

ROT MUNCHING ARCHITECTS



Mark Foster Gage

Triumphant secretions, sculpted in foul
mist, dehydrated spectral birth, at war
with false metal, fucked and quartered,
erection of possessed flesh, rot munching
architects, cadaveric cornholination,
fluorescent discharge of, sloppy
viviseconds, endless bleeding journey,
shivering whore of light, drunk on vomit
of heaven, as tongue meets ash.

—Steven Shearer

Sandwiched between the predictably domineering presences of the British and German pavilions at the 54th Venice Biennial was Canada's clearly pissed-off decorated shed. The nearly thirty-foot tall freestanding Venturian façade featured a nastily worded poem by the artist, Steven Shearer. The National Gallery of Canada described it as "drawing from the vocabulary of Black and Death metal music, which conjures the sublime, nihilistic power of language and seeks to provoke a visceral response in viewers." Pissed can be a dangerous thing; ripping down the barriers of decorum in favor of unedited and desperate rawness, prioritizing the honesty of the loud and direct over the partial truths offered by the politic and calm. The visceral response Shearer's text provokes, while not uncommon in today's contemporary art scene, remains entirely foreign to contemporary architectural discourse, dominated by infantilizing arrow-laden colorful diagrams, energy-saving over space-producing master narratives, and worse, simplistic natural metaphors spun by weavers of words to explain even the most banal buildings. The time has come to tear down the façades of decorum and cast off the hackneyed narratives of success that thinly veil the discipline's Brobdingnagian angst. It's time to put away the thick-framed plastic glasses and professional-genius-artist ruse, give up the jargon-laden verbal masturbation, and stop trying to pass off our cheap Zara suits as Prada. Offering a delicious dose of discontent, Shearer's text highlights the unmistakably sad state of our profession, which has in recent history undergone a swift Gouldian devolution from the starchitects of magazine and television fame to the bottom feeders of the building industry. But there it was, emblazoned dead center for all to see: we are ROT MUNCHING ARCHITECTS. The sentiment seemed evident to me, but was word officially out? Did others know? Had architecture's pathetic plight been discovered? It's time to pull off the blanket of desperation and expose the architectural profession in all its rot-munching decrepitude and get pissed.

Architecture in the postcritical, post-starchitect, posthumanist, postparametric twenty-first century is changing, or perhaps has already changed, certainly into a scrappier discipline, if not one of actual scraps. In such times our youngest and greatest minds are encouraged to fight, to scrounge, and to root for remains that might be used to cobble together any experimental construct at even the most minuscule of scales—and for free. The simple fact is that architectural experimentation has left the building. Literally. And instead of being a discipline that innovates through the practice of designing buildings, we now innovate through the practice of assembling leftovers. From shredded blue jeans used as insulation to discarded skateboards used as walls and from cardboard tube structures (that recently received our highest award—the Pritzker), to shipping-container volumes, architecture is becoming the new casserole of the twenty-first century's industrial leftovers.

The results of most of these architectural secretions go by a limited palette of names—none nearly as glamorous as "building" but rather the more disposable and less lofty terms of pop-ups, installations, pavilions, and temporary anythings. Like Alan Ginsburg, but less optimistic (and perhaps not quite as serious), I too have "seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix."¹ The difference is that the drug dealers my generation usually seeks aren't illegal park dwellers. They go by more recognizable names, which to protect my career I am referring to here as "The Museum of Modernesque Arts." I myself have groveled at the base of that (fictional) altar: doing free work for a competition, the winner of which is guaranteed to lose money in the endeavor, hoping to please somebody, anybody, who will listen. In her painful, but only because it's entirely true, *Artforum* article "Vanishing Point," Sylvia Lavin writes: "Young Architects are often forced to spend their own money, exploit the labor of even younger student architects, and donate the models and drawings produced along the way."² Why is this allowable? Because architects are not only encouraged to bottom feed but are being instructed by our mightiest institutions, the very ones that should be championing youthful experimentation and design, that we are a disposable discipline unworthy of actual investment. This isn't a complaint specific to the Museum of Modernesque Arts, but as that particular (fictional) organization had a reported

2009 operating budget of \$160,000,000³ and dedicated a paltry \$15,000 in fees for the winner of its Youngish Architects Program (or .0012 percent of its budget for the fees for the largest item in its collection in any given year), it stands as a clear front runner in a posse of too many high-end criminals for this particular sheriff to tackle.

