

On the Work of Nigel Coates & Doug Branson

Neuromancing in Cyberia

No introduction needed. With Nigel Coates and Doug Branson we plunge straight into life – or, perhaps better, into hyperreality.

The Imaginary City

Perhaps it doesn't really exist, but most people recognise the idea: the city of light, the city of the electronic paradigm, a thermometer going off the scale, the laboratory of global degeneration, the entrails of society, the dream factory, a place of solitude and multitude (Baudelaire) where self-immersion in the masses produces only a feeling of isolation. The metropolis is creative nihilism, an amoral, indifferent vigour that is potentially an unceasing source of inspiration; it is the preserve of the blasé whose icy gaze is their only defence against the barrage of lacerating images. The city is a collage, a ruin, a system of signs in permanent danger of succumbing to semantic entropy, yet continually fed with new energy by the perpetual flood of youthful arrivals. It is intangible yet of the greatest possible significance for its inhabitants. A real metropolis has eternal youth. This idea originated in the old world but has only been achieved on a modest scale there. For the real city, writ exponentially, we must look to the east – to boom towns like Hong Kong, Singapore and above all Tokyo.

The city is a picture composed of countless allusions. Everyone has his individual experiences, and these are many and diverse. But in the end that multiplicity and diversity make the concept of the city identical to all. The townscape has become a mass medium and has shaped a common psychological framework for all its inhabitants. Rivalry between Mods and Rockers faded into the urban spectacle, which became the same for everyone. Social and economic differences become submerged in the common Difference, The Other. In this dimension the city is a *cyberpunk stage*. It walks a tightrope between vitality and apocalypse. The difference from the past is that these two extremes effortlessly coexist. *Les extrêmes se touchent dans la métropole*.

In the city you breathe freedom, as we have known since the Middle Ages. Since then, too, new Cassandras have regularly materialised to warn us that the same freedom can also corrupt. These two tendencies in appraisal for the city have been present in every vision ever to be applied to it. On the one hand, the city is a refuge, a public ambience, a fount of creativity and a breeding ground of poets and thinkers. On the other hand, the city is a pit of vice and a conspiracy of the ungodly. The outsider, the average inhabitant of Kensington, say, or of St. Cloud or Brooklyn Heights, can always understand this as a neutralising polarity. But for the woman behind the soup stall in Bangkok or for the salaryman in Tokyo, the distinction is not at all clear. They are in the middle of it.

Building for the Night

Nigel Coates and Doug Branson. What are they? Architects? Interior designers? Creators of atmosphere? Or are they merely set designers in the theatre of the idle class? To them, the city is a gushing spring of inspiration to which they are addicted.

But the dark side of the city fascinates them too, the refuse, the abandoned remains, the scum of the earth. The image of the city in their mind is a strange blend of high-tech constructions and ruins from bygone times, whose physical residues remain but whose moral significance is long exhausted. It is the result of beachcombing among the flotsam and jetsam of the past, but without the usual accompanying nostalgia. The players in this world sometimes seem like romantic heroes in dark times, but their existence is alleviated by countless video screens and laser flashes, by the incessant electromagnetic throb in the veins of the universe. Their city is a far cry from the *civitas* and the *urbs*, from the community and the fabric, from Augustine and Livy; their city is Cyberpolis, virtual, imaginary and without roots. Everyone has to become a performer – not to promulgate a message but to enter into a practically erotic relationship with the fragmented world, a game of flirting and ogling in that open air club people call a city. Coates and Branson, as will already be clear from the lyrical phraseology, are not primarily interested in the profession of architecture and the workmanship of an ancient craft. What matters to them is the state of our culture at this moment, with its strivings and its failures, its fatal course, extrapolated into the very near future.

Coates and Branson build for the night. It is the night that the new times have welcomed with open arms. Leave the daylight to fade the already yellowing conventions of yesterday.

From Revolution to CyberProp

Although it may be an injustice to the special character of their work, we would like to attempt here not only to undergo their architecture but to understand it too. Nigel Coates began his career as a student at the Architectural Association in London, under the leadership of Bernard Tschumi. In the experimental atmosphere of the AA, architecture was not so much regarded a specialised craft but as a territory for cultural research and (in the present case) cultural action. This is underlined by the fact that the theoretical foundations were provided by the work of Superstudio, the situationist Guy Debord and the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre's dictum that 'Urbanism will emerge from the Revolution, not the Revolution from Urbanism' meant, in practice, taking a very unconventional approach to architecture: the important thing was not building, which served only the interests of the bourgeoisie, but a critique of this degenerate world embodied in an architectural dimension. In the studies that were carried out, the accent lay on the communication between architecture and the public and on making the *flâneur*, a city dweller free to make his own decisions, visible. Here we can trace the choreographic approach which was to remain characteristic of Coates' and Branson's architecture. It was not a matter of supplying architectural properties, but of creating an appropriate setting for urban behaviour.

