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**Dramatising Contradictions**

Ole Bouman & Roemer van Toorn, Editors, *The Invisible in Architecture*, London: Academy Editions, 1994.

Hannah Vowles & Glyn Banks
*Art in Ruins*

In 1985 French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard organized a groundbreaking exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Entitled *Les Immaterieux*, an attempt was made to dramatize the anxiety of the subject and the uncertainty of the object in the face of techno-scientific advances in capitalist societies. What could have been a demonstration of exemplary negativity however, turned out instead to be a glorious failure revealing as it did an underlying fascination with the new and novel. It would seem that for Lyotard, and many others, making visible the invisible ("representing the unrepresentable") turns out to be both unproblematic and productive. *Colonising* the invisible has always been an industry however; if once only an avant-garde one it may now be the motor of consumer society.

The authors of this book, Ole Bouman, a curator and teacher in art and architecture, and Roemer van Toorn, a practicing architect and film maker, refuse both a fashionable (neo) avant-gardism and technological fetishism and instead define the invisible in architecture today as content (not sign), life process (not object), collective production (not fetishised author), problem (not solution), Third World (not First World) and Other (not Self). A Hidden Agenda.

If it has been said that "the real teaching of Levi-Strauss, Foucault and co. is that politics is embedded in form" then the authors of this book would add "Our own times, when form predominates and content goes unrepresented, do not provide a climate that favours an understanding of the programme [of architecture] ...The importance of studying the programme is that when we become aware of it, it places us in a position to trace the commodity structure - the ingrained practice of daily

life that invisibly reproduces the functional position of the dominant ideology - in theory, politics and art."

In some ways *The Invisible in Architecture* is an example of an aspect of Bakhtin's polyphony - the notion of a multiplicity of voices and consciousness - and of an unresolved conflict and contradiction between daily life and professional discourse. The stated aim of the authors is to raise more questions than they can claim to answer, to include a multiplicity of voices, a continuing dialogue, a plea for an "open architecture" which displays its absence of an original personal or homogenous style, and in contrast articulates opposing discourses, a resistance to singular readings. Their aim would appear to be to *keep conflict alive*.

In the case of this book, polyphony consists in extensive interviews with *heroic* architects (e.g. Rogers, Calatrava, Koolhaus, Ungers, Hertzberger, Nouvel); essays by theorists (e.g. Ernest Mandel, David Harvey, Kenneth Frampton, Richard Sennett, Gianni Vattimo); profiles of practices (e.g. Bolles Wilson, Branson Coates, Moneo, Foster, Herzog de Meuron, Hasegawa); quotations from architects, critics and theorists; photographs of architecture, art, film stills, advertising, *everyday life*; comment, questions, essays by the (collaborating) editors - a matrix of alliances, counterpoints, fictions - a wealth of invaluable material creating an arsenal of arguments for use in the architectural debate.

It also consists in the glaring contradiction between, on the one hand, their oft-repeated derogation of *design* as condemnation of critical thought and action, and on the other, the extraordinarily elaborate design of the layout, structure, typography and coding of the book. In their introduction, Bouman and van Toorn argue for an architecture of "criticism as practical strategy enmeshed with society, generalised not specialised, as something more than a travel guide for the cultural tourist, *to make doubt visible* [our emphasis]; cultural analysis as the backbone of an architectural discourse... brought into relation with politics, culture and economics." In other words it is not so much a question of how architectural criticism can serve architecture, but of how architecture can be a medium of critical activity. "This book aims to reveal the cultural shadow of the kind of architecture which stands out in the spotlight of media attention."

To return to the question of form and content, Bouman and van Toorn declare that these two have traditionally been kept separated in order "to keep capitalism in the saddle," and that most architects have been only too happy not only to accept the programme (content) as given, but also to accept the reductivist role of fashion designer. Thus have architects too often endlessly reproduced and legitimised the economic and social status quo, albeit expressed in a continually changing guise, where forgetting has become a virtual ideology.

