

OLE BOUMAN

# ARCHIS IS WITHOUT MERCY

... if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.  
Friedrich Nietzsche

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**A**rchitecture is always given a reason. There is a justification, a mission statement or other propaganda accompanying every project. As an architect, you do not count unless you are capable of formulating an underlying motive. Essential is the premiss of some agenda or other secret, a purposeful intervention to alleviate a certain deficiency, chaos or reprehensible situation. You rarely hear of an architect being satisfied with a simple statement that he was merely doing it for the hell of it. This is of course applicable to all kinds of design intended to contribute to the fabric of society. Yet perhaps it is even truer for the very kind of architecture that tries to put an end to that utilitarian way of thinking. As a simple architect in service to the community, you rarely have to issue a justification. The purpose is always implicit. But the modernists, the suprematists, the deconstructivists, the futurists, in short all those who question the inertia and inevitability of utility, never tire of explaining why their actions are necessary. Perhaps, they cautiously argue, construction is called for; but what is needed even more is creative destruction. And so the utilitarians and the artists, the conservatives and the revolutionaries, meet in the middle: in the simple ethic of trying to do something of value. Of value to society, of course.

But suppose society no longer exists. Suppose we're in a world where modernization no longer takes place because of a need for emancipation, but because modernization must happen; a world where war is no longer fought to achieve something, but because it is inevitable; a world in which building is not conducted to house people better and more beautifully, but because one must build things; a world in which the news no longer informs people about the progress of important matters, but exists for its own sake; a world where cutbacks are not meant to free up funds for improvements but just to save money; or conversely where funds are expended because money is there to be spent. It would be a world, in other words, which does not strive towards some goal but is simply chugging along, from nowhere to nowhere. It would be a community without a common good, a society without socialization, a civilization without civility. You could describe such a universe as remorseless, if remorse still meant anything. Or as merciless, if mercy were still a criterion. But that is of course not at issue. The point is that everything simply is the way it is.

There's nothing you can do about it. End of discussion. Suppose, in such a world, you are still an architect; or an artist, a writer or a scientist. When the traditional legitimization of creativity – namely artistic freedom in exchange for enlightenment, inspiration, comprehension, redemption or, in a word, mercy – is no longer applicable, what can we expect to happen? Read the upshot in this issue of *Archis*. ✕