We can see this in 1983, for example, when Coates founded NATO (Narrative Architecture Today). After boundless and fruitless neo-Marxist discussions on the economic infrastructure, the cultural superstructure and the role of the intellectual between

In the initial stages I try to visualise the building as a place after it is built. I think of the people in it and the way they will look at it – find the sources in that. I use the sketchbook as a catalyst. I love the irrationality of drawing – just to draw a line and see what happens. It's not quite automatic drawing, but it's starting with something you know, such as the outline of a site. You draw it and very often it develops into something else and it's

that development which you can't do simply by sitting down and analysing something and redrawing it using the usual logical processes of design. I much prefer a process which uses sequential operations to allow the unpredictable element to emerge. It's a conversation between the mind and the paper.

Nigel Coates

The very permanence of architecture can only be understood with the actions that take place in it as part of its structure. Then, and only then, can architecture entertain an intimate contact with the moment of perception – of being in it, of finding that it means something.

Nigel Coates

The simulacrum implies great dimensions, depths, and distances which the observer cannot dominate. It is because he cannot master them that he has an impression of resemblance. The simulacrum includes within itself the differential point of view, and the spectator is made part of the simulacrum, which is transformed and deformed according to his point of view. In short, folded within the simulacrum there is a process of going mad, a process of limitlessness.

Gilles Deleuze



Caffé Bongo, Tokyo, 1986



Frans Smets-Verhas, De Vijf Werelddelen, Antwerpen, 1901

these two, it became clear at least that there was no point in waiting for the revolution to happen. Practice enticed. Utopia, a motif always implicit in Lefebvre's work, evaporated and made way for the Big Chill. But at the same time a feverish spate of activity was directed towards fathoming and manipulating the city's immanent and autonomous powers, which patently cared not one whit for any kind of progressive vision. The disillusionment of lost ideals and the relief that times were going to be less predictable than any little red book might have foreseen combined to form a blend of despondency and zest. The essence of this transformation was a shift of focus – from what life ought to be, to what it is. The NATO periodical revealed plans for this new urbanity. The initial basis was the contemporary life style of a certain type of Londoner, the rootless urbanite. What Lefebvre had already pondered in theory, namely the potentially subversive effect of manipulating a banal mythology, was now to be explored forcefully in the form of architectural design. In design, irrational, ritual behaviour on the part of the individual was not a disruptive element but an inspiring one. Nothing merits preferential treatment – pop music, modern dance and fashion were just as interesting as Art and Architecture. High Modernism was infiltrated by the Low Modernism of mass culture. 'Low Modernism wants to work towards an ethic, but an ethic without blueprints. Its universalism is one which fosters cosmopolitanism, but cosmopolitanism without emancipation.'★

It is the hybrid character of metropolitan life, pre-eminently visible in the nightclub, that fascinates Coates and Branson. Here, in the flush of conviviality, conventions are flouted and the cultural spectacle is at its most vivid. Theatre is too restricted as a metaphor, since the distinction between the performer and the public remains intact. But in any self-respecting nightclub, the spatial barrier between the stage and the auditorium vanishes. The

★ Lash, Scott, and Friedman, Jonathan, *Modernity & Identity*, Oxford 1992, p. 3.

spectacle of the self is given total freedom, the sensuous faculties of the body are on display. Everyone becomes a performer. The clubs that Coates and Branson have designed so far are thus not just so many completed projects; they are, as Rem Koolhaas puts it, retroactive manifestos of an achieved Utopia. The boundaries between body, clothing, movement and architectonic hardware are blurred.

Architecture was looking the other way when this Valhalla became a cultural fact, but now that things have come so far, architecture can still supply heaven on earth with satisfactory cyberprop. Propaganda for the post-agit age, in other words. The Revolution? That was years ago.

Rétro-garde or Post-orgiastic Triste?

The meaning of the city resides not in its buildings but in the fact that it is the place where the modernisation process proceeds, full of conflicting or supporting ambitions. That is why Coates' and Branson's work is concerned neither with Style nor with the making of architecture as such, but with the city as a continually changing decor, so rich and varied that it passes everyone's understanding. That quality that makes the city what it is, is located in the memory and fantasy of its inhabitants and is hence personalised to the individual psyche. In the words of Coates himself, the city is 'a lexicon of all that goes on in it, both physical and abstract'. Just as the nightclub is a condensate of the city's hybrid nature, so is the city a magnified nightclub.

Coates' and Branson's executed work has so far mainly taken the form of interior design, largely in Britain and Japan. Clients for their kind of choreography and architectural props are few and far between. Having seen their urban visions, we long to see their ideas realised on a greater scale, but so far that seems not to have fallen to their lot. To the architects themselves, this restriction of their radius of action does not

The new city must use every conceivable technique to flip meanings and throw the control of events back to the people performing them.

Nigel Coates

It was a cruel city, but it was a lively one, savage city, yet it had such tenderness, a bitter, harsh and violent catacomb of stone and steel and tunnelled rock, slashed savagely with light, and roaring fighting a constant ceaseless warfare of men and of machinery; and yet it was so sweetly and so delicately pulsed, as full of warmth, of passion and love as it was full of hate.

