



# The end of imagination?

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Sometimes you find yourself asking questions you have been answering all your life. Thus Peter Eisenman, in a reaction to the terrorist attacks in New York: 'Architecture is about imagination. Suddenly we have witnessed the unimaginable, and imagination has been taken from us. Can we architects ever imagine again?' It's a comment you might have expected from many architects, but not from Eisenman. After all, he has repeatedly designed buildings which, in their very imagining, were about collapse. Furthermore, in his extensive theoretical

output, he has often proclaimed the end of the classical, phallic world view expressed by the World Trade Centre. Eisenman's work is a critique of Western culture, which has now been translated into action by the most drastic means. At any rate, it's clear that this was not at all what he intended. On the contrary, the designer who was never at a loss for words has been rendered speechless.

Answers are, however, in the making. The Canadian Architecture Centre (CCA) is in no doubt that 11 September 2001 marked the begin-

ning of the third millennium. The CCA changed its exhibitions programme around in order to give space to a series of installations about architecture's response to what is being termed a watershed. Six young Montreal-based architectural practices were invited to put forward their theories regarding the new age in the way they know best: by creating space and dividing space. Before they started designing, however, they first talked to the architectural theorists Mark Wigley and Frédéric Migayrou. Wigley acquired fame with his extensive knowledge of

**Top:** Atelier in situ's installation for the *Laboratoires* exhibition at the CCA, Montreal.

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Deconstructivism and its spiritual father, Jacques Derrida. Migayrou is well-known primarily as the organizer of the high-profile Archilab conferences in Orleans, at which the architecture of the network society is examined. To be sure, a highly explosive combination, and it is indeed an interesting question how the local architectural talent of north-east Canada would respond to it in the CCA's long-running 'Laboratories' project, which, in the words of the former director Phyllis Lambert, can also be read as an exercise in 'intense human interaction', which she has defined as the most important revitalizing force in contemporary architecture.

Are the installations by Atelier Big City, Atelier BRAQ, Atelier in situ, Bosses design, BUILD and Pierre Thibault really the expressions of friendship and community that Lambert and the curators had hoped for? It's an idea that is confirmed immediately upon entry, as you make your way across a bright red, sloping stage (by Big City) which gives access to the rest of the exhibition. The second work is also a forum, where you can leave personal thoughts on sheets of drawing paper on 'Ground Zero', a cylinder-shaped platform. But the further you proceed, the clearer it becomes that the architecture is responding first and foremost by turning in upon itself; more insularity than community. The signs become more and more basic, they are exercises in space and material, height and depth, textures, forms... Where the world has radically violated architecture is where architecture seeks radically to validate itself. Or, as Mark Wigley puts it: 'What is put on display is the way architecture works rather than a particular kind of architecture.'

The question is whether this response should be interpreted as defensive. Are we witnessing a reevaluation of autonomy in turbulent times? The fact is that the brutal events of the past year were inspired not by architecture's eternal themes, but by its time- and place-bound representational potency. World Trade Center versus Tora Bora. But also at the local level of everyday repolarization in the multicultural society, where the indigenous population campaigns against minarets in the metropolis, or Muslims unite against Western symbols. Will architecture have the courage to take up a position at the epicentre of this conflict, or will it take refuge in a purely materialistic justification, thereby placing itself outside every political discussion?

Ole Bouman