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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

“SOUL OF A NATION”

ART AND VIRTUAL REALITY

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Chicago Architecture Biennial

CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER

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IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LOCAL Fox affiliate’s morning show, *Good Day Chicago*, right between the segment introducing the “Furry Friend of the Week” and the forecast with Bill the weatherman, viewers throughout Northern Illinois were recently treated to a brief story on the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial. Over some B-roll of the lakeshore skyline, the host declared that the second installment of the omnibus design festival, open now at the city’s Cultural Center, was called “Make New History.” For just the briefest instant, the presenter appeared to puzzle at the name, as if he were punctuating it with a tiny question mark.

How much of the Chicagoland audience, one wonders, caught the whiff of subversion in that title? Selected (in a riff on a 2009 Ed Ruscha piece of the same title) by curators Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee of the Los Angeles-based firm Johnston Marklee, the exhibition’s theme sounds like an expressly political overture, its Hegelian undertones harking back to the old-time revolutionary conviction that history, far from being a mere sordid accumulation of incidents, is an apprehensible thing, a vehicle

over which human beings can assert captaincy. Writing of Trotsky in 1940, Edmund Wilson described what it was “to feel History towering at one’s elbow.” Architecture has all too often found itself conscripted by events—here, it seemed, was a bold enjoinder for designers to take history by the scruff of the neck. What they would do once they got ahold of it was anyone’s guess, but surely the tussle would be interesting to watch.

That, however, was not really the kind of history, or the kind of newness, that Johnston Marklee were after. The adjective in the title turns out to be something of a misnomer: “I think Mark and I would challenge the idea of a certain aspiration for the new,” said Johnston, during one of CAB’s opening-week symposia. Instead, she suggested, their exhibition is more about “incremental transformation or appropriation.” Of the 140 contributors from around the world, scarcely any have trotted out genuinely radical ideas of departure from contemporary architectural practice.

A kind of souped-up archaeology is the order of the day, as the architects have responded to a series of prompts provided by the curators on the prospective uses of the past in contemporary architecture. From French architect Dominique Perrault there is *Groundscapes*, 2017, a series of digital renderings that peel up familiar landscapes such as Paris’s L’Étoile and Madrid’s Plaza Mayor to reveal both real and imagined proposals, fleeting glimpses of futures past. LA’s Bureau Spectacular returns to Adolf Loos’s iconic Villa Müller from 1930, lampooning the Prague landmark’s vaulted domesticity by remodeling its interior within a fur-covered periscope to produce an interactive model that serves as a sort of architectural peep show for passersby. Two separate presenters, the Los Angeles Design Group and Cameron Wu of Harvard, offer up meditations (in model and drawing form, respectively) on Baroque ecclesiastical architecture,

while a third, London office DRDH, takes on the Pantheon, conjuring the dome’s miniature ghost with an inverted concrete cast. There is the requisite homage to the city’s most famous architectural invention, the skyscraper, which appears in such profusion that Filip Dujardin’s *Chicago Shuffle 01* and *Chicago Shuffle 02*, both 2017—digital collages of International Style towers, stacked into fantastic Dagwood sandwiches—seem almost reflexive critiques of the show itself.

Skyscrapers and their associative connections are also the occasion for what is perhaps the exhibition’s most significant, and certainly most popular, section. For “Vertical City,” fifteen practices were invited to reimagine one of the most bruted-about architectural events of the twentieth century, the design competition held by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1922 for its planned office tower near the Loop. An entire upper room of the Cultural Center, with enormous windows rising clear to double-height ceilings, is forested with sixteen-foot-high original models of retroactively imagined entries to the competition, as well as one of Loos’s unexecuted proposal for a giant, semisatirical Doric column and another of Ludwig Hilberseimer’s imagined hyperrationalized block. Seen together, the ensemble makes for a terrifically photogenic bit of curating, but as a playful exercise in disciplinary recursion, it is even better: The 1922 competition was *already* re-created, in 1980, under the auspices of Chicago’s favorite son Stanley Tigerman, starring a host of outlandish schemes from then-ascendant postmodernists. At CAB, history is taking on history, the unbuilt towers operating as surreal “exquisite corpses,” as the curators described them, to be exhumed and practiced on by the architectural imagination in order to yield new formal recombinations and theoretical constellations.

This is fun stuff, and fairly wholesome, at least until one pauses to consider what it all meant. Taxidermy is a

ghoulish hobby—just look at where it got Norman Bates—and even if it can be used to produce something “new,” it can hardly be expected to raise the dead.

