



FLICKR / PAUL BONNINGTON

AFTER: H. KLOTZ, THE HISTORY OF POSTMODERN ARCHITECTURE, THE MIT PRESS 1988, S. 413

To the left: Salk Institute, La Jolla, California, USA, designed by Louis Kahn, 1959–1965

To the right: Nils-Ole Lund, a piece from the cycle *The Future of Architecture* that presents the future fate of the Salk Institute campus

Piotr Winskowski

A LOPSIDED SPACE-TIME LOOP

Since Plato, utopias of total organisation of human and social life have employed architectural images. Utopias – unrealised concepts and ideas – have left nothing but drawings in the place of imaginary organisations. Architectural drawings of buildings, cities, walls, etc. hold the power to show the desired ideal organisation. Dystopias emerging at the time of the Cold War envisaged a post-catastrophic future, but their mistaken visions of potential threats and what would be destroyed in what order and for what reason are simply amusing from a contemporary point of view. In the 20th century, the name ‘utopia’, connected with anything that was thought of and even described and drawn, and the image of the future as a failure, mingled into many fears and inklings of an end which, visually indefinable and unimaginable in their elusiveness, desperately craved for evocative images.

In the book *Moderne und Postmoderne: Architektur der Gegenwart / The History of Postmodern Architecture* by Heinrich Klotz, published in 1984, the last chapter is entitled ‘Architecture on Paper’, and its last section (two paragraphs) bears the title ‘Anti-Utopia: Nils-Ole Lund and Ettore Sottsass’¹. From a perspective of over thirty years, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the ironic, and at times nostalgic, landscapes and their architecture

drawn by Nils-Ole Lund in the series *The Future of Architecture* (1979) and Ettore Sottsass in the series *Another Utopia* (1973). They enable us to see the present in a crooked mirror as the then utopian content, hidden in the composition of the whole and in details, enriched with visual culture motifs in the following decades, becomes more and more ironic or increasingly threatening – but at different points than those that were intended. Nils-Ole Lund depicts ruins of buildings that are architectural icons of the 1970s: the Faculty of Engineering (1959–1964) at the University of Leicester, designed by James Stirling and James Gowan with Michael Wilford and Malcolm Higgs, and the Salk Institute (1959–1965) in La Jolla, California, by Louis I. Kahn. What is particularly notable is the manner in which the ruins are depicted, which is taken from Romantic iconography. Ruins atop a hill, resembling a dilapidated castle, seem deserted and forlorn, surrounded by wildlife as if there had been nothing there. In his description, Klotz notes the shoddiness of the ruins into which neglected modernist buildings are turning. His view is quite convincing. It does not require imaginary ruins of well-known, still existing buildings which have not fallen into ruins as yet. It is sufficient to recall the real ruins of many others that exist in present-day Poland.

In continuing, however, Klotz writes something that is not substantiated in the picture, “rather than celebrate the architectural monument, with its individual appearance, Lund envisioned it wasted like any other commod-

¹ H. Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne: Architektur der Gegenwart*, Braunschweig und Wiesbaden 1984 (*The History of Postmodern Architecture*, transl. R. Donnell, MIT Press 1988), p. 410.



FICKER / MATT NEALE



AFTER: H. KLOTZ, THE HISTORY OF POSTMODERN ARCHITECTURE, MIT PRESS 1988, S. 412

To the left: Engineering Building, University of Leicester, proj. James Stirling, 1959

To the right: Nils-Ole Lund, a piece from the cycle *The Future of Architecture* presenting the future of the Faculty of Engineering building in Leicester

ity. A short while earlier, the individual architect had seen himself as a demiurge; and with the envisioning of future supercities this role had grown even more convincing. What Lund did was remind architects that even their most idealistic creations were part of the transience of all things, and of the destruction of the environment as well.”².

