

L. Woods: "Centricity" series (1987): City limit: towers and rings



D-Quad. OAN: Biomechanical and biodynamic towers.

LEBBEUS WOODS INTERVIEW

Ved Carsten Thau

I see a contradiction in your work, on one hand you formulate a sort of cultural criticism of the rapid process of industrialization, and the alienation of man from nature, and on the other you carry to extremes a technological, scientific vision of man's future?

There is a lot of ways to approach that question. One of them has to do with the whole issue of nature, in a larger sense of the word. We were as human beings – if you accept the biblical metaphor – delivered to nature as a kind of Eden, as animals, and because we developed, assured these powers of curiosity we were expelled from the purely animal state into a completely different state – in a way an alienated state from the beginning. I think there is an instinct in human beings throughout history to recreate Eden, to recreate nature. The perfection of nature from which we excluded ourselves earlier on by our intelligence and our

will. So I think this contradiction on the one hand exists – yes we are alienated beings from the beginning, alienated from the pure state of being, but at the same time we can rely only on our own inventiveness to restore us to Eden, to a state of harmony with the universe. We only have ourselves to rely on. We cannot anymore appeal to Nature to put us into that state of harmony. So we have to recreate the Universe in a sense. That's where the science and technology come in.

Would we not risk repeating the error of the Modern Movement of using technology and industry as architectural metaphors, or rather of shaping man's life and environment in the image of the machine?

But I think that's the whole idea of the machine. Newtonian physics, after all, gave birth to the age of machines. With-

out the laws of motion, there would have been no machines as we know them to day.

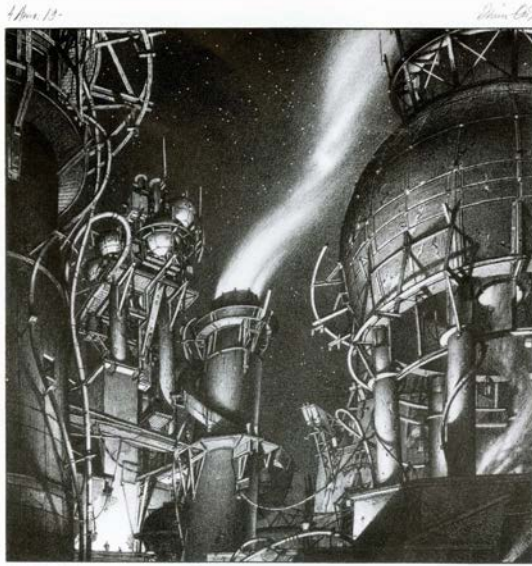
But also Newton's universe, his cosmology was the cosmic machine. The great machine into which we are – all of us – very infinite testimonial parts, that obviously are not terribly important in the overall machine. The idea that man becomes subservient to the machine, is a small part in a great machine, is the old newtonian world view. Now with Einstein and the new physics, the new world expressed by the leading minds of our era was something very different, it was no longer the clockwork universe. It was the relativistic universe. The relativistic universe is one in which physical reality, time and space and all its actual tangible material physical properties, are a function of the observer, or shall we say of isolated inertial frames. This was the language... Because in newtonian physics time and space was considered as an

absolute field across which the forces act.

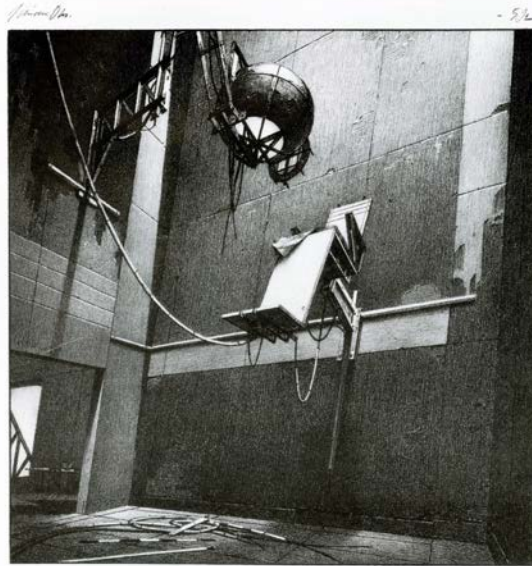
The big break came when Einstein said: We cannot consider time and space as absolute. We can only consider local events in a local inertial frame and we have to relate the inertial frames one to the other. So suddenly the individual's position in the universe is the crucial – the observers position as the crucial position. This is an entirely new world-view. A new cosmology is opened up by this. In this universe the universe is no longer a great machine, but a series of many, many universes, radiating from individual perceivers or observers. If one follows that point of view there is no danger whatsoever, that the individual will become subordinate to the technology, to the cosmic machine or to any other machine: It's only if one lives in the old cosmology that this danger exists. To translate that into something more specific, I think that the idea of a kind of

global, corporate, technological society belongs more to the old autocratic, deterministic world view. And I think that it is a political, sociological structure that eventually will crumble. It's already in a way crumbling, because technology is going to give us, as individuals, greater and greater autonomy, because it's shrinking, we can put the advanced technology in your pocket. So this kind of being part of a big machine is no longer technologically where the action is so to speak. Now it's individualistic technology. You have that piece of gear in your pocket, and what you do with it may be something totally dissociated from a kind of global connection.

