

'Architectural fragments as artworks: The project proposal TopDown in Ballymun, Dublin and the 9/11 Memorial in Padua, Italy'

'The problem with the mirror garbage offers is that, when encountered in a garbage can, dump or landfill, it is a broken one: our civilization is reflected in billions of fragments that may reveal little in and of themselves'

William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, 'Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage'.

Perhaps only a newly found balance between the contemplative nostalgia of ruins and the morbid enthusiasm provoked by their sustained state of decay could prevent man-made catastrophes from taking root in our cultural imaginary as natural disasters.

Magali Arriola, 'A Victim and a Viewer: Some Thoughts on Anticipated Ruins'

A fractured mirror of civilisation and a monition not to treat the man-made ruins as natural, are the opening sentences for this talk, perhaps because in the images that they employ, they are outlining the main modes of reception and response available to us when we look at our contemporaneity with an archaeological impulse.

The fear of loss within the largest possible accumulation of unclassified material discards that we might experience in a landfill and the iconic loss of the images of the ruins of the WTC seems to collide as suggested contemporary cultural signifiers.

But, and this is where the monition of Arriola might be valuable, it is perhaps our job to exorcise the images of entropy placed in front of us, demystify their inner reasoning, and separate the man-made from the natural, the historic from the dominant cultural memory, the necessary from the strategic, the forgetful from the amnesiac.

The loss that is at the heart of the archaeological project *-history as a ruin-* is a precisely modernist experience, but one that has to constantly reconsider its meaning to be relevant in a contemporary situation.

If, as Niall Kirkwood has suggested: *'a large part of the twenty-first-century will be preoccupied with un-making the twentieth-century'*, the question that arise is: 'If Modernity is our antiquity, how are we to operate the transition from modern to historical without reenacting neither modernity's iconoclasm, nor earlier forms of contemplative nostalgia?'

The contemporary ruins we have witnessed through post-industrial demise, war, urban regeneration and even terrorism, could then *be approached as tools that allows us to read our present condition in the stratification of cities and in the topography of their landscapes, a legibility device that may help us to avoid discarding an uncompleted future that seems to have brought on its own destruction.*

The trope of 'anticipated ruins' that I am attempting to problematise here, is a term that

bring us back to the 'ruin value' of Albert Speer and his designs for buildings that eventually would look as good as romantic ruins when partly collapsed. In order to attain the results wished for, he deliberately rejected modern techniques of steel frame building, the visible rusting beams being an aesthetically ineffective trigger of nostalgic detachment.

We can also observe how reverse mechanism of anticipation are functioning in the contemporary, for example in the overlaps where images of modernist architecture and their demolition seems to coexist at the same time in our imaginary, such is the ease with which we have seen so many disappear, by disaster or demolition.

Such self-fulfilling prophecies brought about by the identification of modernity with failure are not rare: a classic example being that of Charles Jencks who coincided the ushering of post-modernism with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estates in St. Louis, in 1972.

We might then engage in a fanciful moment of architectural serendipity and remember that Pruitt-Igoe was designed by Minoru Yamasaki, who later became the architect of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre.

But contemporary urbanity can do even more: it can presents us with a skillful real-time montage between images of rubble and demolition and their reflections onto the shiny surfaces of glamorously fractured buildings of contemporary architecture, the semi-collapsed factory and the shiny Libeskind overlapping onto each other. The strategic relevance of such juxtapositions is that of transferring importance from the collapsed history of the ruin to the formally constructed structural implosions of the new architecture, the expressivity of the latter wishing to contain the history of the former.

Going further, we can also note how the substitutive devices for knowledge produced by such architectural icons, create comfortable modes of interpretation for our disasters; perhaps this is why Herbert Muschamp, architectural critic of the New York Times, when attempting to describe what he saw when standing in front of the rubble of the Twin Towers, he noted a '*resemblance between the wreckage at Ground Zero and some Frank Gehry projects*'.

Archaeology focuses on ruin, the abandoned, the decaying, the abject. It exposes genealogies, it is concerned with 'origins,' accentuates links, flushes out processes. It excavates beyond the surface, both metaphorically and literally.

By providing us with both metaphorical and literal tools to understand the contemporary ruin as a *process* rather than a *condition*, archaeology might help us to reject the ruin or the fragment facing us, as the out-of-time/out-of-place evidence capable of extracting the universal from the particular.

For artistic and architectural inquiries, to conceptualise liminal spaces as archives in process means to explore through duration their histories and therefore potentially affect the outcome of the stage of liminality, rather than simply creatively exploit liminality as a favorable condition, whilst ultimately allowing the predetermined outcome of regeneration agencies to run without frictions.

So how can an archaeological impulse be manifested in the artistic explorations of liminal spaces generated by vacated architecture whether 'in situ' or 'in transit'?

For Magali Arriola *'(Re)visiting these secular spaces not only opens up the possibility of re-signifying the sedimentation and stratification of remnants and waste, but also for the recovery of the residual narratives that inhabit them in order to engage their present life and function'*.