An even more terrifying hole that we seem to be rooting around in is entirely a territory of the twenty-first century: pure online architectural prostitution. Whereas late in life Philip Johnson famously stated, “I’m a whore,” the profession today has managed to far exceed even his sluttiest dreams by willfully participating in digital abuse through sites such as “arcbazar.com.”⁴ Whereas the Museum of Modernesque Arts may exploit a mere ten architectural designers a year, Arcbazar exploits thousands. The premise of this Web site is simple: 1. A client uploads a design problem; 2. Architects and designers accept these client problems as “challenges” and develop solutions that they then submit for free; and 3. After all submissions are received (for which not a single one has been paid for in any capacity), the top three winners split the “prize money” as set by the so-called “client.” According to Arcbazar’s statistics, the projects receive an average of nine actual design submissions. Meaning, of course, that for every architect who is paid something (and by something I mean hardly anything) there are six who have designed, drawn, rendered, and submitted designs and been paid absolutely nothing. The Web site notes: “As a client you will benefit in two key ways: First, you will get more than one single design solution; and second, you can get these design solutions at a dramatically lower price range compared to traditional design acquisition channels.”⁵ The “dramatically lower price,” is, of course, code for “You can take advantage of young architect’s industry-confirmed lack of self-worth.” Here are two testimonials of projects that “clients” received designs for via Arcbazar, adjacent to what they paid—in total—for said designs:

\$1,200: “We ran a competition for 4 weeks. We offered \$1,200 in prize money. We had a total of 8 submissions after 16 designers signed up. Overall experience was great, they were very responsive to questions that we had, and the designs submitted were overall very good. ... If I had hired an architect first, and then asked him/her to draw eight different designs with conceptual and



dimensions, they would have been happy, and I would have spent every last dime I have for the renovation on architect fees. This worked exactly as we had hoped, if not better.”

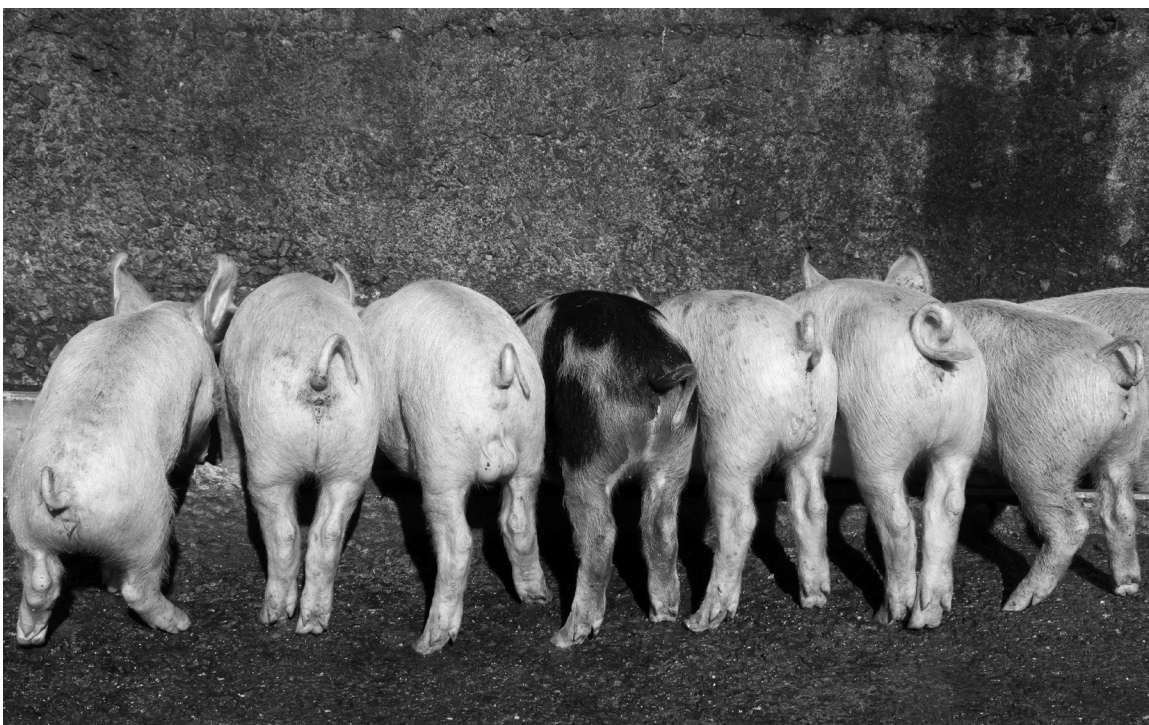
\$1,100: “We ran a contest for ideas and plans for a mid-century modern whole house renovation plus an addition to our garage, all on a limited budget. ... We ran the contest for 3 weeks and had many designers submit questions. ... In the end we had several excellent designs to choose from and were very impressed with the results. All of the designers provided 3D renderings making it easier to envision the finished product and make good decisions. ... We had an excellent experience! We feel like we got an excellent product for a steal!”