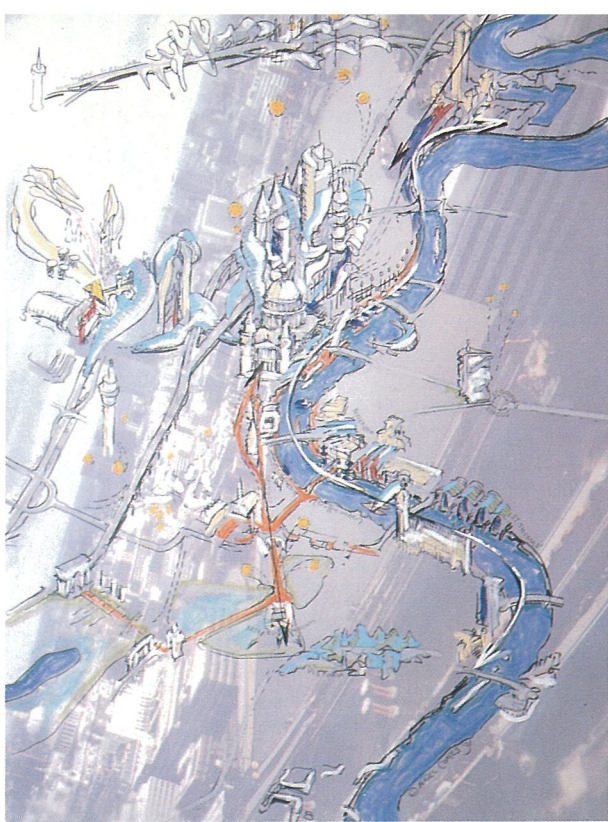
Thomas Wolfe

It's a city that's in tune with the shifting desires that inhabit it - where the material, communicative and social worlds combine to make one infinitely balanced 'cyber' urbanism. It's a city where architecture and the physical landscape put forward cultural and functional challenges strong enough to stimulate collective highs - a city where the private world of love finds its double in an erotic world of shared spaces. It's a place where buildings seem to be alive, to have feeling!

Nigel Coates

The process involved standing in for the users of buildings and learning to use one's body as a source for an enriched handling of the elements of architecture and the real life situations they contain.

Nigel Coates



London 2066, journalistic manifesto for Vogue, British Edition, June 1991



The Shiba Driving Range, Tokyo

110

appear to be too great a problem. Interiors have just as much potential as complete buildings, in their design philosophy, because the important thing to them is the creation of a super-urbane atmosphere. Projects like bars, shops, restaurants and other semi-public spaces make it possible for them to confront the challenge of the metropolis. 'To some people, interior projects are second class to new buildings, but to me they're a real opportunity to bring the physical nature of the city as a whole together with the experience of people that live in it. Just about all the spaces we have done are derived from the "excellence" of the city experience, or what I call Ecstacity.'★

In their current portfolio of work, transience is already present in the nature of the commission. Firstly, this is because fashion has a big say and the laws of marketing dictate a regular facelift; secondly it is because the new interior 'overwrites' the old, in itself suggesting a less than scrupulous attitude towards the design. There is no reason to suppose Coates' and Branson's work will be spared the next little shock of the consumable new. The architects have thus made a virtue out of necessity by linking the conditions under which their architecture is created with the ephemerality of the city on the one hand and the provisional status of their work on the other. That way everyone is satisfied. At first sight, the spaces are one enormous *bric-à-brac* of found objects, inventively deployed industrial materials and elements scattered as though at random. But although these items lack a logical ordering, they are extremely effective in mutual relation. The *bricolage* method runs counter to so-called good taste, but the totality is a perfect grotesque that represents the disorder of the metropolis just as tellingly as the

★ Hatton, Brian, 'Arcadia and Epicomedy', in *Ottogono* 94 (1989), p.132.

classical orders of the past did for feudal and, later, middle-class power.

In the new order of chaos, no single system of representation can be valid. Coates therefore reverts to a mythical kind of thinking that restores desire to its former prominence. What is concerned here is not the deferred satisfaction of needs that we know from the Modern project, but the hedonistic life style, uninhibited enjoyment of the here and now. This Surrealistic ploy (comparable to André Breton's 'reintroduction of desire in the very centre of our existence') is part of the strategy to demolish the barrier between *Lustprinzip* and *Realitätsprinzip*. There is not a message being promulgated with which we are expected to agree, but a narrative which we can allow to sweep us along. Decorative features from the repertoire of good taste have been replaced by an anti-decorum in which public performance is possible.★ The scientifically dissected life-view of the Moderns, with its concomitant functionalism, is now replaced by the 'art of life' (Herbert Marcuse) for which the appropriate architecture is one of sensation. What we should now like to know is the following: is this a new avant-garde or a *rétro-garde* – or must we now beware of a post-orgiastic depression? We are waiting... for Godot. As always.

★ Coates, Nigel, 'Ecstacity', Royal Australian Institute of Architects Conference, 1992.

