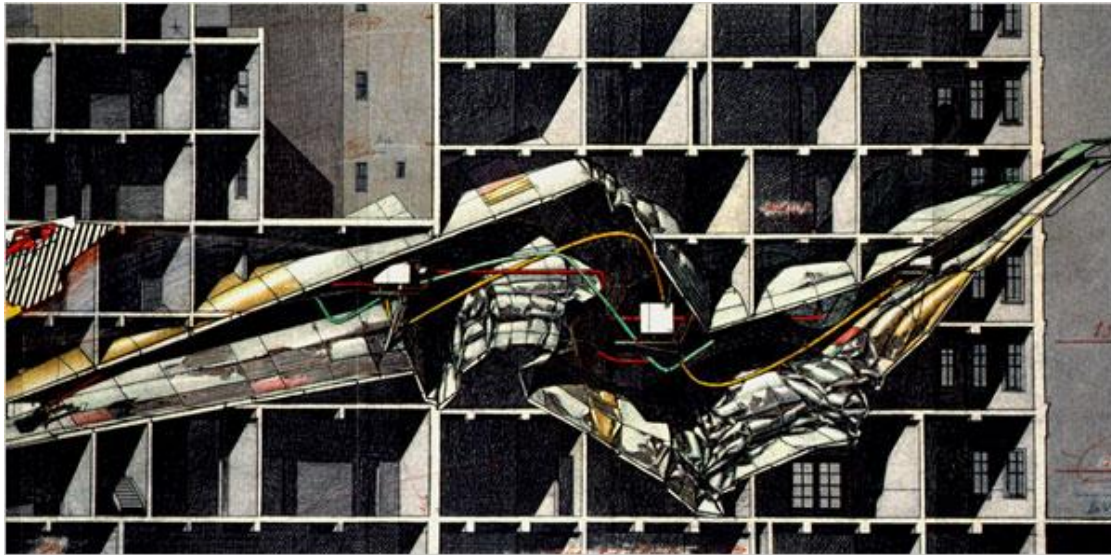


## The New York Times

### An Architect Unshackled by Limits of the Real World



Lebbeus Woods

“Berlin Free-Zone 3-2,” a 1990 proposal by Lebbeus Woods for an abandoned government building in reunified Berlin. The structure, more theoretical than practical, has no assigned purpose.

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These are lonely times for Lebbeus Woods.

In the early 1990s this irreverent New York architect produced a series of dark and moody renderings that made him a cult figure among students and academics. Foreboding images of bombed-out cities populated by strange, parasitic structures, they seemed to portray a world in a perpetual state of war, one in which the architect’s task was to create safe houses for society’s outcasts.

Since then Mr. Woods has become his own kind of outcast.

Architecture is big business today. While most of his friends and colleagues have abandoned their imaginary cities to chase lucrative commissions, Mr. Woods has shown little interest in building. Instead he continues to work at a small drafting table in a corner of his downtown apartment, a solitary, monklike figure churning out increasingly abstract architectural fantasies, several of which are on view in the “Dreamland” show at the Museum of Modern Art.

Some question the wisdom of his choices. (They certainly haven’t made him a rich man.) But that he now stands virtually alone underscores a disturbing shift in the architectural profession during the past decade

or so. By abandoning fantasy for the more pragmatic aspects of building, the profession has lost some of its capacity for self-criticism, not to mention one of its most valuable imaginative tools.

Not so long ago many of the world's greatest architectural talents behaved as though the actual construction of buildings was beneath them. During the 1960s firms like Superstudio in Florence, Italy, and Archigram in London were designing urban visions intended to shake up the status quo. These projects — walking, mechanized cities and mirrored mega structures that extended over mountain ranges and across deserts — were stinging attacks on a professional mainstream that avant-garde architects believed lacked imaginative energy.

When I was an architecture student in New York in the early 1990s, the architects my peers and I admired most were famous for losing competitions, not winning them. For us it simply meant that their work was too radical, too bold for the cultural establishment.

This was not just youthful idealism. Free of mundane professional considerations like budgets, clients and zoning laws, these architects were able to produce works that were aesthetically inventive and piercing social commentaries. And their designs were wildly influential, closely studied by younger architects who sought to apply their ideas in the real world.