The two case studies I present today bring forth contrasting approaches to the use and requalification of fragments in permanent architectural public work and explore different engagements with the residual narratives that such fragments are meant to signify.

Of the two examples one has been built whilst the other still awaits a final authorization from the commissioning body to move forward.

For this occasion I have decided to present the proposal TOPDOWN of 2003 by myself and the architect St. John Handley which to date remains as a feasibility study for the Ballymun Regeneration, Dublin.

The second example, officially unveiled on the 11th September 2005 in Padova, Italy, is the memorial 'Memory and Light' designed by Daniel Libeskind.

1- TOPDOWN: A proposal for Ballymun, Dublin, Ireland, 2003-2005

TOPDOWN is a proposal for a permanent work of public art of architectural scale and sculptural character, in which the process of demolition of an existing 15-storey tower block deemed to disappear as part of the Ballymun regeneration process, is exploited in order to carve out and preserve the inner core of the same building.

The reversed creation of a fragment from a previous whole is posed as a symbolic act of exposure of the internal structures of the building, a partial salvaging of a piece of Ballymun from its complete disappearance and a practical intention to transform the lift shaft of the tower block into a periscopic view of Ballymun surroundings.

The demolitions of symbols of architectural modernism, the architectural equivalent to public executions in front of an assembly of people called to witness the purging of the undesired, are of a destructively ritualistic nature. As we cinematically turn 30 years of history in a 9 seconds commercial, we might hear the voiceover: 'We must act violently in order to demolish the past; only in this way we can make space for the future in the present.'

The attempt with TOPDOWN is to articulate the processes that interpret demolition not as a destructive, but as a constructive process intended as a permanent go-between, which owes much to the 'un-building' approach so dear to Gordon Matta-Clark, but in this case made permanent and for this reason much less structurally precarious.

The munching away of the caterpillars at such a symbol of modernity, eliminates its inner planes all the way into its substance and in the process literally reveals the memory of the structure, stopping only at the bare circumstantial evidence of the lift shaft, the core elevation which often initiates contemporary building processes of many large concrete and steel urban constructions. In this way the surfaces of each of the lobbies bearing witness to moments of rage or love scribbled onto their surfaces, are turned inside-out.

But there is another inverted trajectory envisaged for TOPDOWN.

Height and power have often been linked in a symbolic relationship. However, it is in the housing estates like Ballymun that this relationship crumbles. If, for the businessman 'going to the top' is a career goal, a point of arrival, for some of those inhabiting the high rise

modernist housing, it might become a point of departure for a long journey of escape from social confinement, discrimination, idleness.

We might reflect that to experience the breathtaking views of our cities one must either embrace power or surrender to it.

TOPDOWN proposes to address this paradox and bring the stunning views of the Dublin area at ground level, symbolically eliminating previously held social and architectural convention related to height, power and wealth, and reversing the surveillance devices that from the top of the towers monitored the activities of those on the ground.

The viewer and the viewed are switching seats, as the camera on top of the tower, slowly rotating at 1-revolution p. hour surveys at 360 degrees the surrounding area, and the images captured are back-projected onto a screen at ground level, where the lift door would originally have been.

Inspired by the Camera Obscura of Patrick Geddes in Edinburgh, which was meant as a tool of urban pedagogy and a method of furthering people's participation in the making of their environment, the periscopic views of TOPDOWN are also meant to bridge the distance from the city centre from which Ballymun has been largely cut off throughout its 30 years.

The internal surfaces of the lift shaft will be rendered and painted black, transforming its core into a long focusing channel framing a portion of the sky above Ballymun.

This straight viewing point creates a well of light into the shaft, whilst re-introducing the perception of a previously hidden indoor space that survives the stripping down of the building.

By proposing to resist the iconoclasm typical of demolition, We have attempted to highlight stratification rather than amnesia in the dramatic transitions between previously existing and newly built landscapes

2- 'MEMORY AND LIGHT': THE 9/11 Memorial of Daniel Libeskind in Padua, Italy

On the night of September 12, 2001 the Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island, NYC, after only 6 months from its long awaited closure in March 2001, was reopened and designated a crime scene; trucks began arriving from Ground Zero with steel and crushed debris that was once the World Trade Center.

The resulting operation to recover human remains, personal effects and the objects of everyday life from 1.8 million tons of material was undertaken by the New York Police Department, an FBI evidence recovery team, twenty-five state and federal agencies, and fourteen private contractors.

The enterprise of sifting through the fragments of the WTC recovered from Ground Zero, was of an unparalleled magnitude, an eerie and ominous restaging of the sifting and sorting activities of the archaeologist of the Garbage Project team who brought their methodology to Fresh Kills in 1990 boring holes 60ft deep to recover and study the discarded items deposited in its depth during the 40s and 50s.

Available statistics of the 2001-2002 NYC recovery operation, report that 185.000 tons of steel structures was brought from Ground Zero to Fresh Kills to be subjected to the analysis of the recovery operation.

The vast majority of this material (80%) was immediately sold for scrap to large metal recycling businesses in New Jersey, and from there subsequently sold to other merchants in China and India, capable of paying higher prices per ton than local processors.

