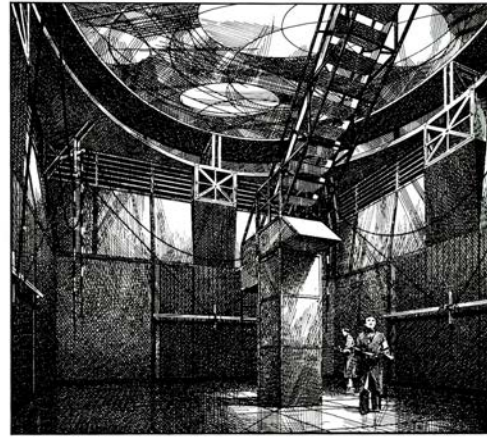


Epiclyarium, Interior, Upper Chamber



Epiclyarium, Interior, Lower Chamber

EN MODERNE ARKITEKT I ATLANTIS

En introduktion til Lebbeus Woods

Af Carsten Thau

The drawings of Lebbeus Woods, with their fragments of writing, seem like extant papers from an indefinite past transmitted to the future. A promise of reappearance after a catastrophe. An Atlantis of »yet not« and yet already. Is it a scenery which is to be populated, or is it deserted after a disaster of vast dimensions? Something enigmatic is concentrated in these pictures, something ambivalent, which appears and is made the object of registration by solitary travelers, and which, in spite of traces of use and the ravages of time, does not belong to any known civilization. The drawings of the series »Centricity« arouse a feeling of alienation through precision, through a dry objective realism.

To the quick glance, which appears to be the lot of all pictures these days, they fall into a genre which invites trivialization, and which is often trivialized: science

fiction architecture, interplanetary meta-structures or neo-Futurism with a certain fashionable aestheticism of decay added to it.

The Italian futurist Sant Elias' sketches for *la città nuova* combined with features from oil-rigs, elements dismantled from yesterday's harbour installations and engineering constructions. A romantic-commercial landscape which prevails in all fields of the mass culture, from cartoons and video-clips to the settings of fashion photographs. Meagre references to our modern industrial civilization transformed into a theatre of destruction. What remains exciting is the power of insight, the mimetic use of the industrial culture as a substantial form found in the few powerful visions of this genre. This applies to the drawings of Lebbeus Woods. They preserve a special immunity against the *high-tech* stylish as well as the fashionable melting-together of the nostalgia for the locations of the *film noir*, and the constructions of earlier pe-

riods of industrialization as landscapes of ruins.

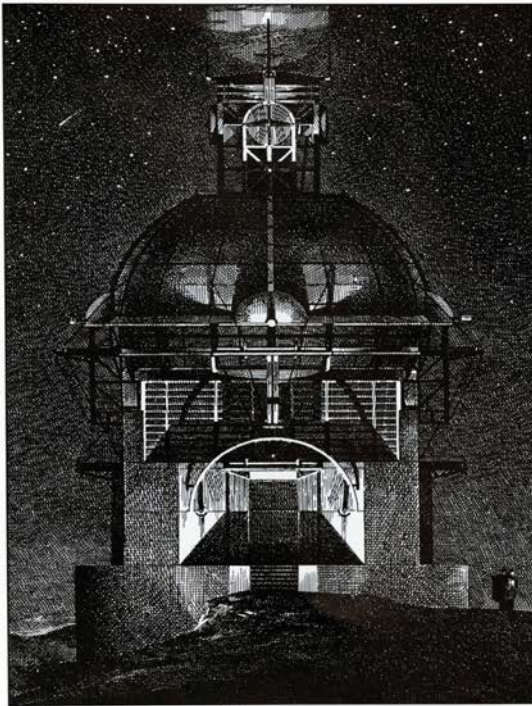
Areas which used to possess a considerable power as »pockets of time« but which are usually trivialized and reduced to pointless industrial looks and mere decorations now.

»Every age dreams about the age to come«, a wise Frenchman said. What sort of dreams are found in Woods' pictures? Lebbeus Woods belongs to the group of people who, falling in line with the apocalyptic visions of earlier times, imagine that a new prime will be possible after the modern development »in which the machine has thrown off its pilot and is racing blindly into space« (Horkheimer), continuously destroying the basis of our very existence. A metaphysical holistic world view based on this century's scientific insights and a renewed humanism which sees man as interconnected with universal cosmic forces. A point of view which is exactly opposed to the *deconstructivism* in archi-

