Space Wars

Fredric Jameson

The Invisible in Architecture
edited by Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn.
Academy, 516 pp., $115, 13 February 1994, 1 85490 285 7

The Classical Vernacular: Architectural Principles in an Age of Nihilism
by Roger Scruton.
Carcanet, 158 pp., £19.95, 13 October 1994, 1 85754 054 9

To what degree is our experience of modern – let's say rather, contemporary – architecture mediated through photography? To what degree, in other words, is that experience really photographic rather than architectural (and spatial)? And would such 'contamination' be a bad thing? Is it possible that the buildings themselves are complicitous, no longer offering the grand head-on, Neoclassical facades for simple reproduction (see, for example, the magnificent Richard Pare collection, *Photography and Architecture 1839-1939*)? Photography would then be co-operating in the actual construction of the newer buildings, angling into dimensions of built space that our ordinary human bodies have little daily commerce with, combining planes we normally separate in dramatic visual 'chords', and absorbing the signs of space in order to produce a new simulation. The older photography wished to isolate the building from its surroundings and render it visually independent: this new kind uses it to render a seamless web of spatial texture, like a Mayan frieze.

Maybe we need to separate space from the visual; and to the allegation that architectural photography today superimposes a secondary spurious or fictive space on the presumably realer one of the actual building, add the rather different reproach that it subverts space itself (the fictive as well as the real kind, if that distinction still makes sense) by the techniques of modern colour photography and the splendour of colour reproductions. Is this not, as Aristotle might have wondered, a 'peculiar pleasure' of a different type from what engages us in the experience of the architectonic? Does it not feed, extra-aesthetically, into the social tendencies and temptations of a new 'society of the image' in which consumerism and market frenzy are not the issue so much as consumption by the eyes, a *concupiscio oculis*?

That the builders, too, are formed within such a system removes the conspiratorial onus from the photographers and explains the heliotropic drift of built space in the direction of such visual thrills and highs, which are sinful only in the pleasurable sense and not to be stamped out by puritanical conceptions of what the beautiful ought to be (but see Roger Scruton, below). To be sure, both Baudrillard and Susan Sontag have recommended something like a diet cure for images: that we try to be reasonable and reduce our intake, to fast once in a while perhaps, and exercise other senses. Yet this is preeminently an addictive society, and of all conceivable responses to visual overload, this one is the least plausible.

Such are some of the reflections inspired by *The Invisible in Architecture*, an extraordinary work compiled by the Dutch architectural critics and historians Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn (the book is unfortunately no longer available in Britain). The mere mention of a book about architecture seems suddenly to deflate worries about visuality, for language is an equally suspicious mode that makes the purely architectural over into something as distant from its original function and Aristotelian telos as a colour plate might be. I don't doubt that styles in architectural eloquence have evolved historically, and have even been structurally modified, particularly since the new resources of photography rendered a purely verbal evocation less urgent and less vulnerable. It also seems possible that the verbal might function to contain the excesses of the visual, if excesses there are and you need to have them contained: for a surrounding envelope of words, however impoverished, drains our libidinal investment in the visual field by mobilising it for an altogether different form of attention. Yet perhaps the visual stimulus is capable of responding to such controls in subtle ways. At any rate, our research into such interactions does not seem greatly advanced, with a few signal exceptions such as Hillis Miller's remarkable *Illustration* or the pathbreaking work of W.J.T. Mitchell.

One might, for example, imagine the counter-attack of the visual in terms of CD-ROM technology, where the image virtually erupts from the bureaucratised grid of a computer text, whose ceaseless mechanical succession seems to call into being over against it a geyser of old-fashioned moving pictures – newsreels, the orations of long-dead politicians, classical film clips, this or that standard architectural tour or illustrated guide to modern art. This would seem to explode the traditional book far more effectively than any of the now traditional Modernist strategies (which longed to preserve the Book in some transfigured form). The volume to hand, however, suggests 1) that the idea of the CD-ROM may be more subversive and exciting than its still impoverished reality, encaged in its plastic frame, and 2) that the 'book' may well be better exploded, if I can put it that way, by the stimulation and vigorous reactivation of its own internal relations and circuits. Hugh Kenner once observed the not-so-subterranean formal influence on books like *Ulysses* of the existence of dictionaries and encyclopedias as proudly linear modes of organisation. Mallarmé imagined in vain a book that would remodel itself perpetually, like a transformer or a superchangeling: an unrealisable ideal William Burroughs brought down to the affordability of ordinary people in his proposal for the cut-up book, which you could simply rearrange at home according to your fancy. But *The Invisible in Architecture* is closer to these ideal images than the literary works that attempt to find inspiration in them.

