

CITIES OF THE DEAD

Hannab Vowles and Glyn Banks

Mastery of nature seems less a grand enterprise of the species than a means of upholding the interests of particular ruling groups.

W. Leiss¹

Mastery over inner nature is a logical correlate of the mastery over external nature.

M. Horkheimer²

No consumption, production, communication, transportation, illness, health care, death, learning or exchange occurs without the intervention of centralised administrations or professional agencies.

A. Gorz³

That there is a crisis in architectural education today is perhaps due in no small measure to the fact that Architecture is now in our consumer society nothing more than a combination of technology, administration, politics, and economics with a design facade. For the most part, those people who are working in educational institutions are trying desperately to maintain *professional* standards while implementing cuts and working within Government guidelines, failing to notice (or pretending to) that it is the nature of *professionalism* itself which is being changed.

The fact that Architecture (as with all professions) is being driven into the arms of 'private enterprise', and its reliance on 'new technology' should be obvious by now to all, things however are more complicated within

our educational institutions. Here those who (secretly or explicitly) support the "Thatcher Revolution" promote the autonomy of Architecture (from *ideology* but not from economics) and those who don't, end up supporting the very same notion, in their failure to recognise (or admit) their complicity within the institution, to that *revolution*. Both sides bemoan the intrusion of *ideology*, and the only difference between them seems to be the positing of *autonomy* as something under threat or lost (due to Thatcher) or as something yet to be achieved (through Thatcherism). Nearly all our professions then, (including education) preach in defence of their *autonomy* while practising whatever is necessary to the ideology of economics; for to admit dependency and "*complicity*," rather than *autonomy*, would be to reveal all professions as already political and would perhaps lead to a demand for a political conscience and politicized action. Instead of denying the crisis and serving economics, professions and institutions would become (visible) sites of struggle.

The crisis in architectural education today, then, is quite simply the failure to consider Architecture in a socio-political, cultural context; that is, in relation to *consumerism*. (There is, after all, not much difference between the articulation of free-floating space in architecture, the free-floating sign in linguistics and the free-floating commodity).

Perhaps Architecture has always served power, whether it be the Church, Sovereignty, the Industrial Revolution, the Third Reich, the Colonial Empire, or the People (the Administrative State). Architecture may be nothing more than a form of built power where today this is denied and disguised by its pretence to *professionalism*, taken to mean only the *emancipation* of all by an elite (concerned with its own *autonomy*) which results in the protection of buildings against the people they are supposedly designed (to emancipate) for. Dr. Alice Coleman is ridiculed by the profession for over-determining Modern architecture's relation to alienation, crime and despair, while (although she may underplay elements of education, class, and consumerism) at the same time "experts" claim that "good" architecture by "approved" practitioners results in a "better" environment.

It is hard, if not impossible, to conceive of Architecture (and in fact, Art) outside of its fatal attraction to power. It is however, this very urge to *build at all costs* and to work for the highest bidder that has today created the situation where Architecture is dead.

At the centre of this situation is the relationship of Architecture to technology. Modern architecture's mostly uncritical celebration of the machine metaphor has meant that in tying itself to 'functionalism' Architecture finally becomes the victim of technology. Whereas industrialism needed Architecture to legitimate its power through the coercion of bodies to rationalized discipline, the technological imperative of post-industrial society does not need even bodies to legitimate its power.

In the modern state, there are no rulers enforcing obedience by virtue of command, or requiring allegiance and submission to their

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person. In the modern state, the bearers of power enforce obedience in the name of *objective necessities* for which *no-one can be held responsible*. Contemporary technocratic power has an essentially *functional* legitimacy. It does not belong to an individual subject but to a function, to a place occupied by an individual within the organigramme of a firm, an institution or the state. The particular individuals holding this or that functional position are always contingent, can always be called into question. They have no majesty or moral authority ... For the greatest secret of large-scale industry, as of any vast bureaucratic or military machine, is that *nobody holds power*.⁴

As Hal Foster has said, the plug-in architecture of Archigram and others in the sixties merely fed into the ideology of consumer culture, and did not contest it.⁵ Now that the “degree-zero” (so important to Roland Barthes, and influential to Modernist artists and architects alike as a strategy of “de-personalization” as deconstruction of the sovereign subject or bourgeois individual) has become the logic of a technological society (information as neutral, technology objective) rather than a resistant artistic strategy, Modern architecture disappears, becomes nothing more than the functional (economic) administration of corporate identities.