It seems to be crucial for you to regain a sort of meaning in architecture, but nevertheless there is an absence of everyday life, of »Lebenswelt« in your work. It's very abstract in that sense.



Quad 19 with central photon accumulator.



Neomechanical tower (upper) chamber.
(Alle: blyant på papir/All: pencil on paper).

It always seems to me, if one is going to be a whole human being, one has to look equally directly at the terror as well as the joy. And this is very difficult for us to do. F.ex. it's very difficult for us to deal with anger, because it is potentially destructive, because we're afraid of it. So the fearsome or the so-called darker aspects of existence is something that we tend to deny, pretend that it does not exist, and concentrate on what is happy, healthy etc. But some coming generation of mentally healthier humans than we are, are going to be able to look into life without the intersection of so many illusions of comfort and security. The reason that everyday life as we know it, is absent from my work is because much of what is our everyday life, is a mechanism to protect us from reality and I would like to think, that we could live less protected from reality. Maybe this is wishful thinking, but it is also what is implied in Freud, what is implied in the people who have consid-

ered the modern humanistic tradition... the existentialists. All of them were saying that reality, though harsh, is really a thing of beauty to be perceived and lived as directly as possible. So that's the spirit I'm trying to convey in my work and obviously it's my interpretation and it's going to have its limitations for that reason. But that's the goal, that's the aspiration.

There is exactly this ambivalence in your work of disaster and new hope, and this might remind us of the romantic ruin. Just like the Renaissance was standing on the ruins of antiquity, of classical architecture, we might today be standing on the ruins of the Modern, of this long process of controlling nature, of developing an enormous capacity of instrumental rationality. And there is in your work a certain pathos of the romantic ruin being re-interpreted as a sort of industrial archeology; mimesis towards the technological civilization.

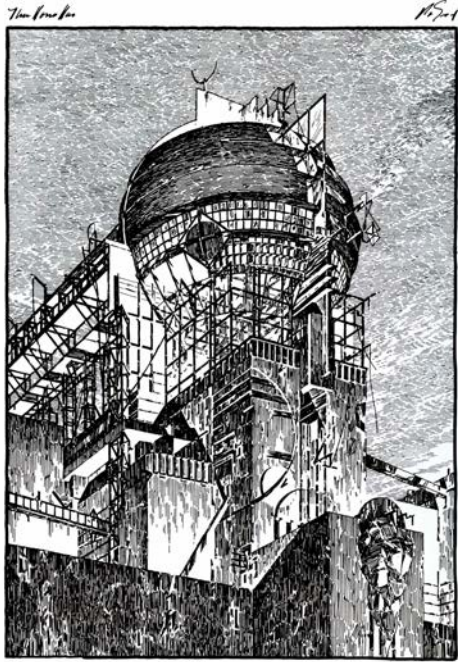
Yes, but I hope it is not barely nostalgia for some individual path. For instance this thing about the science of decay in my work, what this is really about in my mind, is time, it's the reference to time. Today when we saw these beautiful old buildings (the warehouses at Langelinie) out on the piers, I was commenting on the fact, that these diverse materials because of time becomes strangely related to each other, akin to each other. Time has somehow brought these materials more together and one senses time, when looking at these weathered things, and that sense of time is an important aspect of our consciousness; that we realize that we are in time – that there are different spans of time that we are part of. But it also has to do with the idea of cycles of time. One can observe that time is not simply a linear thing. A cycle is a spiraling thing. The cycle returns to its point of beginning, but it's always at a different level. So it's not a matter of merely

repeating, it's a matter of developing and evolving. I like that metaphor of time. We are living in a time, where even the heavy industry is passing to a degree, and a new kind of life, a new kind of industry will come out of that; so we are bound to be living with the remains of the old, much the way we are with those buildings that still have meaning to us. Should we just tear them down and build a new thing or should we readopt them...?

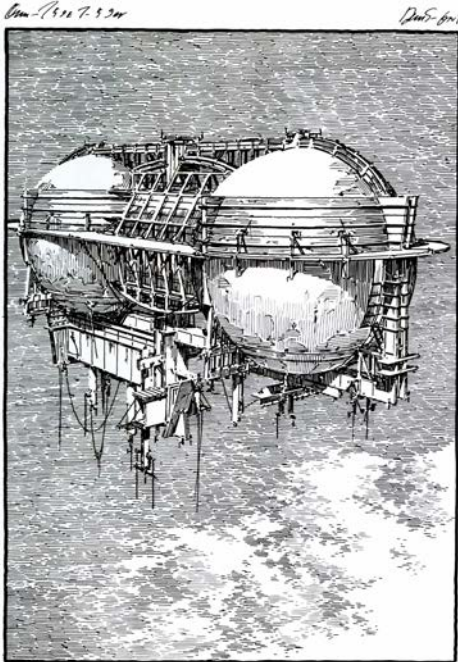
Some people have seen allusions to Piranesi's in your work and one might also see some similarities with the ideas developed by Edmund Burke in his treaty on «The Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful». The concepts of «vastness», of «obscurity», «darkness». Does this concept of the sublime appeal to you?

