

Why the Unbuilt Visions of Architect Lebbeus Woods Matter

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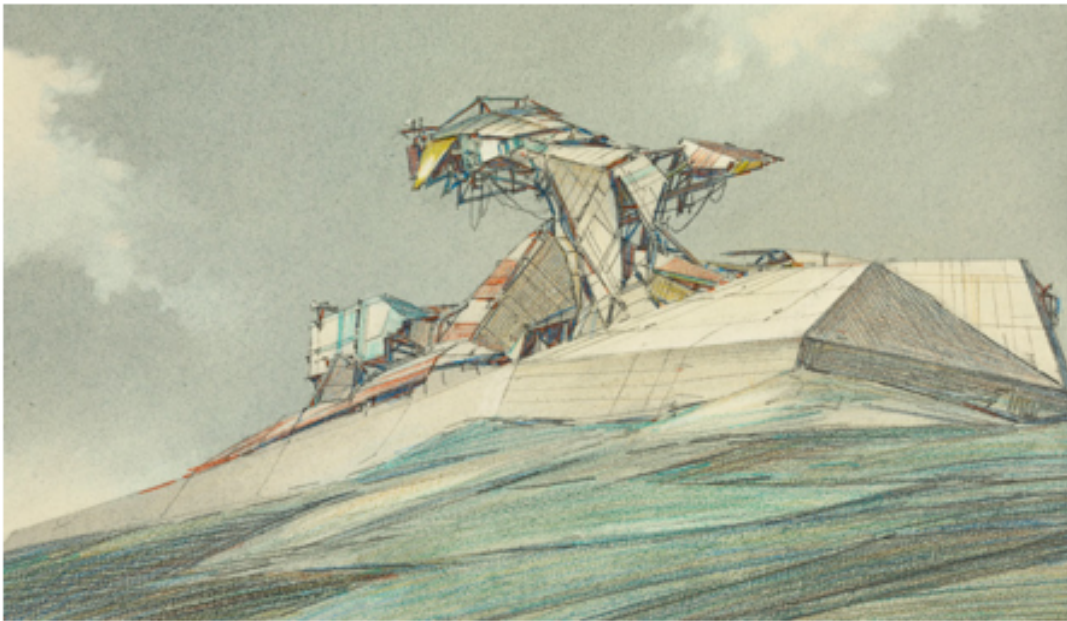
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Lebbeus Woods, "Geomechanical Towers," colored pencil on stock paper

by Kelly Chan

Published: November 9, 2012



On October 30th, 2012, architect **Lebbeus Woods** passed away in his New York City apartment at the age of 72. Amid the haze of a disastrous hurricane, news of his death crept out somewhat discreetly over Twitter that morning. Those who recognized his name — the architects, critics, students, and others stirred by his creative vision — were saddened, but possibly more stunned by the fact that such a preeminent voice was silenced so suddenly. In the outpouring of praise following his death, Woods was portrayed as an architect's architect. Those who knew him personally, to any extent, penned poignant testimonies to his ingenuity and character. He was seen as an almost sanctified figure, an uncorrupted presence in a discipline

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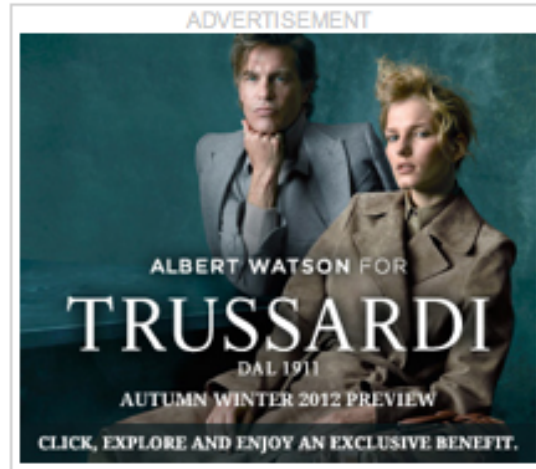
that struggled to maintain a schizophrenic identity as lofty art form
and viable commercial enterprise. What gave Woods this enormous
cachet as a singular figure?

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With only one permanent construction to his name, a felicitous art-architecture hybrid called "Light Pavilion" completed just this year in Chengdu, China, Woods is best known for his immense output of architectural drawings. His visions of violently ruptured buildings and landscapes, stitched together with profane steel interventions that flout the laws of physics, are considered some of the most radical works of experimental architecture in the 1980s and 90s. Famed practitioners such as **Steven Holl** and **Zaha Hadid** and countless former students of Woods (who taught at **The Cooper Union** in New York and the **European Graduate School** in Saas-Fee, Switzerland) have expressed their admiration for and indebtedness to these two-dimensional schemes.