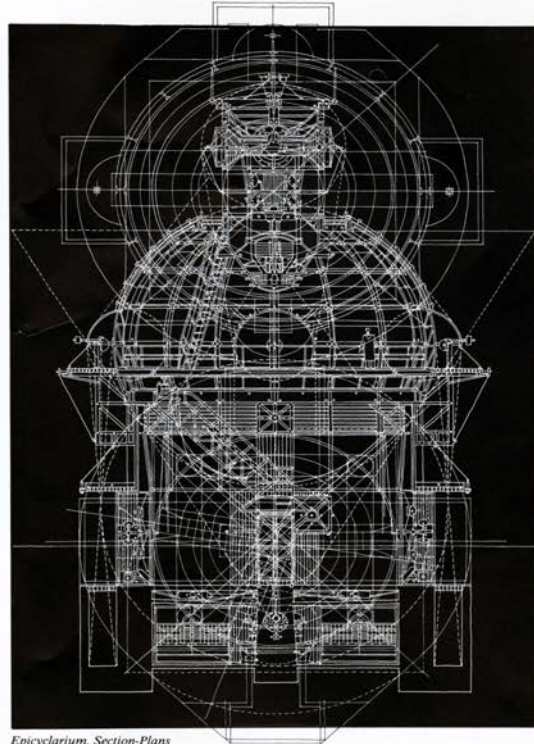
ecture with its philosophical anti-humanism and de-centricity. Woods has commented on the role of architecture, »Whatever the failure of modernism to put man on a solid footing in the world – the concept of architecture as the most comprehensive and coherent of human activities is the groundwork for a genuinely humanistic architecture yet to come«. To Woods, as well as to the German expressionist architects of the 1910's, some of whom were later to form the Bauhaus, architecture holds a leading position on the path towards a spiritual reawakening, a reawakening which was then called *Menschheitsdämmerung*. Woods regards architecture partly as an independent form of knowledge, partly as a point of crystallization for what scientists have called »the new covenant between man and the universe«. According to Woods, however, true architectural beauty cannot exist without the beauty of ideas, without a philosophical meaning, one might say,

even though its purely formal aspects enable it to create new forms of meaning. In Woods's works architecture and city merge, in a centripetal »centrism« deriving from a new theory of unity which is applied to all sciences and which brings forth its humanism in the light of a cosmology, a universal knowledge of cosmic forces which are symbolized architecturally in an extensive series of drawings dealing with the theme of centricity. Woods' ideas, however hymn-like and high-toned they may seem with their metaphysical longing, and however remote they may appear to those who have become accustomed to perceive the world as divided into self-contained expert cultures and mere local truth concepts, are nevertheless in tune with the ideas expressed in what has been discussed as »the new scientific world view« (Edgar Morin, Elya Prigogine, the Aspect experiments etc.)

Woods connects mythological subject matter and ancient images of the so-



Epicyclarium, Entrance Elevation (Night)



Epicyclarium, Section-Plans

called collective unconscious with the insights of modern physics into the origin of the universe, and into the relationship between matter and energy; light; gravity; space and time. The concept for the tower called Epicyclarium is exemplary. An elevated spherical form with light beams radiating from it. Data collected from all fields of human knowledge – art, science etc. – are accumulated in this tower. They form a synthesis of dynamic continuity. The accumulated data are continuously being transmitted to an electronically stimulated screen which, suspended over the floor of the Epicyclarium, forms an image, »the global image«. Using the succession of new data with which the computers are constantly being fed, it presents changing figurations of light and colour which are in turn transmitted globally as a sort of report.

This image forms a »religious« vision, the cosmic oneness of earth-man-uni-

verse itself. The universal harmony is shown in a state of perceptible lucidity and kaleidoscopic change. A vision that may be compared to religious notions of the holy »moment« when God appears before man. Woods admits that the result might be a visual chaos, with scattered moments of random order. The architectural form of the Epicyclarium is a synthesis of the Pantheon, the central church, the theatres of knowledge of the Renaissance, radar installations and observatories.

Contrary to the post-modernists who have turned against the Modern Project with its striving for technological perfection and total control of all fields of reality, Lebbeus Woods apparently intends to go through with the Modern Project, that is the technological-scientific perfection. And to consider this the way to final and absolute enlightenment.

From this point of view the modern project of the age of enlightenment reaches

its apotheosis in Woods' buildings, which not only appear as volumes in the light but whose interplay also reveals the visible light, thus showing its inherent order, the metrical properties of light. Woods attempts to develop Le Corbusier's poetical statement – namely that »architecture is the mastery and magnificent play of forms gathered under the light« – scientifically in a scheme for the relationship between light and the forms of the urban landscape.

In Woods' technically brilliant drawings there are elements of a magical realism connected with light and the super-real. And of something sacred, associated with the process of purification, the sobriety of light in the drawings, and emptiness, the absence of physical life. The lost identity as a felt presence.

On the one hand, the atmosphere pervaded with the lust for destruction which is widespread in the western world, and the vision of this destruction as the last »great« event which we will be

able to bring about, in a period of satiety, when all meanings seem to be undermined, neutralized and finally made to disappear, is present in these drawings. On the other hand, Woods' spiritual search expresses a strong sense of time allowing other possible times to become plastic and present. Woods' drawings project into the future a feeling that there is a connection between cosmology, the everyday world, and the architectural culture, the same feeling that we experience when confronted with the great architectural achievements of the past: the Indian temples, the Angkor Watt, the Acropolis, the pyramids, the Pre-Columbian monuments... An experience of the depth of human existence, in its widespread ramifications of historical perspectives. And, at the same time, of its fragility. The fragility described in a simple image by Buckminster Fuller, who compared the earth to a rare, green, self-sufficient space ship which moves among barren and extinct planets, and

which we ought to take good care of. In Woods' drawings there is a peculiarly ambivalent suggestion of something ominous and of rebirth. He is an emissary from the sunken Atlantis, pointing toward the future in a long historical glance which will make some of us open our eyes.

*Lebbeus Woods:
Born 1940 in Lansing.
Studied at Purdue University School of Engineering and University of Illinois School of Architecture.
Worked as an architect in a.o. the firm of Dinkerloo and Roche in New York.
Currently a visiting associate professor at the Pratt Institute and the Cooper Union School of Architecture in New York.*