Yet another project submitted on Arcbazar called for the redesign of an existing building in New Mexico, including “the façade, parking lot, signage, and planting.” The award money offered was \$1,100, to be split between the top three “winners.” I do not know the alchemy through which an architect who is paid, in this case, an average of \$366 to redesign an entire building is considered a “winner,” but this one had three. It also had, according to Arcbazar statistics, six nonwinners, who were paid nothing. One has to ask, in what other industry is prostitution so unregulated? Could you get a massage for ninety minutes and pay only for the five in which you actually grunted? Or extending Johnson’s analogy to its logical conclusion, could you in fact have a ménage à neuf with your favorite prostitutes and only pay for a ménage à trois? Such scenarios are unfathomable except in architecture, for which

prostitution is actually too lofty a term: prostitutes are paid for their work. Five thousand architects and designers are currently signed up to participate in Arcbazar.

The humiliation of these small scraps, however, is nothing compared to the political rooting of the high-stakes corporate architectural world. Let's consider, in even greater detail, recent history's greatest global architectural feast: the new World Trade Center project. After Beyer Blinder Belle Architects presented a design misfire to the public in July 2002, a new

competition was organized and received more than two thousand entries, none of them paid for. If one were to do the math on the calculator of architectural desperation, it would reveal the following equation: assume each firm spent a minimum of a month working on its entry (a very conservative estimate), with three people working full-time, then the total man-hours donated without pay to this competition was 480 hours per firm, or 960,000 total. This is almost eleven years of free work the architecture community has donated to these competition



proposals. If those hours were billed at a very, very low rate of \$75 per hour, it would be equal to \$72 million worth of unpaid work. In other words, nose willingly forced deep into the soil, architecture as a discipline made a \$72 million dollar donation to Larry Silverstein, whose net worth is currently estimated at \$3.5 billion.

There will be those who say, and perhaps rightly so, that this is a small price to pay for what was ultimately supposed to be one of the greatest architectural prizes in history—certainly among the most visible. The thing about foul odors, however, is that they rise from even the deepest of depths to the greatest of heights. And so from the rotten landscape of discarded skateboards and dot-com prostitution, such an odor wafted at least as high as 1,776 feet—just high enough to turn all of the contributors, and even the competition winners, into willing swine. Given the expenditure of \$72 million, architects could at least rest assured that some lucky architect was going to come out on top—if only.

