Visionary Architectures
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In its simplest expression, architecture responds to a need for protection, but it also appeals to the desire to leave a mark in space, to re-organise the world, to isolate oneself, to defy gravity, to touch the sky. Richard Greaves, George Widener, Paul Laffoley and Marcel Storr are four highly distinctive minds whose oeuvres exemplify a conception of architecture that breaks away from the traditional and evolves into something else: a visionary artform that reflects idealistic values while also engaging in a deep exploration of the metaphysical.

My houses aren't twisted, they are deliberately 'asymmetrical'. They are strong because they have angles that you can't make with nails… A nail is fixed, it stops the evolution, but a rope is patient, it can contort itself… Rope makes it possible to structure a building without hurting it, without assaulting it… With rope, it's great because it still moves. Artworks have to continue. I hate things that are too stable.1 (Richard Greaves)

Of the four, Richard Greaves is the only one whose architectures were conceived in three dimensions – he has never made preparatory drawings or sketched plans for his structures. Where the other three individuals discussed here described realms that existed in their imaginations, Greaves confronted the practicalities of time and space in reality. Having studied graphic design and theology, Greaves left Montreal for a remote location near a village in the province of Québec, a plot of land he bought with some friends in the 1970s. Between 1989 and 2000, in this isolated spot 250 metres wide and 1.6 kilometres long, he constructed over twenty buildings and huts from remnants of old wooden farm buildings that he dismantled and reinstalled in new configurations, along with hundreds of sculptures made of discarded objects that he placed on the ground and hung in trees.

Operating at a fast pace, without concession and regularly without help, Greaves defined a building process in accordance with his unique set of principles, means and knowledge. Untrained in architecture, his approach combines a belief in the organic growth and decline of his 'houses' with a quasi-religious environmental concern. He chose and recycled discarded objects, based on their past lives and somehow linked to his own. One of his texts, titled 'The Objects', pinned up on the wall of a building, gives an apt description of his relationship with trash, which had, over the years, become an essential part of his art environment:

I looked at a coffee maker, an old razor, a nicked shovel, or any object that came to hand, as if I were seeing it for the first time. Now, by examining the facets of the object, its shape, its way of existing, I entered into a relationship with its existence, its memory, its purposes, and the way it blended with other objects… I perceived that they were like individuals… 2

The walls, ceilings and roofs of his constructions are covered with these objects, often gleaned from household garbage put out on the street in nearby villages. In The Three Little Pigs' House (eight metres high by twenty metres wide), an entire section is lined with clothing and shoes, which incidentally act as soundproofing. One also notes photographs, window frames used as dividers, old vinyl and wood cut out in bird shapes, fragments of mirrors, pages of books. Aside from some chairs, sofas and beds that occasionally populate his buildings, at least two elements recur: a wood stove and a toilet. The first incinerates waste for heat (and thus for surviving harsh winters) and the second evacuates waste: 'For each building, I start by making the toilet, and then I make the house around it, as if I were already aware of the importance of our remains, our emissions… The building is like my body, and my emissions are there.'3 One of the many books that cover the walls and surfaces of his cabins is Lettres de Van Gogh à son frère Théo (1937), in which the following passage is underlined: 'Art is man added to nature.' Greaves takes advantage of the fact that nature always asserts its rights, conscious his buildings are temporary incursions.

A spiritual and aesthetic cousin to Clarence Schmidt's House of Mirrors (c. 1940–68), Greaves' art environment is a masterfully orchestrated chaos in which materials and nature converse in growing and unpredictable ways. A battlefield effect is sustained by the absence of perpendiculars in his buildings, giving the impression that they are on the verge of collapse. Banishing right angles, reflecting the nature that surrounds him, Greaves takes advantage of the qualities of the diagonal and the broken plane. Like houses of cards, these buildings defy the laws of gravity and shatter the standards of conventional construction. Until Greaves quit his land four years ago, the site was constantly expanding as a work-in-progress. Although some vestiges still hang from trees like dead branches, and some houses (among them the Round House) still remain hidden in the forest, they are rapidly deteriorating, and at some point will simply be consumed by the elements.