The illustration refers to a picture from the series *The Future of Architecture*, but shows something else. The partially ruined buildings are set against a landscape in which nature is returning to a site that had been transformed by man. Around the place remain only those parts of the buildings that were best known among architects and students of architecture, i.e. those buildings which rendered their authors famous through publications, and were shown in the same way as in the photographs³. Strangely enough, these were only slightly damaged and are still recognisable, even though their immediate surroundings have radically changed. In their vicinity there should be other buildings of the same complexes, designed by the same architects (although their less known parts would then be revealed, and these would not be icons since they were not so often seen in print). However, there is no trace of the spacious experimental laboratory in Leicester,

which should be just behind the picturesquely damaged office tower, built on characteristically undercut masses of two lecture halls that in various views always feature in the foreground.

In La Jolla two out of five concrete, openwork cuboidal projections are visible, every second wall of which protrudes at an acute angle, offering an ocean view to the scientists in each room. The projections form the frontage of a patio which features travertine flooring. In Lund’s vision, there is no patio but a dirt road along which are trotting heavily laden mustangs, urged by three riders. They are going through a wide gate, resembling those of ranches in the Wild West.

We may expect that in a post-catastrophic civilisation, which has returned to the pre-industrial state, the partly ruined, ferro-concrete scientific laboratory building would indeed remain disused, that its windows would get smashed, and it would be overgrown with weeds.

It is improbable, however, that such a civilisation would not use wooden teak screen-blinds that protect the scientists from excess sunlight. And yet in Lund’s vision these screens remain intact. On the other hand, it is improbable that in Leicester there could happen a catastrophe that would destroy the ferro-concrete attic wall in the lower tower with a ceramic facing and the same facing on the lecture hall, but would not impact fragile three-dimensional ribbon windows.

The composition of the picture is completed by an impressive car wreck in the foreground, which in itself offers an interesting spatial scale, with an awe-inspiring motif of a flying bird, a building in the distance and an ‘artificial’ sky, rendered in a collage. The wreck lies abandoned on a meadow which has overgrown the site of the former University of Leicester buildings, which makes it much later than the time when one of the buildings was damaged and the others were destroyed. If a 1960s car is a less lasting object than the buildings, in what kind of future could it be left there? In what future is the situation called *The Future of Architecture* set?

Lund’s visual manipulations give the impression of being looped in time, since his pictures of dilapidated contemporary buildings (erected merely fifteen years before and as yet undamaged) are stylised to be forlorn castles, surrounded by greenery or by such impermanent buildings that they have long crumbled. And yet it is clear that apart from the ruins depicted by Lund there were and are still standing buildings whose construction is equally strong as those which have escaped destruction.

This implies a unique nature of the disaster that not only struck the buildings but also affected the way they are perceived and used. The images entitled *The Future of Architecture* illustrate a future physical elimination of everything that was not accepted in ‘the world of architecture’ (modelled on ‘the world of art’ in the institutional theory of the latter) at the time of their publication in 1979. The

² Ibidem.

³ Ch. Jencks, *Critical Modernism - Where is Post Modernism going?*, London, 2007; P. Gössel, G. Leuthauser, *Architecture In the Twentieth Century*, Köln 2001, p. 296; M. Hollingsworth, *Architecture of the 20th Century*, Greenwich, CT 1988, p. 140; D. Ghirardo, *Architecture After Modernism*, New York, 1996.



To the left: Nicolas Groszpiere, *The Afterlife of Buildings / Rondo One* (designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and AZO, 2006), Warsaw 2008

To the right: Kobas Laksa, *The Afterlife of Buildings / Rondo One Columbarium / 2071*



prognosis seems to be particularly accurate for late modernist architecture right before our eyes, although the buildings depicted in Lund's works have not actually been destroyed. In view of the present need for redevelopment, thermo-modernisation, etc., it is the image popularised by photographs (but not necessarily the 'front elevation' since late-modernist buildings did not always have it) that is the most likely to encounter conservation restrictions in the transformation of such non-historic but already well-known building fabric. In Leicester it is the view from the square in front of the building, and in La Jolla it is the view from the inner patio. Such is a result of using simplified views, 'icons' of buildings, in contemporary culture: they circulate and are much more influential than the buildings which they allegedly represent.

