

The limits of architecture

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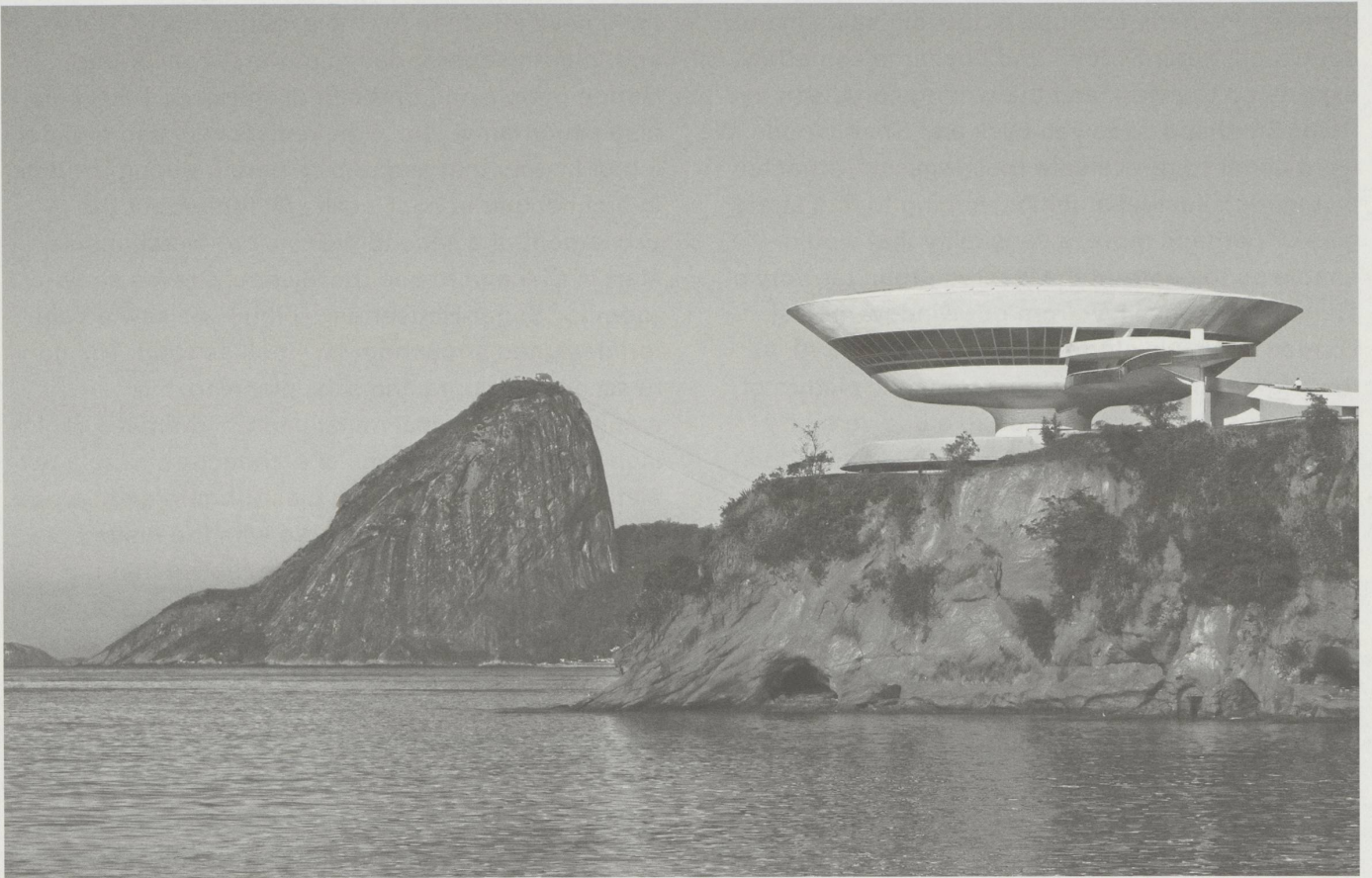
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THE LIMITS OF ARCHITECTURE

