

# The Aftermath of Architecture

**Nadim Karam**

Published in A + U Magazine, no. 267, December 1992

---

*"... liberated a radioactive cloud that almost encircled the globe. Just one of the major catastrophes that have marked the 1980's..."*

I turned the volume down to zero, keeping only the silent, floating images, and put on the radio down low.

We are in a decade where environmental and ecological conditions will dictate every step we try to take, I thought to myself. While accepting the premises of the human/nature consciousness, it is our duty to resist the restrictions that will be imposed on the creative process, rendering society sterile, boring, docile...

## Dialogue with Space

The dark screen of the computer stared at me, the cursor paused, waiting. I started typing; "It will take the human race several decades to get familiar with high-technology. Even then many will never grasp its significance. It will always be a weapon in the hands of the few who will endanger the whole human race. The high-tech man of the city will become alienated from his rural roots, a symptom of the age."

I erased what I had just typed, and began again.

"Instead of being vulnerable to physical harm, the next generation will be prone to social and psychological harm."

I erased that, too. Leaning back, I reached for a well-worn book, and began flicking through the pages until I came to a favorite passage;

"The interaction between a man-made environment and the action presumed for it comes from an archaic and primitive instinct in human nature; a continuous celebration of one's own existence."

I paused, digesting the words, and began reading again;

"Everything around us, including ourselves, is breath-taking, often becoming apparent when alienated or destabilized. Existence in both its life and death is the most breathtaking phenomenon. This only becomes evident when daily routines are injected with modes of absurdity."

The program changed to a feature on sexual harassment. I stopped the radio, and put the TV on volume 2. Then I began writing;

"At the turn of this century, the growth of contemporary cities is reaching its limits of standardization and saturation. People can no longer escape the rules of the social systems politically imposed on them.

And TV is the living proof.

There is a need for emancipation in different zones within the city through ephemeral, accumulated actions that try to break through the existing network and agitate its very structure to provide more flexibility...I call such cultural phenomena "Hapsitus". They can appear as a result of a visible form (urban setting) or from their combination.

It is not architecture in the sense that we know it. It is not a built-up structure to contemplate, nor is it a theatrical play to applaud. It is a concentrated energy distribution network of the city, continually breaking established orders to create new ones.

The break from the ordinary (which paradoxically becomes the ordinary) creates lapses of rebellion, fantasy and anarchy that provoke us to react. The appearance of a new organism in the city keeps the city in constant challenge with itself. The new organism is rejected or accepted depending on the citizens.

Architecture has become a sophisticated shelter that accepts the daily activities and discoveries performed on the way to evolution. However novelty is introduced into static architecture, rapid

decay is inevitable. Architecture is always dying. What is born are the traces. What remains are ruins, ruins, ruins...

What we are going through is not post-modernism or deconstructionism, or any other "ism". We are crossing the bridge of experimental architecture. And experimental architecture is not architecture. Experimental architecture is a celebration. It is the aftermath of architecture; architecture in its act of being.

Hapsitus is not..."

## **Into The Void**

"...Hapsitus is not...is not...is not..." My inability to express myself frustrated me; I couldn't go further. I reached for the erase key but couldn't find it.

The room seemed to be morphologically changing – everything was becoming concave. I was suddenly transplanted into a boundless sphere of glass. I lost notion of scale. I lost notion of myself and felt as if I was living on breath-taking instants.

I could only move within my confines and I was alone, watching the world through a double-layered glass. Depending on the angle of my gaze, I could either see everything from the outside world or I could see myself a thousand times bigger.

Everything I saw was transformed into silhouettes of three-dimensional shadows. The elements forming the scenery seemed to be veiled in a black fog. It was magical, suggesting primitive and organic life. I felt a nostalgia for the illusion of life, which strangely enough provoked sparks of hedonistic desire stronger than the urge for life itself.

It was the first time I encountered a situation where the illusion of life was the basic premise for accepting the reality of life - although most of the high-tech cultures of the world are developing on concepts of simulation, illusion and virtual spaces.