More significantly, Lund's visions ironically show widespread blindness to what can calmly exist, take up a lot of space and which maybe used on a daily basis, but for multiple reasons does not attract photographers' interest, and hence cannot be 'media-mediated' (an awful term but I was not the one to invent it). It has long been happening to the elevations of various historic buildings (in the northern hemisphere) that ought to be photographed against the sun. Lund points out not only the role of the possibility of photographing them but also the importance of their catching attention of a tourist, architect, scientist or student who are drawn by single, well-known shots ("Know it? Then listen", "I only like the songs I know"). The recipients are confirmed in their belief

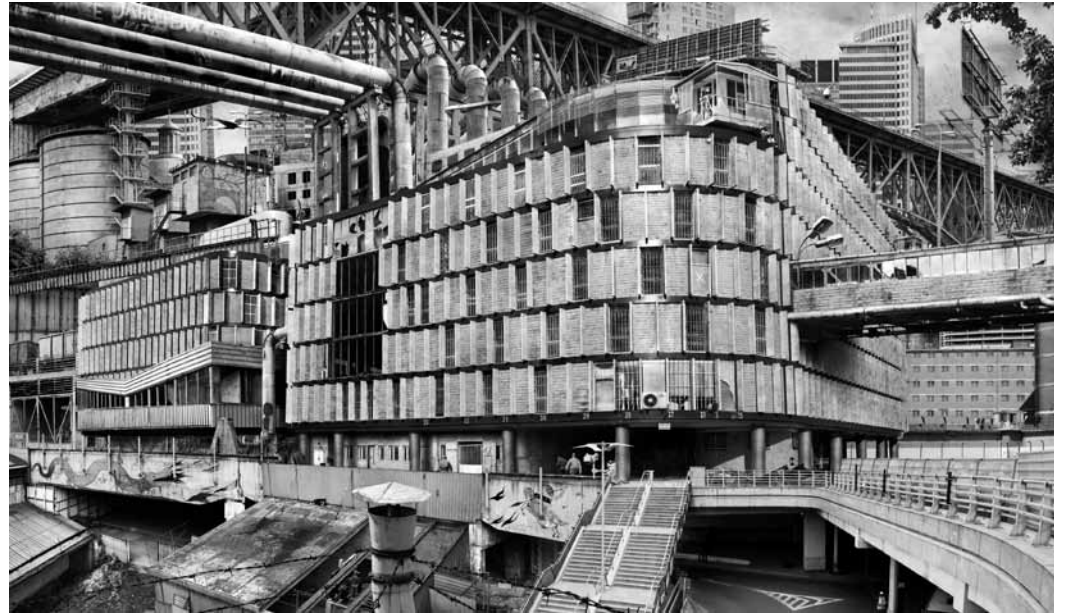
that they have seen everything that was worth seeing, and experienced everything there was to be experienced. This is another side effect of globalisation and the power of media mediation in experiencing the world: we see increasingly more, so we look more and more superficially. Following the example of museums advertising themselves through the masterpieces – flagship items – in their collections (from a short list of the most expensive paintings by several best known painters of the period), following the example of (American) universities which brag about the numbers of Nobel prize winners they employ, following the cities that ceaselessly offer the same views as their 'icons', buildings are also shown in photos that copy the stereotype of 'the most spectacular view', even though there are many more such visually interesting views in reality, not to mention places that are important to users (while postcard views often offer inaccessible bird's eye views).

Contrary to Klotz's belief, icons do not age in the same way as ordinary buildings that are of no interest to the media. Deteriorating, they become all the more iconic, albeit dilapidated. They do not share the fates of ordinary buildings that are sometimes knocked down – even having been knocked down, icons become mummified in the media. A similar story is told in the film *Planet of the Apes* where astronauts identify a mysterious planet where they have landed as Earth after they have dug up a piece of New York's Statue of Liberty, i.e. something that has always been a pop culture icon. Lund's utopia foresees

the future of architecture as icons, magazine cut-outs, which do not offer any conscious experience of space, and are perceived as pictures – *de facto* disregarding spatial criteria.