The computerized world of our post-industrial information society no longer depends on Architecture for legitimation and anyway cannot be celebrated or symbolized through architectural metaphor. As a reaction, High-Tech appears, as a fiction, as a celebration of the ruins of dead technology (technology as style), to disguise the disappearance of Modern architecture into the blank corporate look of power. Perfectly complicit with a certain stage (now passed) of industrial development) where the outside and the inside become reversible, a metaphor for the technological externalization of all bodily functions, where at the same time the inside of our bodies become perfectly flexible (to the penetrations of power, administration, medicine, discipline) with no sentimental human *attachments*—the collective brain that is outside and over us, and whose sleep-walking, servo-mechanism we have, in shocked response, unfortunately become. High-Tech appears almost reassuring in its nostalgic celebration of the now redundant machine metaphor.

The High-Tech architecture of Rogers, Foster, et al. can today look almost comforting because it suspends the technological development of Western culture at a certain point where a well-crafted metaphor makes dead power visible, and reminds us of a time before the human body became so completely redundant to the development of a technological imperative (where the whole development of technology in Western culture can be seen as a development based on a *religious* distrust and purging (externalization) of all bodily functions; a distrust of oral culture; and the mastery of space–nature and inner nature—as *revenge* for an inability to master time—the decay of the body. Information as knowledge without bodies; intelli-

gence as knowledge without minds; the library, museum and now the databank as the collective but neutralized information storage system—memory without bodies). High-Tech suspends the body at that point where it has been emptied of all content, but just before it was invaded by consumerism, and suspends Architecture at the point at which, before having nowhere else to go, chose to celebrate this invasion.

The “degree-zero” emancipation (disappearance) of Architecture and the body leaves them both in a position to re-appear as ‘hyper-real simulation’, and Postmodernism as style rather than critical strategy, appears as both the fiction designed to disguise those disappearances and at the same time a celebration, on the one hand, of dead “community”—designer subjectivity as the consumption and internalization of all the signs of the body’s ‘liberation’ from the “dead scene of the social,” re-presented as “participation”; and on the other hand, as *eclecticism* as the re-cycling and continuous exchange of all signs of dead power for consumption—ruins re-presented as emancipation.

It has become obvious today in our postmodern promotional culture, that advertising has discovered something that Roland Barthes (and others) did not foresee, and that is the fact that at the very point that a “degree-zero” of neutralized ethical, social and political value and meaning is realized in society, all human experience (memory, imagination, etc), having been ‘emancipated’ from the social body and referent in the real world, is freed to enter the free-marketplace of interchangeability and exchange, and “eclecticism” spontaneously occurs as the consumption of all “signs” as an expression of our “unhinged” (disembodied) emancipation as *free individuals*. With the disappearance of the embodiment of subject and object in the real world and the body, they become merely ‘signs’ referring only to each other, free to re-combine at will, and signifying nothing but the almost complete colonization of the life-world by consumerism (as technological liberation plus economics).

Postmodern consumer culture becomes the new site of power disguised as *liberation*, and Architecture, because of its fatal attraction to power, attempts its aesthetic expression, moving *from a celebration of technology to a celebration of its effects*, and in the process disappears once again, now into a designer collection of eclectic fragments of all the signs of merely what architecture once was. Just as the designer body re-appears (and then disappears) into a celebration of all the signs of its own “extermination.” The eclectic architecture of Nato, Terry Farrell, Michael Graves, et al. are perfect “illustrations” of our *unbinged* freedom and Architecture’s disappearance into nothing more than an expression of the unlimited re-cycling and re-combination of dead meaning as spectacle in our post-modern consumer society.