Yet Woods's work goes far beyond its influence on his more actively building contemporaries and disciples. His thin portfolio has unduly sidelined him from popular discourse, sequestering him from the more audible dialogues concerning contemporary architecture. To consider Woods a mere inspiration to others, a teacher and an enabler, is both deferential and reductive. Given the peculiar immateriality of his oeuvre, it seems important to evaluate how those who did not know him personally, those who did not directly benefit from his guidance, can reflect on his legacy. Why was Lebbeus Woods one of the most respected architects of his time?



My only real interaction with Woods is documented in a brief e-mail exchange that occurred this past summer. I had sought the architect out for an interview, unaware of his declining health, and he was kind enough to thank me for my interest and request that I ask him again later in the year (which I did days before his death). My first encounter with his work was barely three years ago: I had seen one of his drawings projected onto the wall of a Tribeca loft, one of several in a slideshow for a benefit auction. That evening, I took passive delight in Woods's extraordinary draftsmanship, dwelling little on the content of the ghostly image. But I have since developed a new understanding of his impossible fictions. As someone fairly distanced from the scene he inhabited, someone who simply experiences architecture rather than ruminating on how to create it, I find Woods's drawings empowering in ways that the greatest realized constructions can be. That the architect rarely built in fact strengthens the force of his ideas.

Shortly after Woods's passing, architecture critic **Douglas Murphy** wrote a brief panegyric contextualizing the architect in recent history. "Open a book on the experimental architecture of that period [around the end of the 1980s] and Woods' heartfelt and haunting drawings ... share space with early works from the likes of **Daniel Libeskind** and Zaha Hadid." Murphy concedes a fairly obvious aesthetic comparison. Were one to imagine Woods's drawn creations or scaled models translated into built reality, they might bear a striking resemblance to the gestic designs that have propelled Libeskind and Hadid to the heights of international stardom.

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But Murphy also sets Woods apart, rightly setting the stage to distinguish him from “that generation who eventually made the career transition from avant-garde upstarts to global superstars.” Wary of this inexorable shift starting in the 80s, Woods chose to acknowledge how architecture and its capacity for meaningful intervention had been drastically compromised. Bound by its tremendous demand for time and resources, the medium was coerced into forsaking its role in shaping human experience in order to address its participation in the rampant production of capital. Woods’s almost complete abstinence from building was, in a sense, a reflection of that prevailing trend and the architect’s personal resistance.

Woods also conveyed his jaundiced sentiments in remarkably heartfelt blog posts. Reflecting on Zaha Hadid’s **Olympic Aquatic Center** in London, he wrote in February: “I feel abandoned and bereft because one [of] the most gifted architects of my time has been reduced to wrapping such conventional programs of use in merely expressionistic forms, without letting a single ray of her genius illuminate the human condition.” Woods’s reproach exudes the disappointment of a hurt friend: “Did she consult with me about the way the Center’s form should somehow express the ‘fluid geometries of water in motion?’ No. If she had, I would have counseled her to forget this idea, because it is too easy and obvious. Even if it could be achieved in architectural forms (which it isn’t here, because water’s fluidity is formless and boundless) it would be much more compelling ... to be confronted with actualities of their relationship.”

Woods’s critical analysis of his contemporaries brings us back to his theoretical divergence from them. One can make superficial comparisons between his drawings and the contemporary renderings of Hadid, Libeskind, and other designers who espouse computer-generated expressionism. But what should be noted is that Woods’s visions eschew precise translations into built form. His structures lope and hover over cityscapes, burrow into existing buildings, cling precariously onto their facades, and suggest structural complexities beyond comprehension. Furthermore, given countless sheets of blank paper, *carte blanche* after *carte blanche*, Woods consistently chose to depict fragmented dystopias rather than propose utopian solutions. His drawings do not so much allude to external plans and cross-sections as they do unhinge the deceptive semblance of stability in the world. His lurid creations suggest that ruptures, schisms, and incongruities in human history can inform new ways to build.

Woods was certainly an anomaly of his time. One could say he draws closer comparison with 18th-century Italian architect **Giovanni Battista Piranesi** than with any of his contemporaries. Though centuries apart, both men were similarly viewed as visionary architects, excellent draftsmen who drew extensively, each executing but one permanent built work. The uncanny parallelism of their careers is frequently acknowledged, but with little elaboration as to the significance of their similarities.


Like Piranesi before him, Woods realized that architecture’s most progressive ideas are often stifled by the limits of its materiality. Piranesi’s fragmented etchings of ancient Rome challenged the dogmas embedded in Classicism; Woods’s dystopian visions revealed architecture’s obsequious response to commercialism, its willingness to erect meretricious façades in order to perpetuate a deeply troubled

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status quo. Like Piranesi, rather than address these deep-seated issues through one exacting construction at a time, Woods worked with a different material: not stone, nor steel, nor space, but individual perception. Woods's crepuscular landscapes, like Piranesi's Roman figments, empower those with the least agency in determining the shape of their world. They challenge existing conventions without enforcing new ones. They inspire private insurrections and personal liberations. They rouse new possibilities. At the same level as some of history's greatest buildings, Woods's drawings dare us to determine the terms of our own reality.

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