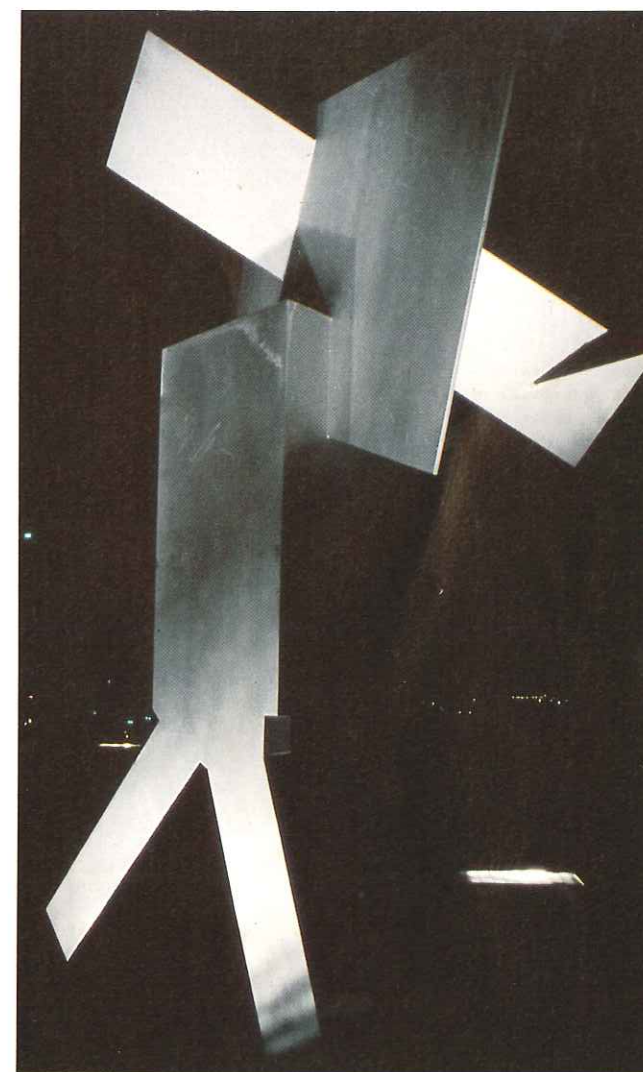
ing on his assigned lot two full-size façades roughly identical to those of the two 19th-century greystones still standing on the other side of the street. This was, as Charney wrote later, "something more physical than a drawing on paper and less material than a finished building"; a perfect description of many Charney works. It was the symmetry of the images, the identical houses lined up when seen from the middle of Sherbrooke Street a block or so away, that gave this piece its power. Suddenly Sherbrooke possessed a grand portal that suggested not a North American city but a square in Europe like the Place de la Concorde.

At least, that's how it looks in the photographs. Most of us have seen only the photographs, because Corridart — the Charney piece and everything else — was destroyed a few days after it was finished and just before the Olympics opened. Mayor Jean Drapeau didn't like it and — in an unprecedented act of vandalism — ordered it torn down in the middle of the night. The province had paid \$386,000 to build it, and the provincial culture minister said it shouldn't be harmed; but Drapeau, who regarded himself as the rough equivalent of Bonaparte and was treated as such by his colleagues, prevailed, as always. The athletes marching to the games were not bothered by baffling or question-asking art.

No one ever found out precisely what it was that so bothered Drapeau: he didn't feel he had to explain himself, so he didn't. The artists sued, asking compensation for their mortification and professional grief, but it was clear the suit was going nowhere, and they settled it when the city agreed to pay their legal bills.

In 1978, at an opening at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Charney stepped backward and found himself bumping into Drapeau, who was also stepping backward. Drapeau said, in French, "I...know you." Charney replied, also in French, "Yes, we have met in another corridor of art." Drapeau turned red, turned away and left. The photographs of the Charney piece, and various descriptions and commentaries, have since been published or exhibited more than three dozen times all over the world, including France, Italy, Japan and the United States as well as Canada.

In the years that followed, Charney steadily lengthened his list of exhibitions, temporary constructions and publications. In 1986 he was one of two artists who represented Canada at the Venice Biennale. In 1987, to no one's surprise, he won the competition to build the Canadian Centre for Architecture garden, and construction began in 1988. But it wasn't until the opening in 1989 of the Peter Rose building that houses the CCA — an elegant and austere masterpiece, lovingly wrapped



Canadian Centre for Architecture Garden,
Montreal: Night view of
"Dancing de Stijl," one of ten
allegorical columns erected on the
Esplanade
Photo: Carlos Letona
© Canadian Centre for Architecture 1989

around a restored 19th-century mansion — that outsiders began to understand how Charney and Phyllis Lambert were defining the word "garden." This was not to be a few nice sculptures, some benches and some trees. This was to be a garden in the most ambitious European sense, with a story to tell and a message to deliver. It was to be a place of formality, with just a touch of frivolity. It was, after all, the first significant piece of public parkland opened in downtown Montreal in half a century, and Charney and Lambert were determined to make it memorable.

The frivolity was what guests at the 1989 opening of the CCA noticed first. Looking out the windows, south across the Boulevard René-Lévesque, they saw what seemed to be a mirror image of the old Shaughnessy House in which they were standing. Except that this version of it, in poured concrete with limestone and granite trim, was apparently in ruins: only the front of the shell had survived a bombing, or a couple of centuries of total neglect. It was a typically Charneyesque way of referring to both past and future in a single gesture while binding the CCA and its garden visually. But it wasn't until months later, when the hoarding around the garden went down and some of the plants began appearing, that one could understand how obsessively detailed this project was. All the plants, for instance, carry references to the history of the site: native trees, such as maples, evoke the indigenous forest; apple trees refer to the orchards that grew on the site in the 19th century; the meadow recalls the 17th- and 18th-century landscape of the area, once owned by the Sulpician priests; climbing roses evoke the stone walls that divided the farmlands.

And the ten sculptures that we glimpse from the freeway ramp? Together with the other elements they are (in Charney's words) "an outdoor museum of architecture, giving tangible form to human memory." Most of them refer, obliquely or directly, to both architectural history and to old Montreal buildings visible to the south, 18 of which are identified by brass plates and arrows set into the garden's south wall. On the columns themselves Charney has placed architectural forms that range from Canadian grain silos to Le Corbusier housing, from Greek temples to the old tenements of Montreal. Sometimes personal, quirky and almost private, sometimes strikingly clear, these objects add up to Charney's visual account of architecture and his city.

During the day they look handsome and authoritative enough, but the best time to see them is at night. When the city turns into a background blur of yellow, fixtures buried in the ground switch on and each column gets its own star lighting. The atmosphere grows theatrical, the columns turn into towers of spectral beauty and mystery, and as we walk among them we seem to be enveloped by a lovely dream of reason and truth. What Melvin Charney has created, with a forest of stainless steel, copper, wood and concrete, between an exit ramp and entry ramp on the escarpment of Dorchester Plateau, is a festival of metaphors, an anthology of allegories.

Melvin Charney has a solo exhibition at the Sable-Castelli Gallery in Toronto May 25 to June 16. The Canadian Centre for Architecture will mount a retrospective of his work from October 2 to January 13, 1992.