Needless to say that in response to this condition there has arisen an architecture that attempts to confront Architecture’s triple disappearance, into redundant technology, corporate administration, and stylish eclecti-

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cism, by appealing not to a "lost tradition" or a "lost subject," but by introducing *anxiety*, as an attempt to subvert consumerism from within. Architects like James Stirling and Frank Gehry (and others) seem aware that the consumer freedom advertized by eclecticism, is a designer illusion, a trompe-l'oeil disguising the fact that all 'signs' retain the traces of embodied meaning and power, and that the "pleasure" of eclecticism is the *frisson* of knowing those traces while not feeling bound by them. They recognise, as did Nietzsche, that the more you penetrate life the more it appears as meaningless, at the same time as knowing that a meaningless world is intolerable to human beings.

Brian Hatton recently observed in *Building Design* that Stirling does nothing externally to alleviate the effects of Thatcherism in the North, apart we would say, from taking "revenge" by re-building "Liverpool" in various configurations in different countries. It may be that architects like Stirling and Gehry are the "last men" of Architecture, problematizing "professionals" who attempt to forestall the disappearance of Architecture through their articulation of "anxiety" and who at least, for us, pinpoint exactly those problems concerning Architecture's relationship to, and "professionalism's" complicity with, consumer and technological society.

This anxiety over meaning, this aporia at the heart of Western culture, is also a dominant theme of deconstruction and is by now overshadowed by the trivialization of deconstruction as a critical strategy through its consumption as yet another style. The absorption of Derrida into American consumer society through the Academy, where deconstruction has for the most part become a validating methodology for *producing* texts in ever greater numbers and legitimating *commentary* as a new discipline, rather than undermining the whole "Western metaphysical project," is parodied by the recent Philip Johnson sponsored 'Deconstructivist' exhibition in New York, where deconstruction in architecture becomes no more than methodology for producing buildings in ever greater numbers. It may be that in privileging the 'text' over 'presence' (of the body) Derrida colludes with, rather than resists, a technological and consumerist culture based on 'signs' and 'absence' (the disappearance of the subject and object, the real and the body.) By refusing to deconstruct deconstruction's relationship to both the Academy and consumerism, Derrida's project falls victim to exploitation and neutralization by both.

The appropriation of Derrida by Peter Eisenman results in the cannibalization of all forms of cultural difference reduced to an *abstract* principle of *anxiety*. In the hands of Eisenman deconstruction becomes not much more than an extension of Modernism where the *uncertainty* at the heart of experience is seized upon as a new International Style. This attempt to suspend and universalize *uncertainty* de-contextualizes "*anxiety*" as the productive force of difference in the world. Once ambiguity and equivalence are recognized as the "degree-zero" basis of all culture, the question of the contextual articulation of difference based on power relations soon

arises, and deconstruction (as could be described as being employed by Edward Said and Michel Foucault, for instance) becomes a socio-political method of tracing both the manifestations of power (both its "limits" and that which "exceeds" those limits), and the constitution of the contemporary social body; articulating cultural difference as discourse; and the utilization of *anxiety* to pursue the notion of "liberation" in specific contexts.

For Eisenman, deconstruction is a project which incorporates the threat of actual difference as an abstract principle, an institutional attempt to keep white, male, middle-class corporate culture alive by continuing to exclude actual "anxiety"—from nuclear power, AIDS, ecological disaster to blacks, gays, feminists, and all dispossessed "politicized" minorities by incorporating the *frisson* of the "threat." Here postmodernism as deconstructivist style continues, with Philip Johnson's patronage, the Modernist project of purging *difference* in the world only to re-present it as abstract "culture."

The problem for Bernard Tschumi, who seems to have read more than just Derrida, including, it seems, Lyotard and Baudrillard, is that unlike Eisenman's desperately white attempt to deflect *anxiety* into abstraction, Tschumi feels no anxiety at all about our cultural condition and Parc de la Villette in Paris becomes nothing more than an *illustration* of the analysis of our cultural condition. In appropriating Lyotard's and Baudrillard's analyses of new technology's effects on society (the disappearance of subject and object, public and private, in favor of network and event; representation into simulation), Tschumi loses sight of the fact that those analyses are made in a specific context, the main purpose of which is to provoke *resistance*. Baudrillard's presentation of his own reflections as simulation (the disappearance of an object on which to reflect), is a strategy to push the logic of Western technological experience to a point where we can look back to survey the ruins of the present.