Schopenhauer talked about the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful – he said – is the knowledge we get from pleasure,

the sublime is the knowledge we gain from suffering. It fits very nicely into the Freudian thing. Yes, this concept of the sublime as the knowledge we gain from suffering, which according to Schopenhauer was inevitable for most of us anyway, is definitely part of my work, because this is part of the reality that we exist with and which, the closer we come to, the more complete we are as human beings. So yes, that element of suffering, that element of torture, that element of terror is part of our psyche, that in highly politicized societies we attempt to cover over. Schopenhauer said that the reason that people are fascinated with disaster... you know when there is a disaster people will rush to be there and to look, and of course today we say: what a morbid curiosity, it's very sick, people going to see these dead bodies, but Schopenhauer says no... no... it's peoples desire to experience the sublime, to experience the terror, because it brings them closer to



The Green Box
AEON 12



The Green Box
AEON 14

I think the appeal to history whether it be in the form of the attempt to recreate a vernacular of an earlier era or not, is one of those comforting illusions and something much, much bigger in their lives. In a moment they're confronted with the universe.

Many Scandinavian architects these days feel that, being confronted with the new trends in architecture of making a radical innovation of the architectural language, there seems to be a tendency towards abstraction, towards a lack of references to the history and the vernacular - and therefore many architects are still attracted to the concept of regionalism, of vernacular architecture in order to give people a means of orientation in the cultural environment. But your work, which seems to be radically innovative in many respects, doesn't seem to refer to a vernacular tradition; How do you look upon this question?

veils. I mean it's comforting to cloak ourselves in something which belongs to what we sentimentalize as a secure, a more happy time. So I think to simply appeal to the vernacular is an unfortunate thing in the modern world. It would be better to create a new vernacular. My work is about a kind of vernacular. I love the vernacular, the anonymous buildings. I love also the individual, rare masterpieces that are created by exceptional individuals, but there is a kind of genius in the vernacular, maybe Jung would have called it the collective unconscious? The human genius in a great vernacular architecture, is equal to and maybe even surpassing the genius of the unique individual masterpiece. So I love the vernacular, but we have to create a new vernacular, because our culture radically changed, at the beginning of this century. It was a revolutionary change. Many of the old beliefs were shattered, many of the old forms were

broken with them, and suddenly we found ourselves as human beings in this western culture, in a position where we were saying for the first time:

We take responsibility for our own faith, we don't rely on God, we don't rely on the King, we don't rely on the benevolence of the religion, of the priests, we are going to be responsible for our own destiny. This was a great adventure and for that we need a new vernacular, and that's what the Bauhaus was about, that's what the modern movement was about, a new vernacular for this new kind of person, this new hero, which was a common man hero. So that's what I think we should work towards.

Still, there is a richness in the local cultures, in the multitude of local cultures, which might be sacrificed for the benefit of a vision, of a new integrated globe, of a new international society.

I think obviously, where it is a living thing or where it still is life for us, we should preserve it. Today we were out looking at these warehouses at the »Langelinie« pier in Copenhagen and I mentioned a comment that Picasso made many years ago, in his writings actually. Someone was talking to him about older art and Picasso said: »Well if the work of Michelangelo still speaks to me, then it's not older art, it's contemporary art.« So if these buildings that were built years ago still speak to us, then they are contemporary buildings and we should treat them as we would any contemporary thing, we should nurse them and we should use them and not just destroy them. But to take things which we perhaps only look at nostalgically, which have ceased to speak to us in direct terms, but only speak to us with a certain kind of longing; maybe that's not so healthy. But we have to make the decisions on a one by one basis. I don't think

we should destroy what is beautiful or what is real to us for any reason!

In your cycle »Centricity«, some of the projects have organic forms. Do you see any connection between the ideas of the »Jugendstil« the »Art Nouveau« and your work? Also in your conceptual work there are many references to literature, to art and to philosophy, but if you should refer to the history of architecture, what gives you inspiration? One might also see vague remembrances of Otto Wagner etc.

Obviously my work is filled with references to other architecture, as is all of our work, which is as it should be... As to the »Jugendstil« and the organic, there is probably less of that, than anything else. And what I'm most interested in recently, in the end of the »Centricity« series, is this idea of curvelinear things, of double-curvations and triple-curvations, of hyperbolic geometry and compound geom-