On Surrealism and Architecture

With Some Stylistic Apologies

to André Breton

In one of the rare pieces in this issue to address the turn, or, rather, clash of architectural events of the latter part of the decade, Jon Goodbun and David Cunningham mark the occasion with a tribute to the 1978 issue of Δ entitled ‘Architecture & Surrealism’, which highlights that whatever the dominant dogma at the time, thankfully there is always more than one way to view a collage and cacophony of thought and material.

First, though, take a position.

Neil Spiller plays with poetics and technology, form and myth, in utopian narrative spaces that can be usefully considered in relation to the surrealist project.
While his house collapses and he stands amazed before the singular packing-cases
Sought after by his bed with the corridor and the staircase
The staircase goes on without end.
— André Breton, Le Facteur Cheval

We, who like nothing more than youthful enthusiasms, are anxious to celebrate in this issue of ∆ the 26th anniversary of ∆ Profile 11, 'Surrealism and Architecture'. We offer homage here to Dalibor Vesely, the mastermind of a publication that might have made such an impression on those who came after. We say 'might', for our celebration is also, of necessity, a kind of mourning of missed opportunity, of a chance meeting that never quite happened, either on the dissection table of the drawing board or in the haunted spaces of built form.

1978: the year also of 'Dada and Surrealism Reviewed' at the Hayward Gallery in London, with Colquhoun and Miller's proliferating half-cylinders providing the material support for Edward Wright's 'collages' of 'original material'. (We will forever regret that we were too young to see them). If the Hayward curators gathered together remnants of La Révolution Surréaliste, Documents and Minotaure, Vesely gathered, for his own 'collage', an equally impressive and speculative roster of the soon-to-be-famous, including Tschumi, Koolhaas and Frampton. Reading familiar texts – 'Architecture and its Double', 'Dalí and Le Corbusier: The Paranoid-Critical Method' – in this early context has all the fascination of a primal scene; the scene of a potential reopening of all those tired, reductive grand narratives of architectural Modernism – and the promise of a concomitant reconfiguration of the relations between architecture, utopianism and the avant-garde – at the birth of 'Postmodernism', as well as now at the moment of that (always already) spurious concept's inevitable waning. What might surrealism have contributed to Tschumi's own later definition of architecture as 'the design of conditions that will dislocate the most traditional and regressive aspects of our society and simultaneously reorganize these elements in the most liberating way'? For is it not still the case that 'contemporary architectural trends have obscured – and continue to obscure – the existence of a body of work that contradicts the accepted dogmas of a period' (p 116)?

In one form or another, the emancipatory dream, and the question of its conditions of possibility, runs throughout ∆ Profile 11 – ‘the dilemma of how to be modern’, beyond the restricted terms of canonical Modernism's colossal abortions, and with regard to

Image taken from the original ∆ paper title page.
potential social productions of radical political identities (p 91).

For, as Stuart Knight notes in his ‘observations’, if the surrealists ‘dismissed expressionism as being redolent of the “bourgeois love of self”’, what they were absolutely not ‘prepared to sacrifice’ was its ‘utopian aspect’, its demand for ‘the abolition of the “new reality”, or its “persecution at least”’ (p 102). Hence, as Chris Fawcett suggests, the means by which the likes of Finsterlin and Taut might be ‘admitted to the surreal hierarchy by default’ (p 126). For us, there is perhaps an entire unwritten history of architectural modernity to be excavated and elaborated from such a remark; one that even the best [Tafuri] have scarcely glimpsed.

For bringing all this into focus, we thus do offer our respect to Dalibor Vesely. Still, we have our misgivings also. Like Benjamin and Bürger, we balk somewhat at the ‘magical-irrationalist’ aspect that Vesely privileges – ‘hermeticism, divination and rituals, myths and folklore’ (p 87) – all that may lead into ‘the humid backroom of spiritualism ... with down-at-heel dowagers, retired majors, and émigré profiteers’.

For at its worst this results in Peter Smith’s witterings about Jung and reactionary speculations that would dissolve the ‘differences between contemporary man and his Cro-magnon forebears’ in the mists of a ‘collective unconscious’ (p 151). While, then, Vesely is no doubt right to indicate surrealism’s ‘romantic precedent’, if we are, nonetheless, to resist any contemporary rapprochement with fatuous New Ageisms, it must be understood that the importance of this precedent lies as much in the lure of revolutionary upheaval as in that of mysticism, and leads as much through Marx or Blanqui as through any mythical search for ‘primordial links with nature’ or ‘the return of culture to its archaic origins’ (p 91)

Basking himself in the glow of surrealism’s ‘profane illumination’, Benjamin writes of that ‘inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.’ It is by this means that, in the ‘now of recognisability’, we too might recognise what remains of ‘tomorrow’ in Vesely’s wonderful endeavour.