Units in a Japanese capsule hotel where businessmen hire no more than they absolutely need of the city's precious cubic footage. This photograph heads one of the eight sections in 'The Invisible in Architecture'.

I think it was Valéry who said that the density of a work stood in direct proportion to the multiplicity of uses of its elements. In this book there is an impressive recycling of fixed elements, such as photos and references, and the larger buildings are encountered again and again, in different perspectives: looming above a narrow street, facing us across a square, their spatial influence felt in the neighbourhood like a planetary force, a readjustment of shade and sun, the systematic occupation of a void or the reorganisation of labour. There are 24 of these 'exhibits': no longer masterworks or touchstones, exactly, for the book is designed as a probe into contemporaneity, not a stroll among the great monuments of a now canonised modern period – a diving bell into Post-Modernity, if you will. This term must be understood as referring to a scene and historical situation, rather than designating a style itself by now relatively antiquated (of the great Post-Modernist names – Charles Moore, for instance – very little survives here; even the more familiar ones, like Michael Graves, are relatively defamiliarised within this extraordinarily overpopulated meteorological zone).

The 24 'works' – project descriptions, actually – range from interior decoration (the Branson Coates Arca di Noe restaurant in Sapporo) to Beth Gali's Montjuich cemetery; from urban engineering, such as Calatrava's railway station in Zurich or Norman Foster's Stansted air terminal, to a sprinkling of housing developments, culminating in Bofill's deliberately magnificent ensemble in Cergy-Pontoise and Leon Krier's deliciously classical Atlantis; from a few individual dwellings (Gehry's Schnabel residence, Pietro Dirossi's two-tier corner apartment on the Wilhelmstrasse, let alone the astonishing Slow House of Diller and Scofidio) to a host of remarkable museums (Venturi, Moneo, Hollein, Kurokawa and Liebeskind) along with the stray library (Tschumi's project for the Très Grande Bibliothèque), school or amusement park (Hasegawa, Graves's Disneyworld), not to mention Tadao Ando's extraordinary Church on the Water, in Hokkaido.

It is a varied and satisfying menu; but the reader who misses the great names of the period should be warned that Peter Eisenman, Richard Rogers, Alvaro Siza, Jean Nouvel and Rem Koolhaas (along with the central figure in Barcelona's historic renewal, Oriol Bohigas) are all represented by substantial essays or interviews. I am not sure whether the distribution of these varied building types and programmes corresponds to that of contracts in the world today; but the geographical focus is certainly selective: Japanese architects but also Fukuoka; the great Barcelona model, alongside the immense architectural and urban pangs of the new Berlin, and the unique French *ville-nouvelle* format. It is a view from Europe where North America is omnipresent yet largely absent, and one which offers a focus on individual buildings without coming down on the side of any traditional opposition between architecture and urbanism, since the new problems of the new kinds of city space are everywhere in these pages and suffuse the image of the individual building just as they haunt the remarks and reflections of the individual architects (and of the critics and theorists as well, for the volume includes a dozen or so full-length essays by significant specialists, above all Kenneth Frampton, Hal Foster and Charles Jencks, but also by significant outsiders, from Vattimo to David Harvey, from Richard Sennett to the late Ernest Mandel).