Our moment came in December 2002, when from the original list of more than two thousand entrants a short list emerged that included Lord Norman Foster; the “more established” super-group of Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Charles Gwathmey, and Steven Holl; the “up-and-coming” super-group of Foreign Office Architects, Greg Lynn FORM, Imaginary Forces, Kevin Kennon, Reiser + Umemoto, and UN Studio; Studio Daniel Libeskind; Skidmore, Owings and Merrill; and the “THINK” group of Shigeru Ban, Frederic Schwartz, Ken Smith, and Rafael Viñoly. From a massive effort on the part of architects globally, our champions had emerged and represented, like shimmering white knights, multiple generations and varied design sensibilities. It was architecture’s shining moment, our discipline was front-page news, and architects globally basked in the newfound glamour of their deserving profession.

After comprehensive deliberation by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC)—the organization charged with selecting the winner—the proposal by THINK was chosen. But all things foul are not limited to the state of Denmark. The following morning the naïve aspirations of any architects who actually believed that by voluntarily entering a competition they stood a chance of winning by fair means were fecund with decay. George Pataki, then governor of New York State, reminisces: “I remember waking up in the morning and seeing on the front page of the *Times* that the LMDC was going to choose the Viñoly plan, and going, No, this can’t be because I thought the Viñoly plan: 1. was unbuildable, 2. was economically unsound, and

3. where the footprints were had these skeletons, really, rising into the sky. Which to me symbolized the destruction of the past instead of the hope of the future—and I just thought it was a terrible idea.”⁶

Roland Betts, who from 2001 to 2005 was one of Pataki’s appointees to the board of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, recalls: “So now we were in a pretty awful position here because the LMDC had voted, not just as the site committee but as the full LMDC, and expressed a clear preference for Viñoly—and basically Pataki came in and pulled the rug out from under the LMDC. And you know he just, he reversed the decision.”⁷ And so THINK, the rightful winner of the massive competition (at least \$72 million worth), had been officially snuffed because of a single person’s fear of an infantilizing skeletal metaphor.

Next up for some rot-munching of his own was the new “winner,” Daniel Libeskind, who was selected “officially” by Governor Pataki, whom we already know to be susceptible to metaphors and was smitten by the fact that the scheme was 1,776 feet tall, thereby mystically reflecting the very roots of freedom and democracy in America. (We shall forget the irony of Pataki overturning the LMDC’s *democratic vote* in a single-handed dictatorial gesture.) Libeskind, also an immigrant and a frequent spinner of expansive metaphorical tales, was Pataki’s man. Architectural writer Philip Nobel notes, “For three months, Libeskind gave Pataki everything he needed. He got in front of any camera, and told a gripping story, and there was imagery to attach to it. And it was ringing the right political bells, and everyone was happy. Except for [the developer] Larry Silverstein.”⁸

Other than “rot-munching architects,” artist Steven Shearer had a few other choice phrases in his biennial totem, among them “sculpted in foul mist,” which seems an apt way to describe the machinations of the World Trade Center selection process. It seems the only thing resistant to the rotting and decay-producing properties of this foul mist was money—and that was exactly what developer Silverstein controlled. Where democracy and design had failed for THINK, and metaphor and personal history eventually failed for Libeskind—who was, for lack of a better term, demoted—it was ultimately money that succeeded in Silverstein’s selection of architect David Childs, from the titanic corporate firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. Silverstein insider and project facilitator Jano Lieber best sums up the ultimate dismissal of Libeskind when he says, “Larry announced the truth, which is he’s going to do the building with the architect *he* chose, which