How then to proceed at this late, and yet still so early, stage? In one of the most admirable contributions to Profile 11, Chris Fawcett, opposing the ‘chic surrealism of the shop window’, points out that a certain ‘surrealism’ was apparently ‘gaining ground’ in Tokyo in the late 1970s by virtue of the fact that advertising was ‘becoming a major element of the environment’ (p 122). (Fawcett also gives us a delightfully delirious reading of the Smithsons’ Robin Hood Gardens as opening a ‘gangway to the unconscious’.) Of course, it’s a short step from here to what the American poet John Ashbery suggests in a letter to Yippie leader Jerry Rubin, 10 years before the 

dissue (and effectively prefiguring Koolhaas’s formula: ‘Manhattan = Surreality’): ‘President Johnson is a surrealist ... Congress is 95 percent surrealist and ... the entire nation and the world including Vietnam are surrealist places.” Thus, would surrealism, and the faultlines of modernity itself, be reduced to the already given culture of congestion and the ‘political complacency of Brandspace’, to an ultimate affirmation of the ‘irrational’ qualities of the new global fluidity of capital flows. Starting in surrealist revolution – albeit in the dissident refrains of Avida Dollars – Koolhaas’s ‘delirious New York’ becomes merely the celebratory prophecy of a ‘moment’, already emergent in 1978, ‘when the logic of media capitalism penetrates the logic of advanced cultural production itself’.

Karin Jaschke has suggested that the work of Van Eyck comes out of a Surrealist architectural thinking on the mytho-poetic as a spatial opening on to a utopian moment.
So, on the one hand, there is, then, a classic Tafurian reading of the fate of Profile 11 that must be acknowledged here. Such a reading would be one that traced how the very nature of surrealism’s radical possibility – the potential unity of morpho-libidinal and mytho-poetic social spaces – comes inevitably to be closed down, turned into the means of its own failure, as it becomes the latest libidinal tool in capital’s commodification of space (and the means by which, as Breton complained, ‘experience itself’ comes to be ‘assigned limits’). Let us not forget that Frederick Kiesler, perhaps the only genuine architect to pass through the movement, found himself as a shop window dresser, grappling with the problems of display as well as risking what Bürger calls the ‘false sublation’ of art into life. Yet, on the other hand, we might also observe, with Stuart Knight, that ‘the fact that consumer commodities still have a “fetishistic” character indicates not a misappropriation of surrealism, and surrealistic techniques … but attests to the survival of the nineteenth-century dream-world into the twentieth-century’, in a way that itself demands ‘surrealist’ commentary. Knight instances the way in which, for example, the ‘architectural fantasies’ of Archigram ‘display’ their ‘fetishistic origins’ in a manner that is ‘almost entirely conditioned by the nineteenth century’ (p 103).

As such, it is perhaps most imperative now to understand those aspects of surrealism that conceived of themselves as an extension of an essentially Marxist revolutionary thought (relatively underplayed in the Profile 11 issue); a Marxism deluxe that would move beyond the classical/rational 19th-century conceptual models available to Marx himself. Breton suggests a modern materialist critique, developing tools capable of comprehending and intervening in the interrelated transrational (and increasingly transnational) economies of sex, technology and media. Alas, at the time of Profile 11’s publication, even with the sophisticated bodies of Marxist thought then dominant in architectural theory (such as those articulated by Tafuri), the chance to incorporate these practices was still being avoided.

A missed opportunity twice over, then. First, in relation to the received histories of Modernism. Second, in the potential for an adequate critical grasp of architecture’s ongoing relation to capitalist development. Is such ‘failure’ to be always inevitable? Is surrealism’s ‘haunting’ of modernity to be always repressed? In the company of Dalibor Vesely, we – Jon Goodbun and David Cunningham – along with several others, took it upon ourselves last year to organise the chance meeting of surrealism and architecture in a Manchester lecture hall, with a laudable contempt for what might result in terms of research assessment exercises. We now announce the continuation of this bold enterprise.

And we ask this question: For all those supposed ‘ends’ of this-or-that project of ‘modernity’ (as if), are we not still living under the reign of logic, albeit those ‘irrational’ logics of capital itself? And architecture? What of architecture, if it hopes to do more than apply itself only to the solutions of problems of secondary interest? Architecture will be convulsive, or it will not be at all.

Notes
1. Profile 11, Vol 48, No 2-3 (1978). All future references to articles in this issue are given in parentheses in the main body of the text. This essay makes joyful use of a phraseology and tone borrowed, with an entire absence of credit, from a number of texts, including the first surrealist manifesto of 1924 and Aragon & Breton’s ‘The Quinquagenary of Hysteria’ (1928). Extracts from these can be found in Patrick Waldberg (ed) Surrealism, Thames & Hudson (London), 1965.
10. For some useful comments on the surrealist ‘attack’ on Corbusian Modernism as ‘an attack launched simply enough by revealing that which modernism had repressed’, see Anthony Vidler, ‘Fantasy, the uncanny and surrealist theories of architecture’, Papers of Surrealism, No 1 (Winter, 2003): www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/publications/journal1.htm. This is the text of a paper delivered at the conference ‘Fantasy Space: Surrealism and Architecture’, at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester in September 2003, organised by the authors with David Lomas, Gavin Parkinson, Peg Rawes, Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly, Dawn Ades. The phrase ‘Marxism deluxe’ was coined by Karin Jaschke in her paper given at the same event.