124

Adam Caruso



A few years ago I saw a documentary about the life and career of one of the ancient masters. It opens with the nonagenarian gripping a joy stick on the bridge of what appears to be a spacecraft closely resembling one of his recent, spectacular museum designs. Skilfully, if a bit stiffly, the architect-captain lands his craft on its spectacular site, a promontory jutting into the ocean. The tropical waves provide a seamless segue to the architect's beachside office where the interview can begin with a parade of bikini clad woman passing just outside the panoramic windows. A rich seventy-year career is recounted, including the bold assertion by a famous revolutionary leader that the subject is an even greater artist than Michelangelo, because unlike the Florentine (whose politics remain obscure), he is a fervent and lifelong communist. The film ends, bathing beauties still in view, with the tearful and heartfelt confession that his life's work has been for the poor people. Unable to find this film on YouTube, I cannot be sure that it exists. Maybe it was a dream, an allegory for my antipathy towards modernism, triggered by the unsavoury parade of bourgeois male architects professing their social conscience. I have always been surprised by the stubborn resist-

ance which the profession shows to anyone from a less than middle class background, and take this as evidence that other professions like law and medicine are more effective as instruments for social change. The profession's resistance to women is apparently just as strong, although I hope this is changing for the sake of my students.

I was educated in the postmodern times of the early 1980s, under the influence of Christopher Alexander and Jane Jacobs, Robert Venturi and Aldo Rossi, and my architectural formation made me all too aware of the damage, to the city and to people's existential wellbeing, that had been wrought in the name of architecture as an agent of social change. The shortcomings of conventional modernism were well rehearsed, with top-down technocrats convincing, or bribing, politicians to believe that heliothermism and industrialised construction techniques were relevant responses to the socio-economic trauma of capitalism. Although the second generation of modernists, that great generation educated by Gropius at Harvard and Mies at IIT, were ascendant during my time at school, I was not so aware of Team 10 and the critique of modernism that had emerged from within

its heart. Perhaps because of this omission in our education, Peter St John and I became something of experts on the work and the writings of Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo van Eyck and Shad Woods. We were eager to re-evaluate their legacies, attracted by their intellectual ambition, hoping to find strategies or perhaps more, a sensibility that would enable us to confront the wasted urban territory of Thatcherism, the view from our window in East London when we started our practice in 1990. As that view has changed from a romantic picture of post-industrial fragmentation to a bad version of Dubai, the attraction of the Smithsons has faded. We are now in need of stronger and more effective instruments.

For all the millions of words, argued and written during the course of thirteen Team 10 meetings, for all of their right-on interest in anthropology and sociology, the Municipal Orphanage in Amsterdam, Robin Hood Gardens in East London and Toulouse Le Mirail in France do not live up to the fiery rhetoric behind them. Although I do not for a moment condone the emasculation and demolition of these heroically tragic projects, a violence perpetrated by the omnipotent forces of capitalism and privatisation, I cannot defend these projects as good examples of social architecture. Van Eyck's study of non-western cultures and habitats in the late 1950s, read today, betrays an unsettling naiveté that is heavily coloured by a colonial perception of culture. The disjunction between narrative intention and reality is all too present in the material austerity of his orphanage. The Smithson's use of Nigel Henderson's photographs of London's East End is similarly misguided. Henderson's work is already in danger of aesthetising the image of the urban poor who were his subjects, and the Smithson's appropriation of childhood play and the cut and thrust of the street verges on social insensitivity when transposed to the empty gardens and 'streets in the sky' of Golden Lane and Robin Hood Gardens. Structuralist-inspired non-hierarchies and daring cranked geometries do not offer an antidote to the previous generation's inadequate, scientific solutions to the predicament of housing. While art brut formalisms might work in the hands of Dubuffet and Paolozzi, the casual hipness that characterised the dress sense and bohemian lifestyle of the Team 10 participants was not enough to sustain the post-war social housing resident. These were the wrong buildings designed for the wrong reasons.