A substantial critical essay on the work of each of the 24 architects is accompanied, as though in rebuttal, by quotes from that individual's own writings and sometimes from more favourable studies and articles, along with a substantial visual portfolio. (There are brief biographies of all the 'participants', theoretical as well as architectural, at the end.) The title of this brilliant picture-book perhaps contains some of the ironic overtones of my initial remarks, as well as referring to the current dilemma of the dissolution or volatilisation of the buildings themselves; but it is also motivated by the view that architects' work is 'ideologically loaded, that it has political consequences and that their formal choices and spatial concepts institutionalise relationships of power'. The editors thus pose tough and insistent questions to all their participants; but they are questions without answers; and an outside observer may have the feeling that architecture today is generally locked into a host of irresolvable oppositions. Several of these are left over from a very recent past: the general situation of an aimless pluralism and multiplicity of styles, following the teleological certainties of Modernism

(according to which Le Corbusier is palpably more 'advanced' than the 19th-century Neoclassical architects); the incommensurability I have already mentioned between a focus on the urban and a commitment to the individual building; and finally, the issue of what architectural *theory* might be, along with that of the 'unheard melodies' of paper architecture.

Here we encounter three relatively new problems, or axes of discussion and vexation. The question of the status of the architect is inescapable: not merely the artistic image by which his achievements are to be evaluated and celebrated – a rock-star in the person of Gehry, a Mallarmé in Eisenman, even a Sturm-und-Drang Shakespeare in Koolhaas? – but also the agonising issue of responsibilities and priorities in the great sinking ship of late capitalism. This question leads into the next: the opposition between populism and the tastes of entrepreneurs or big corporations. Here, the multiplicity of museums and the preference for interior redecoration, the paucity of ideas about individual dwellings, the systematic exclusion of the bread-and-butter office building are all tell-tale signs of compromise, as is the individual architect's helplessness in a situation in which, with few exceptions (the great French neo-urban projects, for example), the state has already washed its hands of the spatial marketplace.

Beyond this is a final dilemma, only apparently about style: the opposition between tradition and the avant garde, or between Prince Charles and the Modern Movement, or better still, the implications and consequences of the observable failure and bankruptcy of both these alternatives: Krier's traditionalism is here as roundly excoriated as are the subversive avant-gardist ambitions of Bernard Tschumi and other 'advanced' architects. Both are locked into a present that no one can do anything about. The past (and its various decorums and civilities) cannot be resuscitated by an effort of the will, let alone a political programme; while late capitalism no longer seems particularly susceptible to subversion or 'undermining'. (It was the bourgeoisie that was subject to that: the reign of 'cynical reason' cannot be subverted, while in the realm of delirious Post-Modernity 'anything goes' and nothing shocks or 'estranges' any longer.) As always, architecture is the most painful locus of these contradictions, for it is the art most immediately dependent on the economic infrastructure. Its fate is the most revealing, and its dilemmas are the most suggestive and worthy of our attention.

None of which, however, tells us anything about how *The Invisible in Architecture* sets about interrogating this immense mass of material. The authors' judgments are shrewd and varied, but they do not extend – they have neither the time nor the space to extend – to minute explorations of the ideology of form of the sort that interest me and that most of us in literature associate with *Ideologiekritik*. Some of the judgments are merely implicit, the result of a simple juxtaposition of images: a Sargent portrait alongside Krier's cityscapes, Duane Hanson in mute comment on the Venturi/Scott Brown kind of populism, an ugly and threatening Israeli settlement to set the tone for the discussion of 'place' as such, the landing of a flying saucer for Hans Hollein, stills from an Ettore Scola movie as a nasty comment on Italian Sixties radicalism. And a rich 'anything goes' of visual illustration serves to heighten the visual excesses of the architects themselves.

The Invisible in Architecture posits three fundamental strategies 'in reaction against Modernism', and eight 'vectors' or areas in which specific and often agonising problems are posed for these architects. (There are thus a number of ways to read this volume, some of which follow the very paths and trajectories the architects themselves liked to talk about when, a few years ago, the idea of space as a kind of 'narrative' burst onto the theoretical scene.) The book's 24 *auteurs* inhabit the typological slots created by multiplying three strategies by eight 'vectors': but it is often a perilous and arbitrary distribution, which it is intriguing to imagine rearranged, a little like Gertrude Stein's permutations in *Four in America* ('imagine George Washington as a great novelist; imagine Henry James as a great general'): Tschumi as traditionalist, or Ando as avant-garde. Each slot is, in other words, a space of thematic interrogation and the 'infinite task' proposed by the book is to continue for oneself the process it initiates.