The Irony of the Arrivé

Coates' and Branson's Industrial Baroque offers a false architecture, an inverse world as seen in the mirrored toilets of a house party, with sudden glimpses into the depths of the soul. It is carnivalesque, a hilarious excrement-slinging match. Everyday banality is deployed in an ironic game (in the romantic sense of Friedrich von Schlegel: *'Ironie is*

To make clear the reality of our world behind the ideological and material curtain and to show how it could be changed, art should break the identification process of the audience with the theatre. Neither feeling nor empathy is needed, but rather distance and reflection. The effect of alienation should accomplish this break and lead people to recognise their true position. Daily life should be abstracted from the sphere of self-evidence.

Berthold Brecht

I believe banality could be salutary. Ushering into banality is one of the major strategies at our disposal. It seduces because feeling is directly and automatically hit. And this is exactly how subversion works, because everybody feels threatened by it.

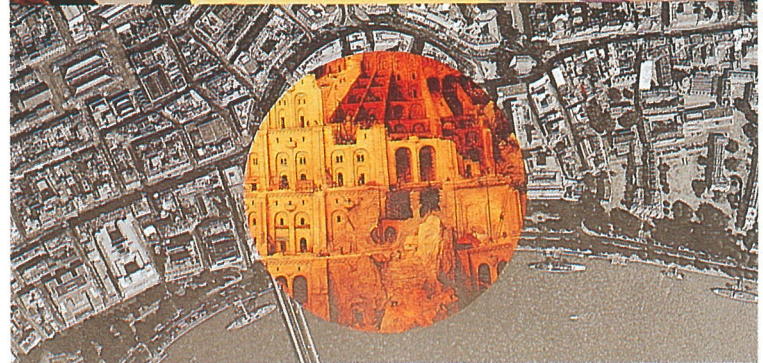
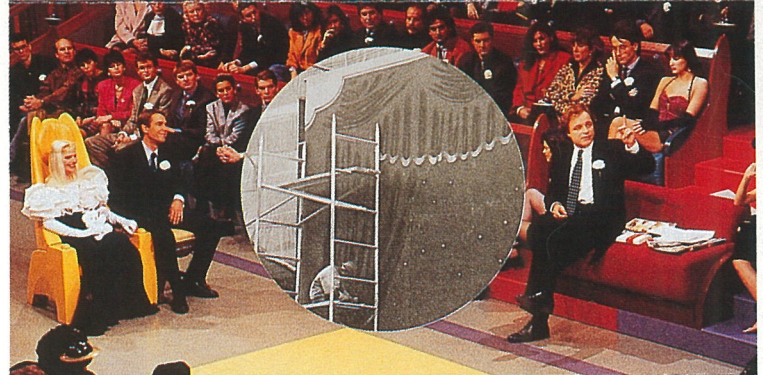
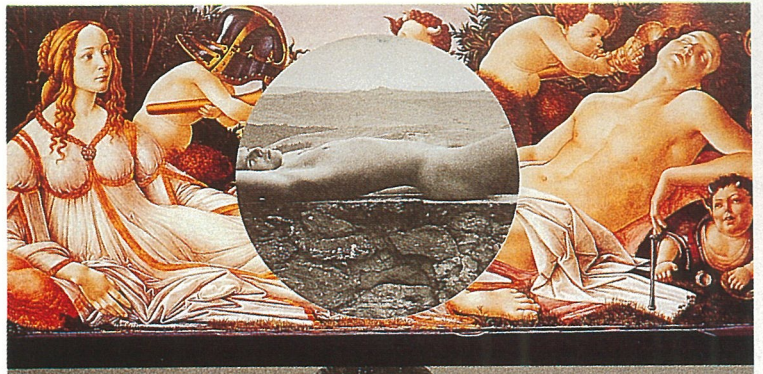
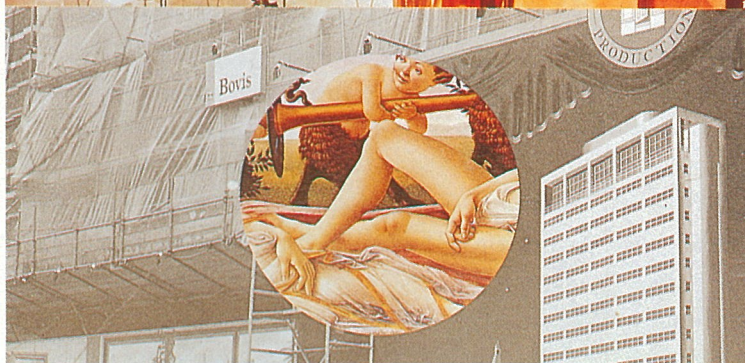
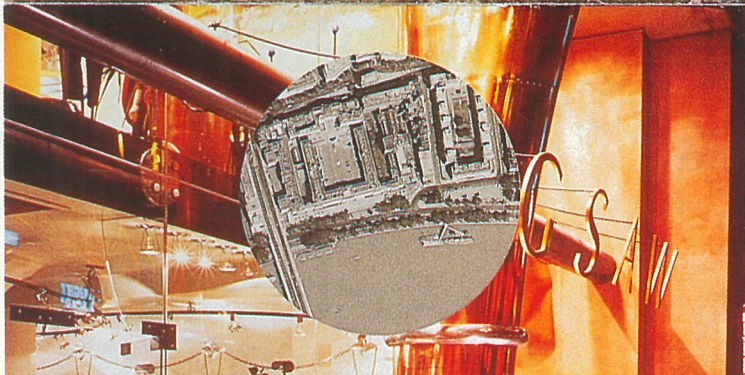
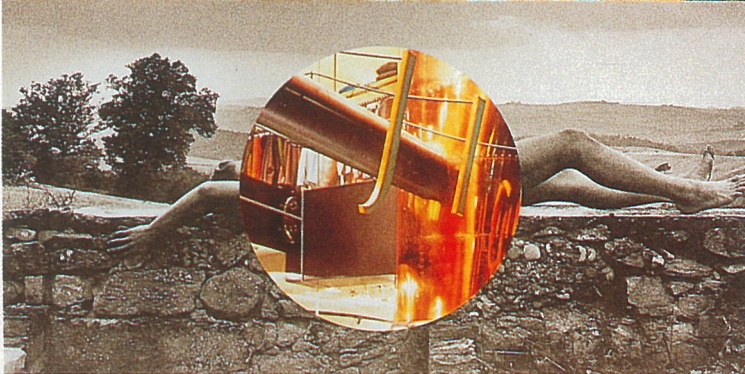
Jeff Koons