If Tschumi's 'network' stands in metaphorical relationship to media technology (where all limits and borders, inside and outside, have broken down), then the events ("folies") stand as a metaphor for *catastrophes*, because on the computer screen of our everyday media lifestyles, only, as Baudrillard points out, *catastrophes* (and bodies) disturb the network. Tschumi seems quite content to substitute for the power relations of subject and object, technological domination where even the impact of *catastrophes* is reduced to the level of "folies."

In failing to take note of the relationship of Architecture to consumerism (using critical theory only to liberate Architecture from its history) Tschumi does not take into account the fact that *at the same time* as the object disappears (into the 'network'), the subject also disappears (into a "blip with a lifestyle"); and Architecture disappears into designer deconstruction—technology, administration, politics and economics plus V.A.T. (Value Added Theory).

Tschumi fails to see that as soon as Architecture becomes programme

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(with plug-in functions), rather than a (social) product/object, not only does he absolve himself (and Architecture) from any responsibility for those functions, handing them over to Administration, but furthermore, there is also no 'subject' to people his park, only abstractions consuming their own Leisure Time as a sign of their emancipation. Thus it is that Tschumi's parodic appropriation of Constructivist forms is perfectly appropriate for deconstruction as a *celebration* of the post-industrial revolution, where 'the people' are finally emancipated to become, as Baudrillard would say, no more than "the masses."

The attempt to resurrect the masses into "subjects" is, ironically enough, another site of Architecture's disappearance, this time into the celebration of *dead community* disguised as "democratic participation;" in other words, Community architecture. Prince Charles is more aware, perhaps because of having more to lose than Bernard Tschumi, of the problems of "disappearing subjects" and of the dangerous effects of new technology and consumerism. What is the point of being landed-gentry if the land isn't worth landing on because it is contaminated, and your "subjects" have disappeared? So it is, that an elite group of "*professionals*" can now claim to work "By Royal Appointment" for a vanished (and vanquished) "community."

It is more than ironic that, just at the point where Royalty and Architecture develop a 'conscience,' the 'subject' disappears, and all attempts to find out what the community really wants meet with no more than a parodic response to the initial problem. To design a local hospital (with Royal approval) in collaboration with the doctors and administrators, is simply a case of collaborating with 'Medical Care' as nothing more than an expression of "Health without bodies," a profession that is, dedicated as much as technology is, to the punishment of the actual body, through normalizing techniques and the private enterprise of pharmaceutical corporations.

Of course, at this stage of the emancipation of the free individual, even if the 'patient' (that is, an actual person) is consulted concerning Architecture, the result might resemble the effect of carrying out an opinion poll where starving people are asked which brand of fish fingers they prefer.

That Community architecture can so easily find (*resurrect*) a community, is simply a disguise for a *profession* (and a future king) smugly claiming its concern, and entails the disappearance of Architecture into a nostalgia for a lost subject, and a parody of its own 'signs' of *professional care*. To attempt to analyse the crisis accurately, and to *produce a 'constituency'* (as the feminist co-operative Matrix attempts to do) is to attempt to politicize *both the profession and the public* (which is no doubt why, even with all the publicity concerning Community architecture, so little attention, including the Royal gaze, is focussed on co-ops like Matrix), and at the same time to admit that perhaps *no-one* knows what is to become Architecture.

If with Modernism we had Architecture without bodies, then with Late Modernism corporate architecture and corporate bodies, now, in our post-

modern condition, we have the resurrection of both Architecture and the body as designer ruins, free-floating signs of their disappearance. Commodity architecture for a consumer community. If Architecture has finally disappeared, then to ask what Architecture once was, is to search the past for clues as to what Architecture may become, as with technology:

... were technology to be understood as a form of historical, actual, social manifestation, then discourse about technology would be able to study technology in direct relation to society, and to suggest how society might influence concrete social manifestations of technology. Here, potential for judgement and change would replace a discourse of inevitability ... The cliché about technology which epitomizes the demythologisation of the world is one where technological means legitimate themselves with no attempt to seek a ground in goals or ends outside of themselves: 'Technology for technology's sake', and "Technology is imperative." Instead of asking what would be a good technology for society it is assumed that what is required is a good society for technology because only means are considered to be important (or able to be discussed rationally).⁶