“When I read ‘Practices Make History,’” said Harvard historian Antoine Picon from the panel stage as he responded to the title of his session, “I was really wondering whether I would be out of a job.” No fear: Thus far the show does not go. For all their retrospection, Johnston and Lee stop well short of endorsing the notion that the architect and the historian are interchangeable. This was the signal error of the 1980s, and while CAB makes extensive reference to the postmodernism of that era (as for example

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in “Vertical City”), no one in it seems much interested in returning to an architecture of capitals and cornices. This is not your father’s historicism—not the old game of stylistic Plinko, dropping the past into the present with playful abandon—but a more critical commingling. The relation to the past is, as Lee put it, no longer “Oedipal” but “horizontal,” free-form and inquisitive.

The two modes do share something of a family resemblance. The most outstanding common trait is seduction: History, however treated, is almost always enticing, and

there’s plenty at CAB to bewitch both mind and eye. Charlap Hyman & Herrero’s gorgeous dollhouse recreations of Yves Saint Laurent’s Paris apartment could make a grown critic weep; cleverly, they manage a performative comment on their own nostalgia, showing the designer’s elegant drawing room in different stages of disassembly following Saint Laurent’s death. Likewise the collaboration between architecture firm Caruso St John, photographer Héléne Binet, and artist Thomas Demand: A simple yet meticulous model of a midcentury urban scheme of tower slab, low-rise podium, and public plaza calls forth all the pathos of modernism’s foregone utopianism. The entire biennial, in fact, is enchantingly presented, and what one sees on floor after podium-packed floor of this biennial is one of the more artfully accomplished architectural exhibitions in recent memory.

That much may settle one of the lingering questions surrounding CAB, which is: *Why?* As Sarah Herda, co-curator of the previous installment, noted, “It’s not a biennial until you have a second one.” Her successors have done almost enough by way of sheer professionalism to justify the show’s existence at least for this year. Attendance figures may prove more decisive, and here Johnston and Lee’s approach could turn out to be a stumbling block. Despite tributes to CAB’s “civic engagement” from visiting municipal officials, there is far less emphasis on off-site functions and pop-up pavilions in 2017 than there was in 2015. This was the right choice from the perspective of curatorial cohesion, but it may lessen the show’s reach—*Good Day Chicago* notwithstanding. Even if they show up, there’s no knowing how the Fox-viewing public are likely to receive such a discourse-centered show.

And what of the discourse itself? On that score, there may be real cause for concern, though not for the reasons that many architects might suppose. The charge mooted by some, that Johnston and Lee’s mission is sneakily

retardataire, doesn’t really stick. Yard for yard, the new CAB is actually remarkably progressive, with far fewer older and established practices, and many more younger ones, than are typically seen in other design exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale of Architecture. Rather, it is in its very diversity that “Make New History” points to a certain eschatological shadow falling over the profession today.

The breadth and depth of CAB is indicative of a field now grown so disparate, so varied, that it is nearly impossible to imagine formal or conceptual solutions that are not in some sense a rehearsal of previous ones. Even Lee’s proposed “horizontality” is far from novel: Since the demise of postmodernism, architects have become well schooled in the subtler arts of “contextuality,” making use of history without pilfering it outright. The reemergence in Chicago of history as an explicit subject seems yet another symptom of the same disorder, a natural consequence of a discipline chasing its own tail; so too the proliferation of biennials, which—though always pleasant as gatherings-of-the-tribe, and potentially useful as occasions for stock-taking—may have exhausted their purpose, especially during a political moment when some kind of definitive escape from the nightmare of history seems more and more imperative. Yet this absence of an eligible futurity is certainly *not* the fault of the Chicago Architecture Biennial; it might not even be the fault of contemporary practitioners. It may, chillingly, be a problem intrinsic to architecture as such. In short: What if there are only so many keys on the architectural piano? What if history is all we have? □

The Chicago Architecture Biennial is on view at the Chicago Cultural Center through January 7, 2018.

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This page, left: View of “Vertical City,” 2017, Chicago Cultural Center. Photo: Steve Hall. Right: Filip Dujardin, *Chicago Shuffle 02*, 2017, ink-jet print, 47 ½ × 35 ¾”. Opposite page, from left: Caruso St John with Thomas Demand and Héléne Binet, *Constructions and References*, 2017, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Kendall McCaugherty/Hall Merrick Photographers. Charlap Hyman & Herrero, *The Grand Salon at the Apartment of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé on Rue de Babylone in the Morning*, 2017, model. Installation view. Photo: Andre Herrero.