The remaining 20%, was composed of 150 fragments salvaged from the efforts of recycling, and largely made up of steel beams from the ground and lower ground floors spared by the high temperatures of the molten steel that, so the official story goes, caused the collapse of the twin towers.

In September 2002, one of these 150 steel beams, appears at the Eighth Edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale as a gift officially bestowed from the US to the Italian People.

The gift of the steel beam, is of course accepted, thereby assuring through the successful transaction that the value ascribed to it by the American authorities is corresponded in the exchange by the recognition of its non-material value by the Italian authorities, such are the conventions of the ritual of gifts as explained by Marcel Mauss.

In that occasion the president of the Veneto Region proclaims that: *'it is most of all our modernity, multiethnicity and our liberalism that distinguishes us from dictatorships'*.

As the Biennale drew to a close, the beam found a temporary location in the Gardens of the Biennale, where it remained until a year later, when on the 11th September 2003 in Padova, without any open design competition or public participation, a press conference announces the commission for the design of a Memorial to 9/11 with the purpose of permanently housing the gifted steel beam recovered from the ruins of WTC.

At the ceremony, we learn that a scientific commission of experts has deliberated the framework of the memorial, its location, its budget, and the appointment of its designer: their choice is the architect Daniel Libeskind, at that point already the masterplan architect for the reconstruction of the World Trade Centre.

Again, Giancarlo Galan, president of the Veneto Region publicly speaks: *'This steel beam rests in our memory not like an object, but as a symbol of universal values, a testimony against the barbarism and the cowardice of terrorism'*.

Exactly two years later, on the 11th September 2005, the 4th anniversary of the collapse of the Twin Towers, all the relevant authorities of state, region and city are in Padua, to officially unveil the memorial 'Memory and Light' into which, diagonally embedded, is housed the steel beam donated 3 years before.

Daniel Libeskind, himself present for the occasion, declares the following whilst describing in his own terms the memorial:

'The light of Freedom shines through the Book of History, an open book in memory of the heroes of the 11th September 2001. The eternal expression of freedom is inscribed in the Statue of Liberty, etched in the view of millions of immigrants as they arrived in America. The steel beam salvaged from the attacks at the World Trade Center is placed within the left page. New York's latitude is connected with the centre of Padova as a vertical cut, onto which the book is hinged: the book shines and so is the lower wall below and this creates an intimate place for meditation.'

Undoubtedly, we can recognise inherent difficulties in memorialising any event and those

of 9/11 above all, but there are in my opinion, at least on a formal level, some visible contradictions between on one side Libeskind trademark stylistic approach, and the infusion of non-material values into the fragment of the South Tower of the collapsed WTC as a symbol of a 'universal values'.

Through such socio-cultural proposition and their acceptance, the steel beam becomes ideologically imbued and recasted as a sacred object, a self-standing signifier, a *relic*.

Relics are an example of objects rich in associations that continue to affirm a world beyond the constraints of place or time. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that objects that continue to affirm a world beyond place or time are called relics.

Relics acquire their value as a result of their history; they are symbols of their history. Therefore a relic acts as a catalyst, touching off an expanding chain of historical associations.

The tragic paradox of the cult of relics and icons is that their material substance was not in itself important. Relics were honored for their non-material values, radiating as they did the grace of God, by means of which miracles could be worked.

And indeed, Christian believers in the power of holy relics come to Padova from all over the World, to enter the space within the space of the Cappella del Tesoro, housed within the Basilica di Sant Antonio, where the emphatic architectural devices of anticipation induce the effect of progressively remove the visitor as pilgrim from earthly matters and finally delivers him in front of the holy remains of the Saint, its tongue and larynx.

My question then is: 'Are we witnessing in 'Memory and Light' an attempt to restage a contemporary version of the cult of the holy relic?'

According to Naomi Stead, Daniel Libeskind's work has been capable of rendering 'palatable' the 'unsavoury' histories at the core of the trauma of the twentieth century.

But, In 'Memory and Light' in particular, the device of embedding the steel beam activated as a relic seems to me highly suspicious; Libeskind's formal arrangement constitute a problematic presentation of a far too recent and still developing cultural memory as embedded in the monument itself.

Its identification as a container of the holy 'steel beam' appears to comfortably bypass still contested historical evidences and substitute them for a 'feeling', a 'sensation' of knowledge as phenomenological experience, a pathos which places Libeskind close to Heideggerian ideas of being, whilst endorsing the uncomplicated, 'universal' non-material values imposed onto the fragments by authoritatively dominant discourses.

For all these reason, I am tempted to perceive the pathos of Libeskind's 'Memory and Light' as fraudulent; the processes of sterilisation of history which 'Memory and Light' exudes, a history so painfully still unfolding as we speak, are reified metaphors only useful to those in need of quickly purging the controversial out of the demagogic.

I would then consider appropriate to conclude this talk with another quote from Magali Arriola, who says: '*maybe only through the reactivation of the memory of a circumstantial past can the official chronicles of History be opposed, and, thus, new possibilities for the future imagined*'.

Alberto Duman, February 2007