I like to try to plan out a city that will work. I believe a good working city would be one with balance, where everything is in its proper place. Cities are often big, dirty and chaotic places, things break down. But if I plan them with calendar dates then it helps them improve.4 (George Widener)

If Richard Greaves's architecture embodies an aesthetic of chaos, George Widener's Megalopolises (2004–present) are cities primarily conceived to reduce anarchy, namely the anxiety he has experienced due to heavy traffic, noise, competition, stress and violence. Furthermore, these spaces are often suffering from overpopulation. As he observes, 'I think that people are not meant to live in large cities.'5 Based upon calendar dates and numbers, the drawings from this series structure his search 'to make order out of the chaos'. As he explained, 'Calendars are balanced out… If you plan a city do with geometry, it becomes balanced.'6 Looking back over centuries, the artist finds 'patterns that are odd, unusual'. Numerical palindromes (like 21.12.2112.21:12, as December 21, 2112 at 9:12 pm, in his cityscape Megalopolis 2112) are one example: 'I find it very interesting to build something using those patterns, and that is what the Megalopolises are.' Each one is the site of a different scenario. This complex calendar system, applied to urbanism, serves Widener's will for a more 'holistic kind of environment'. For him, 'Calendars are not just a single bit of information, but related to an entire system. Patterns in the calendar are like mechanical gears to me. This is mechanistic but also organic.' This interconnectivity recalls the sophisticated calendar system of the Mayans, whose architecture is based on sequences and symmetry, as are Widener's constructions.

Seen from an aerial perspective, his Megalopolises depict symmetrical masses of buildings, parking areas, circular plazas and tributaries, moulded to the convex shape of the earth. These are densely animated with people, but also with automobiles moving methodically over bridges and through sprawling boulevards. Often surrounded by water, they depict a large number and variety of vessels (ships, liners, barges, yachts, cruisers) on waterways, highlighting the movement of individuals and merchandise. Widener, a fan of the author Philip K. Dick, is an avid reader of science fiction and his fascination with alternative realities pervades the general ambience of his 'cities of the future'.

Considered a high-functioning calendar savant, Widener (born 1962) has an exceptional memory and outstanding computational skills. As Roger Cardinal recalls, 'If someone mentions their birth date, he can immediately tell them on which day of the week it fell. Given a date in history, he is often able to cite an event that took place on that day… [He organises] these data in complex systems, inventories, sets, diagrams, charts, calculations, symbols, codes and ciphers.'7 Widener's detailed drawings are windows onto this singular aptitude and obsessive focus. They are packed with rubberstamped piles of dates along with numbers, names and words related to one subject (for instance, many of his Titanics depict the ship with its precise inventories of equipment, lifeboats, food and fatalities). These data follow an established algorithm in sequences that only the edge of the page seems able to contain.

For years, Widener has been travelling around the globe and taking hikes lasting several weeks in the Appalachian Mountains. When, at the age of 17, he joined the US Air Force as a technician to work on cameras used for aerial reconnaissance, he spent his spare time reading travel brochures and planning trips.8 Widener's drawings reflect a nomadic perspective of the world, depicting multiple modes of transport. Even when they are not vehicles or cityscapes built to contain entire populations, his subjects always sustain the idea of motion and rhythm. For instance, his square grids, imbued with the commemorative function of calendars,

recall his heightened awareness of the passage of time and its cycles.9 As he stated, by their very nature, 'calendars are not static'.

Widener expects his art to reach future populations more effectively. As he has noted, 'Scientists are saying that we will become intelligent machines in about fifty years. I created an interactive sort of art for their purpose. Perhaps they will be able to fully appreciate some of the subtleties of my artwork and enjoy the inner codes of the patterns I'm using. I believe that math and science by then will be more connected with patterns than they are today.'

Paul Laffoley also employs diagrams as a conduit for his architectural visions. This scheme allows him to keep adding elements to his paintings until they reach a 'perfect' saturation: 'I like diagrams so much. Because it is a neutral system, which can allow you to diagram anything.'10 Intricate pictorial elements, arrows, pairs of words ('motion–stillness', 'cold–hot', 'abstract–concrete', 'moisture–dryness') and short explanatory texts are unified on a dense picture plane, often inside a mandala-shaped format, with an absence of hierarchy. Referring to such metaphysical topics as time travel, alchemy and human consciousness, Laffoley's aim is 'to be transdisciplinary'. He studied architecture briefly at Harvard Graduate School of Design, but refutes any formal artistic doctrine: 'I've never been to art school or anything. I was working against what they were teaching. This is why they threw me out. I had no interest in what they were doing. But I don't rebel against anything.'11 He obtained his formal Architectural Licence in 1990. His ideas include a house based around the mathematical Klein bottle (similar to a Möbius strip, having no distinct inner and outer sides) with an entrance through a 'biochron time-suit'.

