

## Public relations

Six months ago, I hazarded an opinion in these pages that architecture was going to turn political again. This view was illustrated by a picture of the new development around Canary Wharf, Cesar Pelli's controversial office skyscraper in the London Docklands. The conclusion was that architecture would be inseparably linked in future discussions with the struggle for power.

At the time it was speculation, but it turned out to be true – and how. Several months later, architecture found itself on the front line of global conflicts. Osama Bin Laden chose the World Trade Center as the target for his attack on the West. The leader of the operation was Mohammed Atta, a fanatical student of the history of urban planning from Hamburg, with a specialization in the historic transformations of Aleppo and Cairo. The counter-attack was launched by George W. Bush, who justified his war targets with arguments to do with shelter. Although the victims of his precision bombing were not necessarily themselves terrorists, they had 'harboured' the terrorists to some extent. The operation finally homed in on the fairytale landscape of Tora Bora, a complex of caves which was smoked out using intelligent explosives and, in the deeper recesses, with the aid of sub-orned local warriors. The architect of the WTC, Minoru Yamasaki, meanwhile proved to be the same as that of the ill-famed Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex in St. Louis, whose demolition was designated as the official death-knell of modernism by the world-famous architecture critic Charles Jencks – the same Charles Jencks who, in the last issue of *Archis*, laid the collapse of the twin towers at the door of the guild of architects, whose professional responsibility was above all to build safe buildings. But then it transpires that Mr. Yamasaki is a good acquaintance of the Bin Laden family, a fabulously wealthy dynasty of developers and builders. They have worked with Yamasaki repeatedly since the 1950s on accursed modern projects on the Arabian peninsula, thus surrendering the holy land of the Prophet to the worldly ambitions of the Saudi royal family, who have been content with vague suggestions of the Islamic visual tradition. Examples are the King Fahd Dhahran Air Terminal in Dhahran, which is even depicted on a Saudi bank-note, and the King Fahd Royal Reception Pavilion at Jeddah Airport. And, as though the ironic nerve had not yet been sufficiently gratified, Yamasaki went to town with his use of Islamic design elements in the World Trade Center itself: the dense filigree of the facade, the elegant pointed arches in the base and even the plaza surrounded by the maze of streets of the New York financial district which – according to Yamasaki – recalls the courtyard surrounding the Kaaba at Mecca.

In other words, Osama, the renegade son of the Bin Laden building dynasty, not only attacked the symbol of capitalism but also the symbol of the cultural inflation of Islamic architecture, an inflation to which his own family has been party. It's a devilish imbroglio beyond the stretch of any literature, fantasy or divine conspiracy theory. Who says architecture has lost its significance? One could almost wish it had less significance.

If this cultural intrigue makes one thing clear, it is how closely the significance of architecture is allied to relations: relations between events, relations between places and relations between emotions. There are buildings, structures, monuments, ensembles. But it is the assimilation of the built into our inner landscape and the kind of links that this gives rise to that is crucial. Architecture is in other words the interplay of physical

space, network space and mental space. It is the outcome of cultural affinities. Or the lack of them.

*Archis* has launched many initiatives during the last year aimed at bringing to life not only the representation of the built environment, but also these relations. Sometimes very literally, by inviting you to disclose your own mental space to us by SMS or fax. Sometimes more suggestively, by offering pages through which you can enter into relations with others. It is our intention to carry on promoting this dynamic between the spatial dimensions within which cultural life unfolds, not least by means of the *Archis* web site [www.archis.org](http://www.archis.org). In a time of destruction, it is not enough simply to report; we must create.

Ole Bouman



## Africa

The built environment should be seen as a unique cultural artefact.