Nowadays Kobas Laksa uses a similar device in his provocative collages of recent achievements of Polish architecture: exclusive Warsaw office blocks, examples of high-tech architecture, the pride of the town and of investors. Lund makes references to pictures from literature that are easily accessible and well-known to the potential recipients of his works. Laksa's collages (*The Afterlife of Buildings* series) were on display at the Venezia Biennale of Architecture in 2008 side by side with photographs by Nicolas Groszpiere (*The Life of Buildings* series) so that there was no doubt as to the inspirations for the views of the buildings or their current condition⁴. The horror of the future, or a variation on a theme of the possible return of the spirit of the past, was administered jointly with a tranquilizer – a present-day view. Nostalgia for

⁴ K. Laksa, *The Afterlife of Buildings*; Nicolas Groszpiere, *The Life of Buildings* series; curators Grzegorz Piątek and Jarosław Trybuś, 11. Biennale di Venezia, 2008.



To the left: Nicolas Groszpiere, *The Afterlife of Buildings / Metropolitan* (designed by Norman Foster), Warsaw 2008

To the right: Kobas Laksa, *The Afterlife of Buildings / The Metropolitan Prison / 2082*

‘paradise lost’ and a thrill of excitement over ‘paradise expected’ are balanced by an image of ‘paradise (almost-) existing’.

Furthermore, Groszpiere also depicts a kind of utopia – one which has just been realised: a building that is so new that it looks artificial, as if it were its own design, not covered by billboards, framed so that it stands against the background of a neutral, pale sky. Laksa shows an anti-utopia here: the return of (eternal) chaos, which is so suggestive also because the sky is filled almost completely with added elements. Laksa’s works offer a sense of being looped in time even more perversely than Lund’s. Between the present, when the buildings are as fresh and clean as in Groszpiere’s photographs, and the future, when they have turned into what Laksa shows, time must have gone back to the beginning of the 20th century. Then the centre of Warsaw, supposedly run-down due to some indefinite disaster, was transformed into an industrial site with heavy industry as the dominant feature, then it fell into ruin so that the deserted factories, into which the present-day office blocks had been transformed, could be overgrown with weeds, so looters could remove anything that was easily removable, etc. And then there came the time of the *Afterlife of Buildings*, when their wounds, scars and pauperisation finally became visually attractive and trendy. Such has been the fate of (at least some) 19th century industrial buildings. It was only at that hypothetical moment that such a building could become a theme for works of art exhibited at the Biennale

of Architecture. Since history is different, and time does not go back, it is clear that the buildings are covered with fake scars, like battered heroes at the end of an action film who are made up in such a way that these very scars make them more attractive (this may refer to actors who are to be more handsome to female spectators, to buildings and machines in the eyes of technology lovers, to buildings in Kobas Laksa’s collages as they present themselves to the visitors at the Biennale of Architecture). If a hypothetical reconstruction of future/past events recorded in Laksa’s collages was not undertaken by the viewer, they would still offer spectators a wide range of requisites of the visual poetics of destruction and a test of ‘Spot-the-Detail’.

We can observe that utopian objects or buildings become inspirations for the actual shapes or functions of real objects, and as such they enter the material reality through the back door. They even form a standard, sometimes as opposites to the ideas or functions that were originally utopian, sometimes as their immediate realisations, and sometimes – as advertisements of things that did not either have or need forms that originated as utopian. Bits of utopia are scattered around us and function as pieces/parts of various machines, buildings, and objects we use.

Moreover, earlier ironic or desperate anti-utopias now serve as material to design technocratically optimistic gadgets and buildings, while optimistic utopias turn into material for posters or ecological campaigns that warn

against long-term consequences of exploitation of nature, but are set in a world several decades later, where common awareness is different and where visions formerly considered as utopian have lost the charm of novelty. It is another example of the split between the ‘signifiant’ and ‘signifié’ in the language of mass communication (textual advertisements) and visual communication (image advertisements, architectural images, architecture) which so excited the inventors of deconstructivism, as well as their critics, two or three decades ago.

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