

Perverse Architecture

Can architecture be perverse? On the face of it, no. To stand any chance of being built, architecture has to satisfy any number of hard-headed requirements that are in themselves a guarantee that it will be realistic, acceptable, reasonable and restrained. For a start, it must remain upright, it nearly always has to comply with some kind of functional demand, it must recover its investments and not cause undue offence. This is, after all, a discipline bound by the constraints of gravity, profitability and identification. Architecture, unlike art and literature, cannot go underground. How then can something that comes into being in such a rational straightjacket of right-mindedness be perverse? Perhaps only in the sense of being designed in a perverse age.

It is not difficult to find evidence for the existence of such an age. Although it is never easy to break out of one's own time and to pronounce convincingly on its perceived decadence without lapsing into artificial and nostalgic gloom, there are plenty of visible signs to justify a comparison between the present age and other periods of decadence in the past: the Roman Empire in the third century, the French Ancien Régime in the eighteenth, the defenceless late-Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth, the dual Habsburg monarchy at the turn of the twentieth. All these periods were characterized by psychological self-absorption, internal wrangling, a chronic lack of historical awareness, overweening pride and confidence, unquestioned wealth, pollution or depletion of natural resources, erosion of the public domain, pointless regulation and excessive policymaking, cultural incest and so on. They were periods of acute social disintegration and yet they also produced great architecture. Just like now, you might say. All the features of doom and decadence mentioned above, and many more, apply to the present age – including that of architectural brilliance. To confine ourselves to top-notch architecture: the Bilbao Guggenheim was the product of the 'branding' of the museum; the multi-storey Dutch landscape at World Expo 2000 in Hanover shone in the middle of the billion dollar flop of a bankrupt tradition based on national pride; the Millennium Dome, a technical tour de force built with billions of pounds of lottery money, was intended to add lustre to a completely meaningless calendrical jamboree; in Zurich, the architectural ingenuity of OMA is being deployed for the accommodation of an art collection – the Flick – with dubious Third Reich associations; and the 'more ethics' evangelist, Massimiliano Fuksas, can be seen in a Renault commercial, deriving architectural inspiration from a cumulus cloud in his rear-vision mirror. All rather perverse, but architecture flourishes in the meanwhile.

But perhaps a different – a more liberating, more anarchistic and above all more daring – perversity is possible. This is the perversion of good taste itself. For years, the existing canon and received codes have delivered an architecture of neutrality, coolness and geometrical purity. In its heyday, Modernism stood for architecture as cultural offensive, as a manifestation of moral purism and hygiene, as order in the midst of chaos. Modern architecture can in fact be seen as a great therapy against corruption. The anti-Modernist movements that arose in the 20th century seldom attacked this high-minded foundation. Even the criticism

implicit in Postmodernism and Deconstructivism was of a purely formal nature: a different vocabulary of forms, a different symbolism. What remained was the preference for rational floor plans, for spatial transparency, for constructive optimism and above all for thoroughly modern, and therefore 'honest', materials like glass, steel and concrete. Even while Modernist ideology grew weaker and weaker, Modernist materials and Modernist detail continued to bask in glory. Now something different seems to be happening. There is architecture in the making, often in the margins and by young practices, which delights in flouting the rules governing colour, material, texture, structural engineering. The Devil has infiltrated the details. Is this the end of integrity, authenticity, clarity and transparency? Put like this, it seems to be a purely architectural issue and these 'perverse' eruptions can easily be interpreted as the spasms of a completely exhausted profession, as a desperate attempt to be a little bit new in a discipline that has just about seen it all.

Are we dealing here with a hedonistic style, in search of constantly new kicks? Is this the architecture of a generation that is dancing on the volcano? Or are we seeing the emergence of a new anarchism, a new liberating tendency that returns architecture to the creative genius, to pleasure, to experience and to surprise?

It could well be. Just as Modernism was no mere formalism and was ultimately about spiritual edification, so today's architectural perversities can be read as more than formal curiosities. Now, too, there is a therapeutic, a civilizing aspect, a desire to widen the architectural and spatial horizons. Environments are being created which are professionally 'lawless' but which nonetheless produce surroundings with liberating effects. Ambience architecture can no longer be a question of stylistic correctness; it must quite simply work.

The question is this: how is the new vitality to be reconciled with the global degeneration of which it is supposedly the expression? A paradox, here investigated by *Archis*...

Per day I average:

... (number) perverse thoughts
... (number) voyeuristic tendencies
... (number) exhibitionist acts

Counterfoil

Archis

Yellow Folder
Research

**Perverse
Architecture**

Text

Ole Bouman

Image

Jeroen Jongeleen,
Adjust Classic,
2001

De...
C...
I... could
I... so!