Mr. Woods, now 68, was a regular fixture of that scene. In the early 1990s he published a stunning series of renderings that explored the intersection of architecture and violence. The first of these, the Berlin Free-Zone project, designed soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was conceived as an illustration of how periods of social upheaval are also opportunities for creative freedom.

Aggressive machinelike structures — their steel exteriors resembling military debris — are implanted in the abandoned ruins of buildings that flank the wall's former death zone. Cramped and oddly shaped, the interiors were designed to be difficult to inhabit — a strategy for screening out the typical bourgeois. ("You can't bring your old habits here," he warned. "If you want to participate, you will have to reinvent yourself.")

Some critics condemned the design for its cold-blooded imagery. But it also turned cold-war Modernism on its head. In the 1950s American architects were striving to retool wartime military production for the construction of a peacetime paradise. One result was the mind-numbing conformity of suburban subdivisions. Mr. Woods, by comparison, has never been so utopian. In his drawings society seems to be coming apart at the seams. His glistening pods, armored against the surrounding mayhem, are intended as sanctuaries for society's most vulnerable: outcasts, rebels, heretics and dreamers.

This vision reached its extreme in a series of renderings he created in 1993 in response to the war in Bosnia. Inspired by sci-fi comics and full of writhing cables, crumbling buildings and flying shards of steel, these drawings seem to mock the old Modernist faith in a utopian future. Their dark, moody atmosphere suggests a world in a constant struggle for survival.

Things began to change, however, at the end of the last millennium. High-end architecture was suddenly a valuable commodity. Architects like Daniel Libeskind and Rem Koolhaas, once relegated to the halls of academia, were suddenly struggling to handle an abundance of new commissions coming not only from elite cultural institutions but also from mainstream developers and wealthy corporations.

Mr. Woods, a large, burly man who still likes an occasional cigarette, doesn't try to hide his disdain for this new reality. "Big corporations today want to present themselves as benefactors of

the human race,” he told me recently, summing up the current state of affairs. “ExxonMobil runs ads about the ecology now. And architecture is part of this. It’s a business.”

It’s hard to disagree with the main thrust of his argument: that architecture has always needed a place that is wholly free of self-censorship, and that this place does not exist in the often-contentious exchange between architect and client. Most of us remember, for example, what happened to Mr. Koolhaas in the 1997 competition for a major expansion to the Museum of Modern Art. Choosing to ignore the museum’s internal politics, he indiscreetly highlighted the museum’s corporate agenda in his design. An enraged MoMA board instantly dropped him.

The pressure to smooth over anything in a design that might be perceived as threatening has only increased in recent years, as a lot of architecture has begun to look like a sophisticated form of marketing. Architects who once defined themselves as rebels are now designing luxury residential towers for the super-rich.

The greatest influence of this trend, however, may be on a younger generation of architects. Reared in an era when there seems to be an irresistible supply of work, these architects often seem eager to build at any cost. And their facility with computer software can make it easy to churn out seductive designs without digging deeply into hard social truths.

As Mr. Woods put it: “With the triumph of liberal democracy and laissez-faire capitalism, the conversation came to an end. Everyone wanted to build, which left less room for certain kinds of architecture.”

Meanwhile, as his peers moved on to bigger, more lucrative commissions, Mr. Woods’s work has become more and more abstract. In 1999 he began working on a series of designs whose fragmented planes were intended to reflect the seismic shifts that occur during earthquakes. (“The idea is that it’s not nature that creates catastrophes,” he said. “It’s man. The renderings were intended to reflect a new way of thinking about normal geological occurrences.”)

Last year the architect Steven Holl, a close friend, hired him to design a pavilion for a housing complex in Chengdu, China. A towering composition of crisscrossing bridges and ramps, the project is the closest Mr. Woods has come to real architecture: a dense Piranesian space in which people can climb to peer out at the urban sprawl of the new China.

“I’m not interested in living in a fantasy world,” Mr. Woods told me. “All my work is still meant to evoke real architectural spaces. But what interests me is what the world would be like if we were free of conventional limits. Maybe I can show what could happen if we lived by a different set of rules.”