It is reality itself today that is hyperrealist. Surrealism's secret already was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only in certain privileged moments that are still nevertheless connected with art and the imaginary. Today it is quotidian reality in its entirety - political, social, historical and economic - that from now on incorporates the simulating dimension of hyperrealism. We live everywhere already in an 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality.

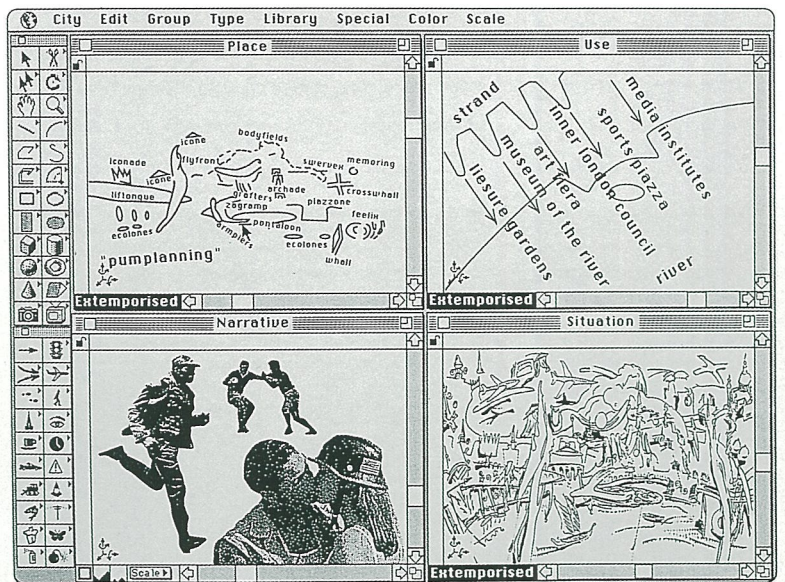
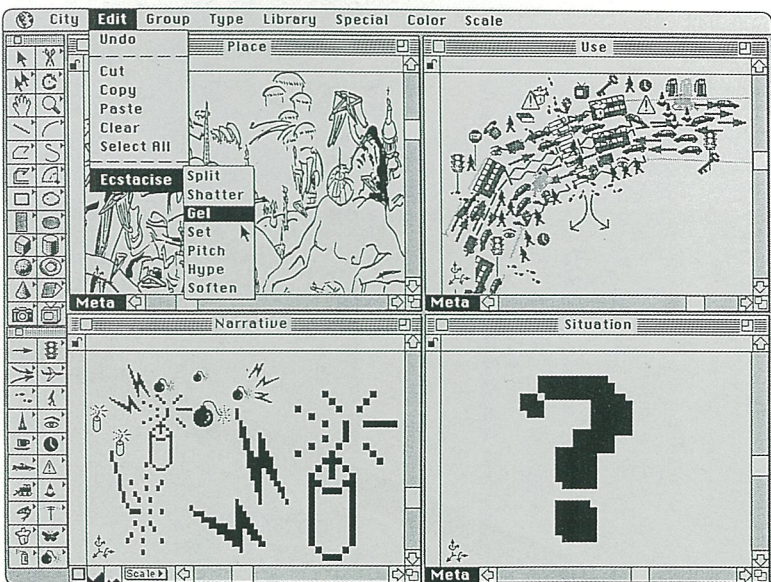
Jean Baudrillard

Ecstacity embraces my challenge of excellence.