What is out there must be reaching me refracted and filtered, a double distortion caused by my "a-priori" distance from others. I couldn't yet grasp the totality of it, but realized that I was in a tube, most probably the filament of an incandescent light bulb. All people and things I encountered were sucked through an exhaust tube into the filament. Then they went back the same way to exit from the light bulb. Everything happening inside the tube was stored in a residue cylinder. In the beginning I was made uncomfortable by the reception of fuzzy, noisy and irrelevant information to my growth, which initiated me into the process of selection. I used it as a device to release myself from media brainstorming. I also noticed that even when I was standing still, the light bulb moved...

## **Echoes, Shadows and Memories**

The next thing I knew, I was back in front of the computer's screen. Nothing had changed in the room. Only the TV, which was now giving the latest news.

What I had experienced was a moving scenery. The atmospheric elements of this could help explain the present nature of architecture: a virtual constant in the city, measured in scales of echoes (future), shadows (present), and memories (past).

I hastened to type:

## **Reverberating Echoes**

Echo is the virtual aftermath of a present action. It is the future trace of an occurrence.

An echo spreads wider than its source. It is lighter and more flexible.

As a noise reverberates echoes, the core of a building reverberates layers going from the inner basic structure to the outer ephemeral elements. These become discontinuous and fragmented when they combine with the urban elements and network of the city. This combination, if well maintained, should lead to a fusion between the building and its environment.

The closer we get towards the outer surface of the building, the more we get concerned with its echo-layers. As the landscape and the approach enrich the substance of the whole architecture, the adding of more outer layers contributes to its longevity.

The envelope of a building interacts more with its environment when the outer layer is formed with a layer of structurally independent light installations. It becomes even more dynamic when the ephemeral elements of light, sound and fragrance are considered in the general layout of the building.

When these elements emerge from the building and appear on the outer layers, they extend the boundaries of the building to inter-relate with nature.

Echoes are virtual and cannot be clearly defined. The outer layers suggest the future and should be developed as part of the building's growth. They help to ensure a step-by-step spatial cognition of the building for approaching visitors.

## **Moving Shadows**

Shadows play a major role in the growth of a building. During the day, they keep the building in continuous visual movement, suggesting the motion of time. Relief and detail are put in dramatic contrast. We have always studied meticulously the behavior of shade and shadows, while often neglecting to discover the congruency of a building by its silhouette at twilight.

As dusk deepens, architecture metamorphoses into an agglomeration of visible darkness, of lines traced on a darkening sky. A scenery of primitive shapes evoking our innate instincts. Walls, windows, decorative details, etc. all merge into one darkness. Vanishing details, one after another, give presence to the silhouette of one organic body. Contours, edges, projecting antennas and other elements transform the building into a nocturnal, motionless beast.

When the full moon appears, night shadows become apparent. Light filters into darkness and contrast fades. Shades and shadows take on a mystic feeling. Then comes the effect of projected artificial light, designed to relate to the building and its environment. It emphasizes a few chosen details forgotten by the advent of night.

At dawn, there is a certain freshness to the city added to an almost unbearable lightness of architecture. This effect of the urban textural appearance in the early hours of morning is well known by architects returning home after an overnight of work before a deadline. The silence of the city gives curiousness to shapes, emphasizing futile details.

## **Perceptive Memories**

Any place we encounter has its own history connected to legends and stories told by our ancestors. In the city, memories of the past are formalized into cultures.

Architecture can develop as the succession of spaces that express a story emerging from our memory of the site, and formulate it in the context of its environment. Shapes and forms grow with the unfolding of the story.

The layers of the building become narrative, giving suspense to the story. Injected with imagination and illusion, they activate our memory of the past. Instead of a static, defined composition, we have a relation between different scenes, forming architectural settings in the context of a theatrical presentation.

The result is diversity in space. A situation impossible to comprehend in its totality, but one which encourages discovery by a perceptive memory, formulating a subjective relationship with the spaces being experienced. After visiting story-telling architecture, we take home the memory of it, without worrying about losing the spatial organization.

I decided to stop writing for the day. I went out for a walk, leaving the TV on. I would need company when I came back.