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McLunatic Asylum

By James FitzGerald

Marshall McLuhan was already famous when, in 1968, he moved his offices to a modest, red brick coach house at 39A Queen’s Park Crescent East. Hidden away at the end of an anonymous laneway, nestled on the eastern-most fringes of the University of Toronto, the coach house, built around 1907 but born of the sixties zeitgeist, housed one of this century's most subversive, oracular sensibilities.

Ironic that it would be called The Centre For Culture and Technology when its founder, famous for his elliptical, off-the-cuff river of "percepts", professed the need to stand off-centre in order to see the world clearly. Ironic, too, that he was cannabalized, if never fully digested, by the mass media monster he devoted his life to studying. The author of Understanding Media once said that all the publicity he'd received never helped people understand what he was saying.

His most radical insight, largely misunderstood, was that the arrival of a major new medium of communication actually changes the way people think. Unless the change is studied and understood, intelligent analysis of current events is fruitless. If his mission was to wake people up, the coach house was an alarm clock, a pulpit, a personal metaphor.

McLuhan loved the coach house for its unpretentious, armchair shabbiness. Stuffed with books, his Cambridge oar, and an abstract mural depicting the psychic effects of TV, it served as a garden of ideas for a tribe of "McLuhan-tics." Although part of a graduate program, McLuhan's Monday night seminars were open to the public.

"He was always interested in the present," remembers his son, Eric McLuhan, now director of an international network of McLuhan researchers and scholars. "People would say his discoveries were ten or twenty years ahead of their time. He'd say most of us are just ten or twenty years behind in our ability to see."

Elements of the U of T administration "feared and loathed" McLuhan, his son recalls, because, in his boundary-pushing spontaneity, he didn't play by the book. Felled by a stroke in September 1979 in his small office on the second floor (originally a hayloft for the stables below), McLuhan, who loved words, was rendered virtually speechless. He died in 1980 at age sixty-nine.

The university jumped at the chance to shut down his multi-disciplinary cottage industry, turning the coach house into a warehouse for band instruments. After a storm of protest from such luminaries as Pierre Trudeau, Woody Allen and Tom Wolfe, however, the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology re-opened in the early 1980s, and thrives today as part of the faculty of information studies. At 39A Queen's Park Crescent East, as everywhere else in the global village, Marshall McLuhan lives.