is David Childs of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.”⁹ Briefly celebrated and now world-famous, Libeskind was forced into some metaphorical mud of his own when Childs essentially cut him completely out of the design process. Regarding this, Childs says, “I think that in fact Daniel Libeskind thought that he would have more of a role, and that I was somehow going to be changed and execute his role in the design. ... Frankly Larry would not permit that.”¹⁰ Libeskind was not only cut out of the design process completely but was dragged along as a metaphorical apologist step-child and forced to acquiesce, and even praise, the unfathomably bland design by Childs. An aide to Governor Pataki recalls, “I can remember shuttling back and forth between Daniel [Libeskind] and David [Childs] trying to get Daniel to say that this is a beautiful building, and he [Daniel Libeskind] kept looking and said finally, ‘Yeah, I think I like it, I think I like it.’ So I called up the governor’s office and said, ‘Danny’s gonna say nice things; I think we’re not going to have an issue there.’”¹¹ At the end of everything—the \$72 million competition, THINK winning and losing, Daniel Libeskind winning and losing—the ultimate winner, money, a.k.a. David Childs, noted poetically: “It was a functioning, operating office building in a capitalistic society. It was not just a piece of sculpture there in the air.”¹² Munch.

Architects, both stars and start-ups, who walk these desolate terrains, are forced to languish, like the zombies of television’s *The Walking Dead*, on Shearer’s “endless bleeding journey” to continual disappointment. Architecture, subsumed nearly completely into the financial workings of late capitalism, has been forced into the meekness of near total economic and cultural devaluation. The landscape of unpaid competitions, cheap, trashy installations, online whoring, and powerlessness in the face of corporate spreadsheets is bleak. To make matters worse, as a discipline we have been among the most active

accomplices in the construction of this vacuous landscape. Through willingly, even desperately, rooting for the aforementioned food scraps and clawing pathways over our littermates, we each contribute, in Visine-size droplets, to the rising ocean of architectural disempowerment.

Instead of munching on detritus, architecture needs a new diet. A better diet. Such a diet—nutritionally fortified, organic, free range and Brooklyn hipster-approved, can no longer include the desperate donation of work to corporate deities, or the groveling at the feet of wealthy cultural institutions. And our new diet can certainly no longer include a mentality where the accumulation of industrial leftovers is mistaken for architectural innovation or empowerment. We not only deserve more, but can offer more. Much more. One definition of “rot” is to become unsound or weak. There can be no other possible description of a discipline in such a state as ours. And perhaps this rot should be encouraged, even accelerated, as it is only when the process of rot is complete that the ground underneath is fortified and nourished for a new generation of unpredictable growth.

Howling as an act of desperation was, of course, never limited to the beatniks. Much earlier, immediately following his own *Scream*, Norwegian painter Edvard Munch articulated quite accurately our current architectural discontent in his sulfurous sentiment “From my rotting body, flowers shall grow.” The ground of architecture will someday soon become fertile from decomposition; it awaits a new generation of seed-planters equipped with the self-worth, confidence, and ambition to resist the temptation of easily reachable, decaying ground fruit. All it takes to reach the more nourishing and sweet growth higher on the tree is to learn to stand erect, stretch, and reach straight upward using the piece of anatomy most of ten neglected by architects today—the spine.

1 Allen Ginsberg and Lewis Hyde, *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1984).
 2 Sylvia Lavin, “Vanishing Point,” *Artforum*, October 2012, 219.
 3 Philip Boroff, “Museum of Modern Art’s Lowry Earned \$1.32 Million in 2008-2009,” *Bloomberg.com*, August 10, 2009, accessed March 18, 2014.

4 All information regarding Arcbazar comes from “Arcbazar.com—Architectural Competitions | Home Designs | Remodeling | Interior Designs | Landscape Designs | Residential Designs | Commercial Designs,” October 30, 2013.
 5 “Frequently Asked Questions: Clients,” FAQ, *Arcbazar.com*, November 6, 2013.

6 *16 Acres*, Film, directed by Richard Hankin (Tanexis Productions, 2013), 36:29.
 7 *Ibid.*, 37:13.
 8 *Ibid.*
 9 *Ibid.*
 10 *Ibid.*, 42:25.
 11 *Ibid.*, 59:49.
 12 *Ibid.*, 40:55.