

Designs that mix whimsy and acumen

Peter Yeadon has just won a year in Rome to indulge his unique brand of architectural storytelling.

GARY MICHAEL DAULT
Architecture Critic, Toronto

Architects tend to be bottom-line people. Even if they are artists first and number crunchers second, they spend a lot of their lives attending to budgets, deadlines and feasibility studies.

Not so with Toronto architect and designer Peter Yeadon. Yeadon spends his time roaming the heady reaches of his imagination. "I believe architecture is the longing for what can or what might be," he maintains.

Some of his schemes exhibit a certain waggishness: reworking the CN Tower as a gigantic

sundial, for example. About others of his plans, such as his house for identical twins, he is deadly serious. Well, okay, *puckishly* serious.

For Yeadon, architecture is always about telling stories. And these architectural fictions, as he calls them — which take the form both of written stories and architectural plans and models — can get wonderfully fanciful.

Now, as this year's winner of the Prix de Rome, the 34-year-old Yeadon has a whole year to spin new fictions in one of the world's most fanciful cities. The annual architectural award, administered by the Canada Council for the Arts, provides for a year's study in Rome, living and working at the council's studio-residence in the romantic old Trastevere quarter of the city, plus a grant of \$34,000 — so that you can more or less do as the Romans do while you're there.

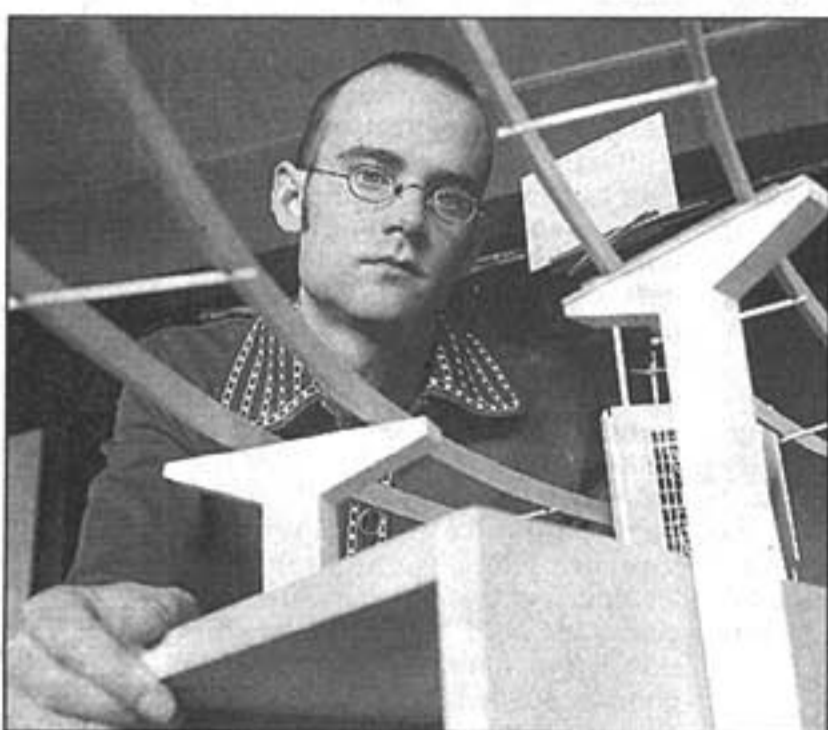
Yeadon is, predictably, delighted. For him, the eternal city is first and foremost a city of accumulated fictions. "Rome is a city where architecture carries the responsibility of containing the memory of its citizens and conveying stories to posterity, whether through building, writing, or drawing," he wrote in his proposal for the competition.

Yeadon has a diploma in engineering from Dalhousie University and both a degree in environmental design and an M. Arch. from TUNS (now DalTech) in Halifax.

Most of his architecture and design work, which is visionary, inventive and extraordinarily witty, is so far unbuilt. "But it is not unbuildable," he points out cheerfully. In fact, all of his projects, while they invariably engage in societal critique, are so enjoyable that it's remarkable that anyone who sees them — as plans and models — can resist them.

His Trac House (1993), for example, is a wooden tower-like structure equipped with flanged wheels to move along the railway tracks on which it rests.

Writing about Yeadon's projects last year in *The Fifth Column*, the student journal of the McGill University School of Architecture, architect Terrance Galvin noted of the Trac House that "the project causes reflection upon the disuse and dissolution of national infrastructures such as the Canadian National Railway, which have become increasingly decentralized



Architect Peter Yeadon.