During the 1980s, Laffoley started designing 'physically alive architecture', using Goethe's idea of the Urpflanze (primal plant) as his starting point, from which endless varieties of plant life could be generated. In Laffoley's das Urpflanze Haus (1981–97), the spiral construction originates from a seed of the living fossil ginkgo biloba:

If you actually graft together all forms of vegetation across the surface of the earth, you will then have a single plant. And all of the species will come from that. How can you cross-graft, between different species? It's done by the ginkgo biloba. You have a single plant with a multiple root system.12

This architectural proposal offers multiple applications, such as helping to solve the problem of low-cost housing: 'You can give a person a bag of seeds and have an entire world in two months. With genetic engineering, you can increase the velocity of maturation, because you don't want to wait 50 years for one house.'13 Furthermore, 'Because of the regenerative power of plants, damaged structures will be able to self-repair through new growth. This is what I call the "Zombie Nimbus" effect, in which "dead" or damaged elements continue to exist energetically in their specific forms (and as such are visible in Kirlian photography).'14

Laffoley's conception of architecture reveals faith in the power of collective effort to make change. In 2002, he submitted a proposal to the World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition that called for building a high-rise edifice based on plans made almost a century earlier for the same site by Catalonian architect Antoni Gaudí. Commissioned by a wealthy New Yorker, Gaudí had drawn up plans for a 'Grand Hotel' over three hundred metres high, featuring parabolic towers of varying heights clustered around a central soaring shaft. Commenting on his proposal Laffoley said, 'I believe one thing is clear: anything that is placed there to begin the healing process cannot proceed from the same living ego impulse that motivated Minoru Yamasaki [the architect who designed the Twin Towers, a project on which Laffoley worked for 18 months in the 1960s]. That is why I feel Gaudí's Grand Hotel would be the appropriate solution… It would take the combined efforts of the entire artistic and architectural communities of New York City and other areas to bring the building into being.'15

Marcel Storr was also formulating an architectural proposal for building in the aftermath of attack. For years Storr thought Paris would be destroyed and the President of the United States of America would ask to borrow his drawings in order to rebuild it. Responding to this mission to reconstruct the French capital, he left

an inventory of over sixty drawings made using graphite, colour pencils and ink on Canson paper bound in pads. His first series of sacred buildings (churches, basilicas, cathedrals) was made between 1932 and 64, and a second one more intensely between 1964 and 65. Then, between 1965 and 75, he created 16 futurist megalopolises.16

Storr was a 'survivor',17 who created his artwork in isolation. During his lifetime, he passed unnoticed, taking lowly, solitary jobs gathering refuse and cleaning. In Paris he worked as a dishwasher at a college, a loadhandler at Les Halles, and was employed by a cleaning company before becoming a street sweeper in the Bois de Boulogne. He resisted human interaction, working on his drawings of imaginary buildings. 'Cut off from the world by his psychic structure, his deafness, his illiteracy… drawing was not a way of enjoying himself, but an act of creation to build a dam against an unbridled inner deluge, to enable him to restore a ruinous imagination.'18

His cities 'were alive for him, he strolled in them',19 wrote Liliane Kempf, who befriended Storr, and noted that just in front of the quarters in which he worked sat the business district of La Défense. For years, he had seen its towers rise one by one. In her view, his passion for towers began during this time. Storr's constructions soar upward; he sets out to draw imposing buildings that point toward majestic animated skies like rockets ready to take off. This rising effect recalls the aesthetic of landmarks like Antoni Gaudí's hallowed Sagrada Familia (1882–ongoing) and Simon Rodia's Watts Towers (1921–54). On the cornices of certain buildings, trees and plants were conceived as lighting systems, possibly by referring to the process of photosynthesis. In his later works, the constructions are covered with multiple layers of vegetation. Storr's use of contrasting scales in his compositions reinforces their overall dynamism: the interplay between buildings and detail, rendered with stunning precision, leaves no resting place for the viewer's eye. There are no half-measures between his dominant structures and the meticulous arrangements of stones, bridges, arrows, statues, display cases, extraordinary vehicles, clouds of birds whose rosary-shaped alignments indicate their seasonal departure for more clement climes. To this are added 'little human beings… prisoners of a crushing architecture. Terrifying buildings predominate over humans, who seem incidental. The creator unveils himself powerfully in his architecture even though he is in the miniscule crowd of people placed below.20