Of the three 'strategies', that called 'archaism' sounds flat and familiar alongside the awkward neologisms of 'façadism' and 'fascinism'. The latter two are meant to designate, respectively, a predominance of the visual image and an emphasis on new spatial experiences and new thrills. It would be tempting to assimilate these two categories to something like an opposition between Beauty and the Sublime, as that perennial alternative finds new forms in the Post-Modern era. And there can be no doubt that a few of the architects in these categories justify such a characterisation. Fascinism, or the new Sublime, thus includes Gehry and Liebeskind, different as they are from one another; it includes Tschumi – arguably the most in-your-face avant-gardist in these pages – but also, somewhat astonishingly, Sir Norman Foster. Yet a little reflection may well persuade us that the technological magnificence of the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank and the Century Tower deserves to be thought of as 'sublime', although the sublimity may be of a somewhat different species. The other Fascinists – Diller and Scofidio, or Hasegawa – strike one rather as practising something like a 'conceptual architecture' rather than a psychedelic kind.

Façadism, or the substitution of the visual image for a three-dimensional spatial, tactile or 'tectonic' experience, is rightly attributed to Venturi/Scott Brown, who were its first theoreticians, and to Bofill and Michael Graves, who have in their very different yet equally bravura ways exploited more than anyone else the splendour of the image, to the point where its secret essence as a mere simulacrum begins to show. The Viennese architect and designer Hans Hollein is another such, whose richly satisfying invention reminds us that that once much despised thing *decoration* (the object of Loos's repugnance in the Modernist manifesto, *Ornament as Crime*) has now been returned to the category of the beautiful. But then we find Leon Krier listed among the Façadists and are obliged to turn our attention to the larger topic of tradition, or better still, traditionalism, since we know in advance that this will not necessarily figure under the heading of Archaism.

Indeed, as Roger Scruton's collection of essays suggests, it is not the telluric resonance of the ancient and primordial – as in Tadao Ando, for instance, whose immense Mycenean walls pre-eminently entitle him to inaugurate the category of Archaism – which is sought after by these (predominantly) British traditionalists (or adopted British, in the case of Krier), but rather some 18th-century Neoclassical style. Scruton, author of the splendidly argued *Aesthetics of Architecture* – where a spirited attack on Danish modern spoons is juxtaposed with perceptive accounts of detail in Italian and English classical buildings – returns in this somewhat patchwork collection to his principled attack on modern architecture: a bandwagon he would like to divert from its now conventional terminus in full Post-Modernism by rerouting it along the less travelled road that leads to Krier and other reactionaries such as Quinlan Terry (also represented in *The Invisible in Architecture* by an outspoken interview).

The Classical Vernacular offers the width and breadth of Scruton's philosophical arguments along with cameo appearances by allies and enemies – David Watkin in the former camp, Buckminster Fuller and Manfredo Tafuri in the latter. (Throughout, it is interesting to find a systematic argument against the narrowly conceived and truncated or 'orthodox' Marxism, which Scruton wishes to complement fully as much as to displace.) One can have much sympathy for Scruton's complaints about the modern; one can even have sympathy for his sympathy with what he fantasises as the Utopian community of certain moments of the (still essentially English) past – 'communitarian', he warns us sternly, rather than 'collectivist'. One must respect his conception of culture as 'the education of the eye' and of perception generally, without forgetting the way all reformist motions of social change necessarily appeal to the deus ex machina of education and 'consciousness raising' in order to smooth the transition to what must necessarily be a radically different social order from this one (and in particular to remove the violence from that transition, an aim expressed as far back as Schiller, but most forcefully in the recent period – and most ironically, from Scruton's perspective – by Le Corbusier, who said that the newer architecture, by transforming the world, would render revolution unnecessary).