TIBOR KOLLEY/The Globe and Mail

incarnation of doubletness, the Ditto House has two front façades, two entries (one from the east, one from the west), attained by two entrance ramps. Inside the house, in the sleeping area at the top of the house, the twins sleep on a taut suspended membrane. When they first fall asleep, they are at opposite ends of this hammock-like sleeping surface. During the night, however (this is an architectural fiction, remember), they slowly shift position until, helped by gravity and the imperatives of twinhood, they find

themselves entwined together when they wake up.

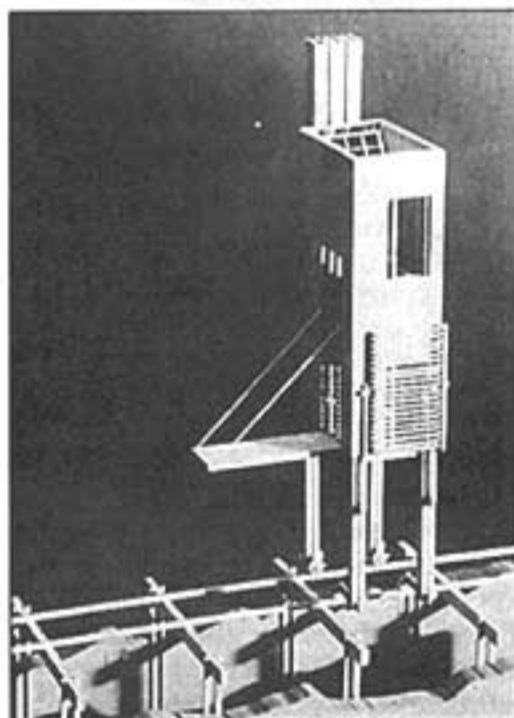
Yeadon is no stranger to awards. He won Canada Council Awards in 1990 and 1992, the later one helping to finance his production of an extraordinary set of hand-wrought architectural tools, his *Case of Instruments: Unique Implements for Drawing, Mapping and Making*. Here, nestled in the beautifully crafted wooden box Yeadon designed for them, is a large cross-like object that turns out to be both a square and, when its carved chambers are filled with water, a level. There is a plumb-bob, scales, calipers and an eccentrically shaped object that is both a protractor and a transit.

All of the instruments are made of bronze and hand-cast using the lost-wax process. Each is carefully indexed to the points and spans of Yeadon's own body — a very personal set of measuring tools that looks like a cross between something that might have come from Leonardo da Vinci's workshop and Yoda's laboratory.

Yeadon isn't hauling his *Case of Instruments* to Rome. But he is going to pursue his fictions. "To be abroad means to be immersed in a place between expectation and experience, the familiar and the strange," Yeadon wrote in the outline of his upcoming plans.

His Roman project revolves around the invention of another of his hypothetical character-client-builders, this time "an emigrant who begins by constructing a familiar place in his new city, his Canadian territory in Rome." Soon, Yeadon's emigrant-protagonist begins to find that rather than embodying his own loneliness and isolation, the new project incorporates more and more of what was initially alien to him in his new environment. "When the project is complete," Yeadon says, "the emigrant ends by reflecting on the familiarity of his new adopted city and the exotic distance at which his country of origin now lies."

Yeadon's Roman fiction will be an inhabitable meditation on what it means to be away, a reflection, as he puts it, "on the slow transformation from here to there, then and now." And a further exploration of the ways in which architecture can help us tell our stories.



Yeadon's Trac House.

and marginalized."

Yeadon's design for his House for a Single Person followed in 1995, and promptly won a Canadian Architect magazine Award of Excellence. Another wooden tower, this one to be 16 feet square and over 60 feet high, Yeadon's lighthouse-like structure, destined for a site on the Tantramar Marshes, on the Chignecto Isthmus between New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, would be situated at the end of a long bridge-like ramp, and built above a narrow drive-in basement garage for the owner's motorcycle.

For his project's program — the written description of the thing being built (the very point at which so many architects descend into flat-footed, jargony blather) — Yeadon composed a chant-like checklist of his client's qualities and needs: "He drinks Vienna Roast/ because his last lover did/ He owns a 1973 Norton motorcycle/ He lost a finger to frostbite/ He accelerates into his garage/ because he can . . . His house is a refuge/ Yet it is without enclosed rooms . . ." and so on for 40 or 50 more lines.

This character sketch in verse is entirely typical of the Yeadon architectural fiction. By the time he has finished a project, he has both designed a structure and written a story. And the one, he points out, invariably nourishes the other.

One of the most charming of Yeadon's architectural fictions is his Ditto House (1996-98). The Ditto House is a house for twins who have had a lifelong argument about which one was born first. A virtuoso