Mirage.
Photo: Pekka Parviain

LandEscapisme

BETTER WORLD AHEAD

Escapade

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We could be on the eve of the Third World War. Just as in August 1914, an act of terrorism has been committed, a country (first Afghanistan, now Iraq) has been found guilty by association, this country has been given an ultimatum that it cannot possibly accept, thus providing justification for a pre-emptive strike. And just as back then with Serbia, it is far from inconceivable that a bombardment of Baghdad will trigger an Islamic backlash that will set the world on fire.

We could be on the eve of the biggest economic crisis the world has ever seen. Measured by share prices, the value of the global economy has halved during the past twelve months. Pension funds have seen their carefully husbanded money go up in smoke. Banks in the Far East and South America, but also in the West, have billions of dollars worth of bad loans outstanding. Many countries are on the verge of bankruptcy. Corporate profits are stagnating, consumers save rather than spend and the outlook is gloomy. Around the world, a single terrorist attack has the capacity to ruin the local economy.

We could be on the eve of social revolt. Popular discontent is escalating. National strikes are on the agenda again. Elections are being won by parties that exploit social disquiet. People are filled with pent-up anger about poorly functioning public utilities, price rises, waiting lists and ever-increasing spatial congestion.

We could be on the eve of an unparalleled demographic crisis. The post-war generation is approaching retirement age and will soon have to pass the reins to a considerably less numerous younger generation. If this discrepancy is compensated by immigration, the appeal to the younger generation to shoulder the burden of their elders will inevitably lose some of its legitimacy. A bruising generation conflict is just around the corner.

Is it any wonder that escapism is flourishing?
But this is not the escapism that weaves its way through cultural history like a red thread. It is not about a longing for the Arcadia, the Green Pastures, the Utopia beyond this existence. Nor is it about the romantic 'inner immigration', the hyper-personal 'stream of consciousness' or the cocoon of the domestic hearth. It is not even about pushing on to the next Frontier, the yearning for *Terra Incognita*. This Escapism, rather than standing in opposition to reality, has become an important dimension of it. Escapism has been organized on a large scale only to develop into the necessary precondition for acceptance of reality. Escapism *is* reality. It is a sign not of light-heartedness, but of power. In a startling reversal of a centuries-old tradition, today's elite has abandoned its espousal of the enduring and the eternal and now rejoices in the ephemeral and transient. Social disinte-gration is as much a precondition as a consequence of the new techniques of power in which disengagement and the art of escape take pride of place. We find ourselves in a social dynamic in which turning away from the status quo, from the dominant canon or prevailing dogma, from the established order or the law, is starting to look a mite unconvincing given that so little remains of all those time-honoured institutions that rebellion itself has become the established order.

Architecture occupies a central role in this cultural process. Once upon a time, its high points were places of sustained use, unique sites suffused with genius loci and socii. Now its greatest successes are airports, shops, 'franchised' museums, port terminals, virtual libraries, multimedia environments and the like. Sites of transfer, transaction and casual encounters. As such, architecture has become a vast theatre of flight – of people, capital and goods. There are in fact only two functions that have retained something of the old sense of place, but their very prevalence is a telling commentary on our escapist culture: the magnificent 'safe havens' tucked away in some secluded corner of nature (for the escapist *haves*) and the bleak detention centres for refugees and illegal immigrants (for the escapist *have nots*).
Yet it is not only in building practice, but also in thinking about architecture, that escapism proves to be much stronger than the will to address reality. There is infinitely more literature, education, documentation and policy on the architecture of the psychological kick than on the architecture of actual material need; much more on what is no longer acceptable 'nowadays', than what is. Conversely, when it comes to form and technology there is infinitely more debate about what is possible, than about what is not needed. In terms of the old analogy between architecture and medicine: the doctor may not be able to remove the causes of the ailment, but is always ready to prescribe daring nostrums.

Escapism is the deep-seated human need for something larger than life that will give that life meaning and purpose. For one it is international terrorism, for another the computer. For one it is genetic manipulation, for the other everlasting fame. Escapism is not a flight from reality; it creates it.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)
SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD

Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Archis 6
Layout Remaindered book

Text Ole Bouman
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Escapade

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Research

Flying poetry
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