Nonetheless, it is with these exceedingly logical and persuasive arguments as with the various proofs of the immortality of the soul from Plato on down: we admire them and cannot for the moment quite remember why it is we are not at once persuaded. In Scruton's case, it is surely the fact of history, whose omission makes the argumentation so flawless. I have to say that I think (rightly or wrongly) that most people are deeply (and often unconsciously) Hegelian in believing that if things happened in a certain way they somehow had to happen that way. If there was a Modern Movement in the first place, then it cannot have been the mere error or misguided malice of a few noisy souls who carried everything before them. And if there was a reason for it – a concrete historical determination – then historically it will surely not be so easy to argue it back out of being again. In an unguarded moment, Scruton goes so far as to assimilate the Modern Movement in architecture to all the other things Hayek was placed on earth to denounce (the traditional and Communist Lefts would have been amazed to hear of this deeper kinship); but Hayek is very much part of the problem rather than of the solution, and Scruton's allies, denouncing the greed and corruption of a society that makes Neoclassical architecture, along with Neoclassical civility and decorum, impossible, cannot really imagine that a return to aristocratic rule – were that imaginable – would be enough to abolish the ills of the 'materialist society' they indict ('we have to realise,' says Quinlan Terry in his interview, 'that money as an end in itself is obviously destroying everything.')

Turning back to *The Invisible in Architecture*, I am more interested in traditionalism's purely architectural or aesthetic flaw: namely, the way in which its emphasis on the decorum of the eye makes it just as Post-Modern a phenomenon as the architectures it repudiates, and thus consanguineous with the 'image' society. Whether the same can be said of the other tenets of architectural conservatism – building to last and the belief in a fundamentally unchanging human nature – is less clear, although these motifs do make a fitful appearance in other representatives of Archaism. For the most part, however, the Archaists seem just as interested in using the archaic in order to 'make it new' and shock us out of our drab spatial habits, as they are in perpetuating an eternal human nature. In other words, they are Modernists rather than real traditionalists or conservatives: for the other fundamental tenet to which all true traditionalists subscribe is a deep suspicion of the value of novelty or innovation, i.e. of the basic telos of Modernism. Ando is in this sense a quintessential Modernist, not a traditionalist at all. All of which makes this third category of Archaism a little less coherent than the other two.

As for the eight 'vectors' – Durée, Context, Border, Topos, Programme, Space, Identity and Representation – each of these skews the architectural situation in a unique way, and defines or at least directs the architectural response. Thus Ando, Krier and Gehry are all considered under the sign of Durée, unlike though they are. But this is scarcely surprising, since each of them evolves his own response to the dilemmas of temporality in the historic situation of contemporary architecture. Ando fashions a kind of 'archaic' space outside of time; Gehry enthusiastically fashions an architecture for the here and now, the perpetual present of an age for which the future is scarcely an issue; Krier conjures up a mid-time, a durable golden age in the middle distance, in which still recognisable human beings live and dwell graciously in the absence of any historical cataclysm. And so with the other 'vectors'.

Let me end with a stronger statement of the fundamental contradiction from which *The Invisible in Architecture* draws its vitality: a contradiction, so to speak, between openness and closure, or expansion and contraction. The visual and photographic features (of which I seemed to be complaining at the outset), along with aggressive colour coding, and other carefully timed explosions of collage and typographic innovation, gradually open up a space of exhilaration and unparalleled variety. One would have thought, leafing through this book, that we had reached a moment of extraordinary creativity in architecture, far outpacing the decorous monumentalities of the classical and the authoritarian austerities of the modern. Yet the book folds back into the multiple constraints of a historical closure: into the stylistic, economic and ideological limits of contemporary architecture. A wealth of inventiveness dissolves into frivolity or sterility, marking an end for the avant garde fully as baleful as that which shuts the door on any return to tradition. I would not want to see the architects themselves chastened by this grim diagnosis, or perhaps only in stray moments; but it is not so bad for the rest of us to be forced to confront this implacable pessimism in the midst of the feast. □