Nigel Coates



Pages from Ecstacy, London, 1992



klares Bewusstsein des unendlich vollen Chaos. [‘Irony is a clear awareness of the infinitely rich chaos.’] But besides the clearly recognisable affirmative irony, they also aim for an alienating effect that is meant to make the individual much more sharply aware of his public exposure and hence foster genuine communication. The problem with this is that in the avant-garde tradition alienation has lost much of its vitality as an artistic device. Perhaps the pre-war avant-gardes really did succeed in setting themselves up as opponents of reality, and from that standpoint were able to highlight the asymmetries between ideology and reality, and between intellectual and material productivity, while maintaining, in their isolation, their artistic integrity. But recent history teaches us the impossibility of this sort of critical distance. As Herbert Marcuse observed, the cultural centre becomes ‘a natural part of the shopping centre, the city centre or the centre of government. The result is cultural uniformity, while the domination continues unabated.’ The double stakes of irony and alienation have come to look highly dubious as a way of arriving at any standpoint that rises above the level of the *salon*. When this incongruity between the artistic and public realms remains unconscious, even the most intelligent architecture becomes no more than an ineffectual fascination. The world-despising bohemian in search of *bonheur* turns into a cocky arrivé. The beautiful literary notion that irony should guarantee our freedom seems here to find its Waterloo.

Non-design in the Non-context of Cyberpolis

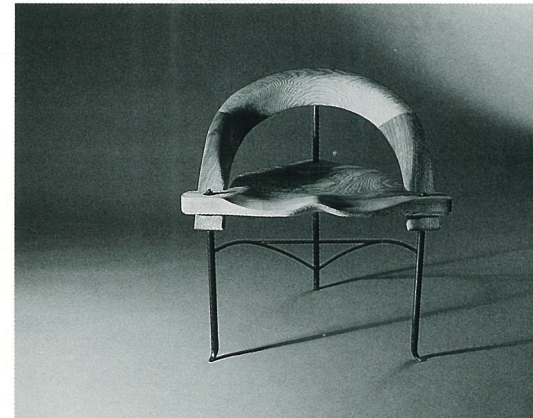
The architecture of Coates and Branson is design in as far as that it supplies a certain pattern of cultural values, in name still anarchistic, with legitimising images. This architecture creates, moreover, an undeniable distance from other cultural domains and practices, and generates a clearly recognisable identity. But it is also non-design in that it evidently undermines that process and tries to stay ahead of an institutionalised version of itself. ★ It aims to be the outcome and the living evidence of a culture, not a fossilised relic. And as long as they can continue pulling it off, against the background of anti-decorum, they can also keep up the ambition of non-design. It’s not the form but the performance that matters. The role-determined action stands or falls by virtue of its context. The context – or rather, in the case of Coates and Branson, the immediate situation – is bounded by the triangle of use/narrative/urban location. Within that zone lies the cultural value of their architecture, their field of action. But this triangle is itself embedded in the hard-to-define field of Cyberpolis, the source of countless impulses. In the metropolis, the notion of space transforms into the notion of time. The city is a self-perpetuating instant, an enduring flash of light but a flash nonetheless. The context is therefore the moment of the present. *Architecture is Now!* At the moment of the present nothing can retain a permanent identity. Nothing still refers to itself but everything melts away in the crucible, the tapestry of culture, the intertext of all imaginable impulses. The city in which this all takes place is barely reminiscent of the economic entity of the machine age. Time and space have long fused under compression to become a slideway for the flexible accumulation of capital. Centre and periphery dissolve into the great sprawl.

★ See Agrest, Diana, ‘Design versus Non-design’, in *Architecture from Without*, Cambridge, Mass. 1991, pp. 30-65.

112



Café Bongo, Tokyo, 1986



Chair for the l'Arca di Noè restaurant, Sapporo, 1988

The context no longer bears a relation to architecture, morphology or even texture. Everything depends on the performance. The action, conceived by the Moderns as a consequence of architecture, has now become a precondition of architecture. Without (night)life, this architecture does not even exist.

Nigel Coates and Doug Branson have no wish to acquiesce to the circumscriptions of a feeble architecture, and they pronounce dauntlessly on the state – sorry, flux – of this world. It is to their credit that they also make inescapable, powerful visual statements about our late-capitalist society. Because their manifestos are retroactive, we are given to understand how *panta rei*, how unexceptionally exceptional this world is, how hyperbanal and super de luxe. Just observe, as you meander tipsily home after a long night at one of Coates' and Branson's establishments, how the panorama of slight disarray that unfolds before you is not all that different from what the architecture had to offer in the hours just gone by: a hotch-potch of consumer vernacular and good taste, a surfeit of *arte povera*, a blend of decadence and asceticism. And the whole affair is half obscured in spaces resembling subterranean labyrinths, not unlike the confusing maze of shadows through which you now head home to your bed. The main drawback, however, is that the world around your bed has become so flexible that criticism will have to make flexibility its second nature if it is to stand a chance of reacting appropriately. And once that second nature has been established, the object of criticism, which was originally so clearly in view, starts disappearing behind the continually approaching horizon. Having noted the existence of Utopia realised in the hyperworld, criticism loses its ethical and aesthetic grounds. In short, the horizon of experience extends beyond the horizon of expectation leaving no scope for criticism at all.

