

For this *Fourth Door* we've conflated the DOC mind/consciousness section, with *Architexts*. On page 132 Finnish theorist, Juhani Pallasmaa is interviewed on the architecture of the Senses.

Here *The Independent's* architectural critic, Jay Merrick, dissects popular and broadsheet media's default interest in architecture, as feedstuff in its omnivorous appetite for celebrity and spectacle, and looks for signs of life beyond this ruinous state of affairs.

Maxxed out on the minimum thing

In the popular realm, architecture in Britain is becoming a culturally reductive retrovirus. Those who imagine that they're responding viscerally, intelligently or creatively to buildings and the places they effect must consider the possibility that their perceptual and critical systems have been denuded by the immuno-suppressant force of the media's interest in architecture.

Triggered by the commercial advantages of producing cheap television and ever-thickening, somatic pillows of newsprint (the density of the medium confirms McLuhan's axiomatic message) most of the media's apparent concern is actually revealed as a profound *dis-interest* in any evidence that might suggest that architecture, and our relationship with it, is not only complex but in a crucially debatable condition.

This complexity is not merely an academic luxury; nor is it confined to the Richter-Hampstead-Shires scale of 'good value' conversational grist among the chattering classes – who, in any case, can no longer be demographed by accent, postcode or a propensity for brioche rather than Welsh rarebit. Architecture, from Hawksmoor to FAT, exists in an age where Googlism has replaced Fordism as the paradigm of infinite growth, consumption and layered information.

Architecture is something that blurs past the window of the 5.40 clattering through East Croydon or Penge or Watford, jumbled with advertising hoardings and Beckettian I'm-on-the-train cellphone monoretinologues. Architecture is beyond even the charming but suddenly antique notion of Robert Venturi's infomannerism. It hovers in the margins of more pressing matters: distant wars, cloned revelations, the latest mistaken cure, and mass metatarsal psychosis. In its more grandiosely hubristic manifestations, architecture seems semiotically indistinguishable from perfectly lit tubes of because-your-worth-it wrinkle cream: architecture as either bizarre curio or aesthetic sugar-lump.

Yet basic architectural truths survive popular commentary. Even the depressing postmodernist architectural expressions of Margaret Thatcher's 'there is no society' declaration to *Womens Own* magazine in 1987,

and today's super-slick *uber teknik* forms can't obscure architecture's original potential as a cipher for crucial human attributes: the opposable thumb, the urge to reproduce, to succour or kill, to create fire, to develop meaningful gestures, marks and languages, and places of shelter and ceremony.

We tend to take buildings for granted, in terms of either their function or – more mysteriously – the dynamics of their presence; we generally feel that we know and trust buildings because they remain the most obvious concentration of our sense of being, self-appraisal, context, and future intent. Architecture may also, of course, signal the erosion of these qualities into hermeneutic gunk, a bricolage of passivity, and psychic and emotional weightlessness. That prospect, shuffling around unseen but as disturbingly present as TS Eliot's Mr Silvero, 'who walks at night in the next room,' provoked the title of my exhibition at the 43 South Molton arts club. It's title: *Why Aren't We Strangers In A Strange Place?* And the subtitle: *Architectural Soma: Passivity: Reactions.*

After three decades of autodidactic interest in architecture, I don't believe that buildings and places can or should, at all times, engage us and render us querulous or overwhelmed, furious or ecstatic. I sense, though, that my interest in architecture and specific places is part of an increasingly disengaged atmosphere of general surfeit. In this condition – momentary humanist anaemia, aphasia induced by the marketing of architecture as pre-digested realities? – I question my relationship with architecture and the nature of its significance, or insignificance. Even the obdurate, intellectually adhesive, post-Walter Benjamin *flaneur* has to be alert: somebody else, somebody with no interest in the sensual and philosophical braids of daily life, is probably one insouciant, disinterested and profitable step ahead.

When confronted with a building or group of buildings and spaces, we should occasionally feel like strangers in a strange place; a place worth considering because it marks a reactive, unknowing moment, an engagement of various presences: topography,

architectural physique, a beating heart, an eye that momentarily notices more than it usually does. If we didn't from time to time feel this numinous connection, where exactly could we say we were? What were we experiencing? What was our relationship with our surroundings based on?

The exhibition therefore mounted a small range of acute reactions to popular perceptions of architecture. The artworks, montages and texts conflicted with one another; they disagreed in terms of the aesthetics, ontology and contextual considerations of architecture. But their shared disagreement was with the status quo: architecture as glossy or faintly shocking product roll-out. In choosing my exhibit material, I was not so much interested in the presence of absence that so concerns Daniel Libeskind, as in the absence of non-iconic architectural presence in the first place. If buildings seem absent, or in some way unreal, so might we.

Architecture is popularly seen as a 'designer' issue – building as singularity, auto-proscribed, critically pre-neuter. Yet most buildings are primarily a demonstration of the results of the thumb, gesture, language, and fire, in the sense of its technical possibilities. Architecture confirms and ramifies human scale, measurement and materials; it is a sanctuary and place of fertility where we demonstrate sexual, emotional, functional, metaphysical, and even shamanic aspiration; it's a prism through which flow spectrums of time and the possibilities of thought, concept and action. Buildings demonstrate these qualities whether they are architecturally notable in the academic or critical sense, or whether they are mediocre.

There is little hint of this content in the popular Press, where the selection of architectural subject-matter is predicated almost entirely on the availability of 'splash' images: genuinely exploratory architecture

that fails to look astonishing gives way to unremarkable architecture that does. On television, *Grand Designs* is more interested in personal tensions than the potentials of architecture; *Demolition*, featuring Kevin McCloud and Janet Street-Porter, is simply Punch and Judy with buildings instead of a stick; even the annual televised presentation of the Royal Institute of British Architects Stirling Prize presents buildings as if they were faintly earnest catwalk models from a place called Architectonia.

The media renders architecture as if it were a procession of C-list celebrity objects, sluiced into a culture whose collective critical immune system is willingly overwhelmed by celebrities – particularly if they're being ridiculed or controversialised. Architecture is being absorbed into a generic existential default-setting: irony of thought, manner and deed – an irony thin on reference to history, the future, personal responsibility, sustained doubt. Not even pleasure figures in this vacuously slackerish mode. The possibilities of belief or redemption – in the secular realm, anyway – might as well be plutonium. 'We turn our backs on nature; we are ashamed of beauty,' wrote Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. 'Our wretched tragedies have a smell of the office clinging to them, and the blood that trickles from them is the colour of printer's ink.'

The increasing popularisation of architecture in Britain threatens to make it insignificant. Architecture, as offered, now has more to do with both the Orwellian and postmodern versions of Big Brother than with any thoughtful invocations or concentrations of rich and variable cultural presence. If we become supplicants to the iconic and its Zen of architectural bling (the 'eye-con' as Charles Jencks put it) then we risk becoming desensitised to less obviously dramatic, but potentially more engaging and affecting buildings and places.