Moreover "most architects offer immense resistance - with renewed force

in recent years - to the view that their work is ideologically loaded, that it has political consequences and that their formal choices and spatial concepts institutionalise relationships of power."

The provocation of presenting this *content* in the fashionable clothing of the colour-coded, apple-mac infected, hardback designer form is like a contaminated criticality from inside of the professional specialised discourse of architecture, from within the image, within the apparently innocuous coffee-table format. At its very best this is the delirious and tragic strategy of George Romero, who in 1976 used the debased and over-used B-movie genre of the 1950's horror film to make *Night of the Living Dead* - a zombie film about race, gender, class, ecological disaster, post-structuralist theory, mass-media, the body-in-ruins and the return of the repressed in post-Vietnam America, in the hope that it would reach an audience other than the already converted art-house movie-goers.

In their text about Frank Gehry, Bouman and van Toorn refer to his having once been likened to his fellow Californian Clint Eastwood, both spurning stultifying legal niceties, both enjoying a nomadic willfulness and provocative methods. And both, whether intentionally or not, perpetuating a conventional morality through their wayward behaviour - the official Fool reinforces the status quo. Permitted laughter as repressive tolerance. A sanctioned designer-version of Bakhtin's theory of the carnival.

In his essay "Architecture, Development, Memory" Hal Foster reflects upon the dualism of what he calls the "developer-architect" and the "academic-architect." He then asks why not the "political-architect" and the "counter-disciplinary-architect" and suggests that our capitalist social dynamic needs looking at somewhat differently - that is, that it is being deconstructed not so much by Derrida or Deleuze, Eisenman or Tschumi, as by advanced capitalism itself.

Furthermore he calls for the development of practices in art and architecture which seek "to dramatise the contradictions of the present into a critical consciousness of past formations and future possibilities." This requires a moving away from concern with the monument and the monumental (which he defines as that which "both commemorates *and* disavows historical change" or as the Situationists put it - from the monument to the action that inspired it) and also from concern with the museum and the musealogical (which he defines as that which "objectifies the Other, freezing other cultures in an idealised past, positioning them as ruins in the present, whose past may be saved in our texts, museums and architecture.")

David Harvey effects a devastating critique of Canary Wharf which he describes as being the result of "naked class aggression," of the privatisation, deregulation and unemployment of the Reagan/Thatcher years. The London Docklands Development Corporation put in 1.3 billion

Pounds of public money to subsidise building Canary Wharf which was built to attract foreign finance capital to Britain to make London the finance capital of the world. Canary Wharf was thus a state-subsidised project which has nevertheless been used to proclaim the virtues of private enterprise. As Noam Chomsky would have it, "a welfare state for the rich." It is certainly true that as Bouman and van Toorn say, "the internationalism, utopianism and universalism of the Moderns has made way for a situational ethics." Perhaps too, the colonising tendency of the former has also been replaced - by sheer opportunism.

Bouman and van Toorn's book is very large, very heavy, very expensive, extensively illustrated in lavish, glossy colour, and hardback. It is literally a coffee-table book, and appears to be designed as decor, status-symbol and picture book. However, on closer reading it is not quite what it seems. *The Invisible in Architecture* is a contradictory experiment which courts failure and controversy to counteract the alternative disaster of its possible success as a liberal humanist plea, where isolated struggles against effects disguise silence as to causes; and where "the work of art - and architecture as art - becomes a bulwark of elevated feelings in a ruined world... and aesthetics becomes a legitimation of power."

Whether this book, like the work of Foucault, Lyotard et al. will prove useful in the redevelopment of a critical analysis and practice (in architecture) or simply provide more tools for cynical opportunism we will have to wait and see and hope that history does justice to its aims and ambitions in a way that this short review cannot.

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Hannah Vowles and Glyn Banks - Art in Ruins - head the Art and Architecture program at the Kent Institute of Art and Design. They are also professors at the Munich Art Academy in Germany. Their work has been exhibited in major cities throughout Europe.