I still have affection for the experiments of Team 10 and their misappropriation of the rituals of the Dogon people and of the English village Fête. I am also sentimental about the rediscovery and plundering of history that seemed so daring during my time in architecture school. I can still remember the excitement of a second year visit to Merchandise Mart in Chicago to see the Michael Graves showroom for Sunar Hauserman (I think we saw a Venturi designed showroom for Knoll as well). The darkness, deep colours and axial planning, the architect's allegorical mural and the dramatic explosion of the formal means of architecture were a revelation, and all achieved in plasterboard and carpet. As I became better acquainted with the history of European architecture I came to realise that the originals were much bolder and more full blooded, but still, in comparison to IM Pei and SOM, this was strong stuff. This was a step on from Team 10 towards enriching the discipline, a step in moving architecture away from the false sciences of modernism, productivism, metabolism and brutalism, and reconnecting it to a wider cultural discourse. Where Team 10 were serious and overly abstract in their endeavours, the postmodern classicists were too glib in their contention that a revival of historical forms and an explosion of colour would magically make everything alright. There was an idea though, and reading Jane Jacobs and Venturi-Scott Brown suggests that this new sensibility was rooted in an idealistic empiricism. Jane Jacobs might have been overly earnest in her appreciation of neighbourhood shops and the everyday pleasures of the street, but her observations were based on a pragmatism that often underlines the best architecture. Venturi might have exaggerated his enthusiasm for the 'honky-tonk' stylings of Main Street, but he did insist on reality being the place where architects ought to be. It is astonishing how quickly the demands of late-capitalism overturned this brief revival of realism, pragmatism and reality being qualities that are notably absent in Doha and Schenzhen, Masdar and Astana, places whose architecture inexplicably exerts an ever greater influence on what gets built in London, Paris, Milan and Berlin.

A friend recounted how confusing it was to be an architect in India. Highly educated, trained in London and well travelled, he nonetheless has deep roots in the country and an ethical desire to engage with his culture. As satisfying as it could be to design houses for well-intentioned rich clients, the utter

lack of any discourse about architecture and the brutality with which the globalised economy was staking its claim on India, had taken all the pleasure out of private house commissions. Historic cities like Delhi persist in their heterogeneous and polycentric structures where rich and poor people, pre and post-colonial architectures, continue to co-exist in more or less proximity. India's boom, however, is being played out beyond the perimeter of the old cities, forming rings of gated communities with names like 'The Palm Springs' and 'The Belaire', where the most exclusive developments are designed by exotic architects from Singapore. Where high-end condominiums are built and sold without any public infrastructure. Sewage, water and electricity are extras, provided separately and not very reliably by private companies at considerable cost, added value in the contemporary residential marketplace. Gurgaon is the most successful of these new agglomerations, a former village just beyond the limits of New Dehli that by 2011 had 16 million inhabitants, and has been economically super charged by ill-begotten zoning changes and a favourable tax regime. Despite the considerable attractions of these new settlements – Gurgaon has eighty shopping malls – the lack of reliable services has resulted in some residents returning to the historic city because, with more efficient public utilities, the standard of living is actually higher there. What colonial India provided as a matter of course and as a symbol of civic society has become an optional extra for the Indian aspirant classes. My friend has come to the conclusion that the best he can do is to look very carefully at what is happening and not design any buildings. He has discovered that architecture is very limited.

Adam Caruso, born 1962

studied architecture at McGill University in Montreal. In 1990 he established his own practice with Peter St John. He taught at the University of North London from 1990–2000 and was Professor of Architecture at the University of Bath from 2002–2005. He has been Visiting Professor at the USI in Mendrisio, at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, at the ETH Zurich and at the London School of Economics. In 2011 Adam Caruso was appointed Professor of Architecture and Construction at the ETH Zurich.