Richard Greaves, George Widener, Paul Laffoley and Marcel Storr have each developed a non-pedigreed architecture, free of convention. We sense here that there is 'no doubt a desire for security but perhaps even more so the need of defining a community's borders.'21 If these visionary architects built firstly for themselves, their work nevertheless addresses collective concerns: Richard Greaves' convictions about recycling are anchored in an ecological awareness for the benefit of future generations. A call for the common good is expressed by George Widener, who is 'convinced that balanced design of urban construction influences the wellbeing of people positively.'22 Paul Laffoley dreamt of lowcost housing that could be grown from seed. And Marcel Storr drew up plans to rebuild a real city – Paris – after an imagined nuclear attack. For although the houses built in the woods by Greaves, the Megalopolises of Widener, the physically alive architecture of Laffoley and the towers imagined by Storr are highly individualistic creations, their visions exhibit communal and idealistic ambitions.

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1. Richard Greaves, interview by Philippe Lespinasse, 2005. Archives Société des arts indisciplinés, Montréal.

2. Richard Greaves, quoted in S. Lombardi and V. Rousseau (eds.), 'Richard Greaves: Architect of the Possible', in Richard Greaves. Anarchitect, Milan/Montréal, 5 Continents Editions/Société des arts indisciplinés, 2005, p. 79.

3. Richard Greaves, interview by Philippe Lespinasse, op. cit.

4. George Widener, quoted in R. Cardinal and Colin Rhodes, The Art of George Widener, London, Henry Boxer Gallery, 2009, p. 60.

5. George Widener, interview with the author, Spring 2013. All the following unmarked quotes in this artist's section are coming from this exact same source.

6. Roger Cardinal, 'George Widener', Raw Vision, No. 51 (Summer 2005), p. 45.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid, p. 44.

9. Widener's subjects are depicted in a limited palette of black, red and blue, drawn fragile-looking paper napkins, which he has glued together and 'aged' by staining with tea.

10. Paul Laffoley, interview for Disinfo TV, 2002.

11. Paul Laffoley, interview by Valérie Rousseau, 16 February 2013.

12. Paul Laffoley, interview for Disinfo TV, op. cit.

13. Ibid.

14. Paul Laffoley, 'The physically alive structured environment: the Bauharoque', in Jeanne Marie Wasilik (ed.), The Boston Visionary Cell, New York, Kent Fine Art, 2002, p. 80. Kirlian photography is defined as a 'photographic technique in which a high-voltage current passed over a subject in contact with photographic film or paper [which] produces an image surrounded by a luminous radiation, or aura, which some claim is a bioenergetic field that can reveal information about the subject's physical health and emotional state.' In Mosby's Medical Dictionary, Elsevier, 8th edition, 2009.

15. Paul Laffoley, 'Fables of the Reconstruction: Gaudi's NYC vision', JUXTAPOZ magazine, March/April 2002.

16. Laurent Danchin, 'Le génie à l'état pur', in Marcel Storr, Paris, Libella, 2011, p. 17.

17. The couple Liliane and Bertrand Kempf reported Marcel Storr had been abandoned by his mother when he was not yet three years old, had a difficult childhood marked by illness, mistreatment, and violence, and notably became deaf from beatings. The Kempfs kept and conserved his drawings: 'He didn't want to show his drawings to anyone; furthermore, once they were finished, they no longer interested him. He never wanted to see them again after giving them to me.' Liliane Kempf, 'Sous la toile cirée, in Marcel Storr, op. cit., p. 8.

18. Françoise Cloarec, 'L'architecture improbable', in Marcel Storr, op. cit., pp. 21, 23.

19. Liliane Kempf, op. cit., p. 7.

20. Françoise Cloarec, op. cit., p. 23.

21. Bernard Rudofsky, Architecture without architects, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1965, n.p.

22. Udo Kittelmann and Claudia Dichter, 'Secret Universe', in George Widener: Secret Universe IV, Verlag Der Buchhandlung Marcel Storr, Untitled, 1973 König, 2013, p. 11.