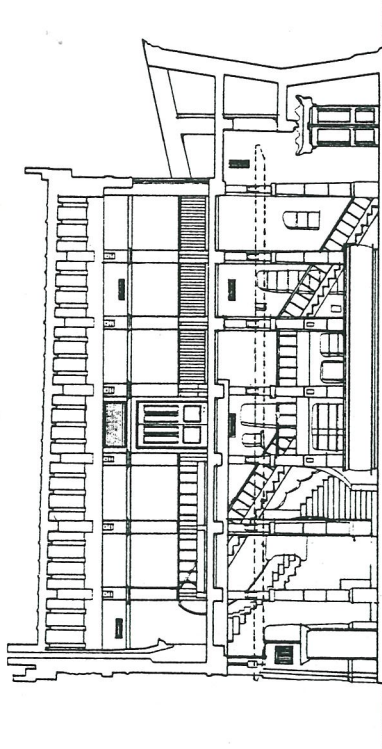
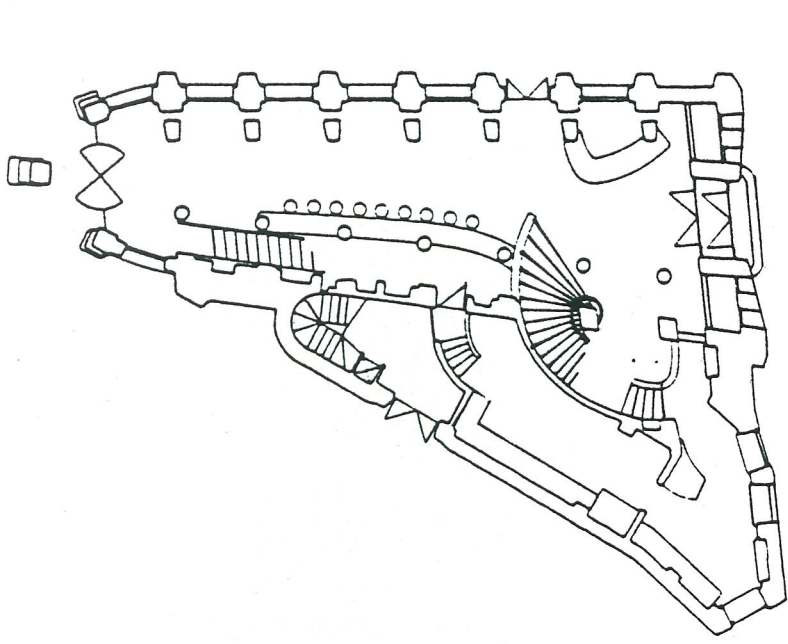
It is exactly this ecstasy which I applaud, if, that is, it can be freely experimented with by all of us. The role of architecture must be central, not because architecture is directly political, nor could it ever be, but because it is the duty of architecture to provide a usable laboratory with some decent equipment. The poverty of architecture has lasted long enough. This play with the erratic dimensions of perception is part of everybody's life

– to the extent that our sense of space has changed fundamentally. Space, in the old architectural definition, relied on objects and how they looked. Space now synthesises form, information and perception. It involves completely new rituals, like VDU's and floppy discs. It relies on hidden information at every level.

Nigel Coates

What planning as a principle ignores is the synthesising instinct of experience – that the proximity of dissimilar images and events can release architecture from its object status. This may be why most of us feel livelier in cities complicated by the imprint of one reality upon one another.

Nigel Coates



The Ark's hull is fashioned from a poured concrete base, treated to look like weathered sandstone. The interior is spatially complex: an elliptical spiral staircase, lit from above by a skylight, collides with a second, linear staircase. The mood is positively baroque, with the feeling of a Piranesi engraving. Interior and exterior are heavily loaded with cosmic iconography and symbolism. The imagery combines illusion and illusion, eroticism, archaeology and mysticism. The aim was to design a building that would transport the imagination as well as the body. It pretends to be a 'pavilion in a park', even though it is surrounded by ten-storey hotels. The Ark fuses an Etruscan temple with a boat-Berg in sprayed concrete around an inner spiral stair. The building's simple representational conceit is that of Noah's Ark run aground on a mountain. However arbitrary it might seem, the narrative idea was primarily a response to the limitations of a narrow triangular site. The client's original suggestion of a temple could never have worked. On one side, the prow emerges from a formless mass of rock housing kitchens and services; on the other, windows lean out over the picturesque river like the stern of a pirate galleon. The upper storey and roof are Etruscan in style inside, plaster finishes with the texture of sandstone are remarkably effective in suggesting a petrified wooden structure. Despite the heavy post and lintel construction,

the effect in the daytime is light and open. Entrances at the prow and stern increase the flow of customers, and solicit a desire to explore the building, turning the visitor from a passive onlooker into an active participant required to make choices. The theatricality of the ground-floor bar is emphasised by the use of non-structural columns to form a sequence of sectional slices resembling the wings of a stage. By directing attention to the windows while breaking up the plane of the wall, the columns help to engage the building with the river outside (upstairs the leaning windows and dipping external canopies perform a similar function).