As Tom Markus has said in a recent issue of *Building Design* ("Down to Earth": July 15 1988): "Almost all architectural discourse now treats buildings as art objects ... The idea of products as social objects is more alien to architectural critique than it is even in the arts ... the overt and covert functional programmes can now be excised from critical debate by creating the myth of the neutral brief. The social relationships, encapsulated in spatial structures are produced and reproduced through a code so powerful that silence is enough. Explicit control of function and implicit control of spatial relationships, accompanied by the promise of artistic autonomy and opportunities for technical and economic innovation, prevents even the questions being asked) *questions about power, technology and people.*"

Indeed, it is apparent, now more than ever, that we are living in the midst of a terrible *ethics gap*: a radical breach between the realities of the designed environments of the new technologies, and the often outmoded possibilities of our private and public moralities for taking measure of the adequacy of technological change. It's as if we live in a culture with a super-stimulated technical consciousness, but a hyper-atrophied moral sense. It is just this gap between ethics and technology which makes it so difficult to render meaningful judgements on specific technological innovations in satisfying or thwarting the highest social ideals of western culture ... What is our practical situation now? It's just this: *technology without a sustaining and coherent ethical purpose; and ethics, public and private, without a language by which to rethink technolo-*

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*gy in late twentieth-century experience.*⁷

The sense of 'beauty' or aesthetic appeal that draws the scientist in one direction rather than another may indeed, then, be a proleptic glimpse of its 'fit', 'fittingness' or 'rightness': not, however, in the sense of its correspondence with or conformity to an independently determinate reality but, rather, in the sense of its suitability for eventual communal appropriation.⁸

It is as '*narratives*' (of power relations), value-laden (though usually disguised, or hidden) discourses, that all *professional* disciplines, including science, technology, medicine, law, education, architecture, and art, have to be examined for their "hidden agendas". In architecture the question of "What kind of society do we want?" (the ethical and moral question) can be approached by a *combination* of deconstruction (in social 'contexts'), 'Community architecture' as the active formation and politicization of a constituency based on difference (as discourse), and an 'eclecticism' which uses the 'liberation' from history (through technology) to *reconsider* history, technology, and the present. The aim being of course, to re-discover the body (*and* its decay) and to re-invent the social body (both bounded by language but exceeded and renewed by *politicized* imagination and action) and finally to emancipate us from 'emancipation' (the continuous expansion of 'power and mastery over nature' and inner nature, rather than the recognition or reconstruction of 'limits').

The fact that almost none of this will take place within the "*profession*" or our educational institutions for the time being, seems depressingly inevitable.

In intellectual culture, both the nostalgic pursuit of the permanent value referents as regulators *and* the nihilistic refusals of value discourse altogether, may be perhaps characterisable as mimetic replications, incarnations and effects of vampirical postmodern displacement of creatively orientated value-life.⁹

In the meantime we wander as Zombies through the ruins of the Cities of the Dead searching for signs of life, awaiting the "catastrophe" which will liberate us from the twilight zone of corporate bodies and designer subjectivities, the twin fictions expressly designed as the final solution, to effect our disappearance (along with Architecture and Art) as the surplus refuse of a technological imperative.

Art in Ruins
London, England

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Notes

1. William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, (New York: G. Braziller 1972), 171.
2. Max Horkheimer, quoted in W. Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, 152.
3. A. Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (London: Pluto Press 1982) 41.
4. Ibid, 52-3.
5. Hal Foster, *Neo-Futurism: Architecture and Technology*, A.A. Files No. 14, 1987, 26.
6. Marike Finlay, "William Leiss on Technology: A Foucauldian and Habermasian Reading," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 10, nos.1-2, (1986), 185.
7. Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984), 127.
8. Barbara Hernstein Smith, "Value Without Truth-Value" in *Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*, ed. John Fekete, (London: Macmillan 1987), 12.
9. John Fekete, "Vampire Value" in *Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*, ed. John Fekete, (London: Macmillan 1987), 72.