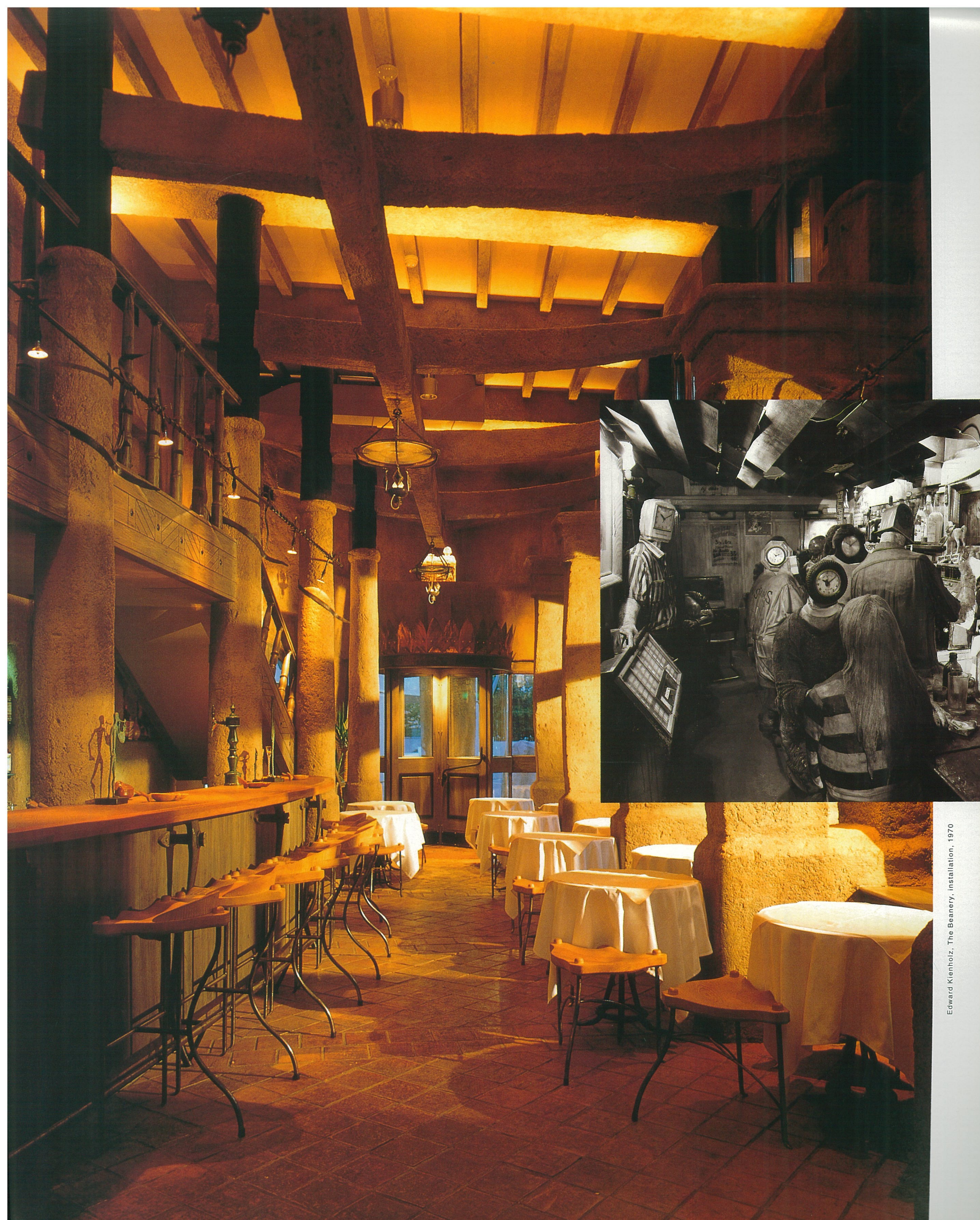
A stairway like a ship's gangway, or a ramp of the original Ark, runs in a straight line from the prow door to the top-floor restaurant, where it collides unexpectedly with a second, more conventionally palatial spiral staircase serving the other entrance; they converge in a Piranesian double-height space. This, the building's single most impressive spatial moment, is the point at which its alternative channels of movement are consummated and resolved. Museum-like, the building is full of Etruscan-inspired objects and art works, from Coates's Noah chairs to wall paintings by Stewart Helm and Adam Lower. *Based on: Brian Hutton in Prospero's Software, Ecstacy Nigel Coates, The Foundation pour l'Architecture, Brussels and Architectural Association, London, 1992, and: Rick Poyner, Nigel Coates, The City in Motion, New York 1988.*

Location Minami 8 jo, Nishi 4 Chome, Chuo-ku, Sapporo, Japan **Assistants** D. Naessens, C. Egret, M. Tonkins **Client** Jasmac Co., Ltd. **Design** 1987 **Completion** 1988

Branson Coates Architecture *L'Arca di Noè Restaurant, Bar and Patisserie*

Henri Cartier-Bresson, A Fire at Hoboken, New Jersey





Edward Kienholz, *The Beanery*, installation, 1970