letters

Three cheers for less and more

Finding a future for Florey

On shadows and neon: simplicity and contradiction

I enjoyed reading Marc Treib's essay 'Simplicity and Belief' in **arq** 11/3+4 (pp. 223–236). It irritated and interested me enough to pull *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* from the bookshelf and read it through from cover to cover for the first time in over ten years.

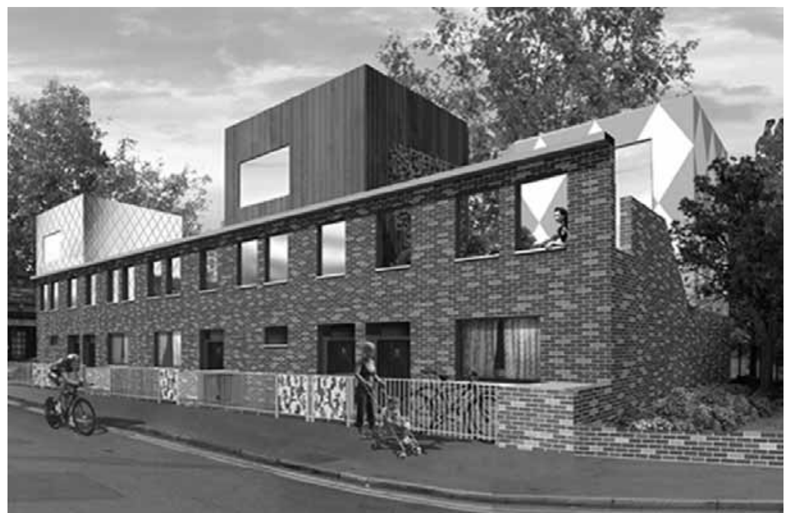
My weekend ends with a renewed enthusiasm for Robert Venturi's extraordinary work, and a bolstered conviction that architecture should be outward-looking and accommodating, varied and open. Reading Treib and Venturi has reminded me that if I believe anything, it is in the importance of allowing the world to challenge me, and in engaging positively with the ambiguities and vulgarities of reality rather than turning away from the world and 'plucking out my own eyes' in disgust.

There is much in Marc Treib's essay that I (partly) agree with. He is right that moments of architectural tranquillity, of quiet and distilled complexities, are appropriate and necessary. I also agree that there is a place in the world for an efficient architecture of simple means. Like Treib, I also value the scales of architectural experience and layered complexity that he refers to as 'Contac-capsule architecture'.

However, Treib's opening suggestion that we live in a world of 'perhaps undue complexity', and that the *only* answer is an inward-looking 'quietness' seems ridiculous to me. Treib's position appears to be one of disdain for reality and antagonism towards the messiness of the world. I cannot share his position. Treib describes a turning inwards – a self-imposed monastic separation from things – that I find all too familiar among architects: a position I find arrogant and damaging.

The notion that the world is any more complex now than it ever was would be hard to prove, and the notion of 'undue complexity' remains hard to define. Antagonism towards complexity and apparent disorder is nothing new of course. In *Complexity and Contradiction*, Venturi refers to Mies' call to 'create order out of the desperate confusion of our time' and Treib's piece is perhaps an essay in the kind of 'painting [of] fairy stories over our chaotic reality' to which Venturi alludes in the Preface to his 1966 book, quoting Kenzo Tange. While I am wary of the current obsession with making new forms for form's sake, with myopic logarithmic explorations that only ever seem to generate flowing blandscapes, and with the 'jazzy' marketing image, I am not prepared to disregard these contemporary obsessions completely, as Treib does. Neither am I prepared to treat them with Treib's condescending disdain. Treib's caricature of the contemporary scene (architectural, political, social, commercial ...) is simplistic and unhelpful. He sets up the contemporary situation as a terrifying picture of the superficial and grotesque in order that he might be forgiven for averting his eyes and 'resisting' engagement.

Treib states that market forces today demand – and architects tend to provide – 'complexity, fragmentation and the curvilinear' before he goes on to make his case for a simple, condensed and spiritual architecture. However, my experience of the past ten years of popular design magazines, and television's *Grand Designs*, suggests that market forces have been demanding bland, orthogonal, pseudo-spiritual minimalism rather than anything complex or fragmentary. Last week, for instance, I passed a clean-lined Barratt Homes development in Crystal Palace branded 'Zen'.



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AOC Architecture, project for Crown Terrace, Elephant and Castle, South London

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Unlike Treib, I do not consider it appropriate that we should resist current popular tastes or avert our eyes from market trends – however ugly, Disneyfied, Monsanto-inspired, alien, droopy, messy, pseudo-Zen, blobby or jazzy they may seem. Nor do I think it appropriate for us to turn our backs on the bigger issues of complexity, difference, global communication or rapid urbanisation to reside instead in a world of singular simplicity. Rather, we should engage openly and critically with the messy ambiguities of the world. We should delight in reality – even in those recalcitrant aspects that Treib would seem to seek to suppress or avoid. Rather than bemoaning and resisting undue complexity, I'd rather take Venturi's advice and, 'resist bemoaning confusion'.

I am not advocating a situation where 'anything goes all of the time', but rather one where 'anything should be able to go at any time'. This is an opportunity to keep opportunities open rather than close them down: Venturi's 'both/and' as opposed to Treib's 'either/or'. Louis Kahn's statement that 'Architecture must have bad spaces as well as good spaces' seems particularly appropriate. Complexity of form certainly does not *always* equate to complexity of experience, but it does in many instances. In the same respect, I accept that less is not *always* a bore.

Treib confesses to a fondness for 'elegant solutions and simple things' that informs his singular position. For what they are worth, my penchants are more contradictory. I enjoy both the elegant and the clumsy, the simple and the complicated, the polite and the vulgar. Perhaps, like him, this has something to do with my age and upbringing. This suburban child of the 1980s is happy to let Chas and Dave share an I-Tunes mix with Susumu Yokota, the Byrds, the Clash and Nik Kershaw. I am also appreciative of silence. I am genuinely as fond of my parents' 1930s semi-detached house as I am of any example of high architecture, and as fond of Postwar Croydon as I am of Renaissance Florence.

Treib's partiality for elegance, simplicity and functional efficiency is familiarly Modernist. He uses examples from the natural world and bridge design to illustrate his case for simple means and paring down. However, Treib's choice to compare two bridge designs as a way of explaining efficiency in architecture is revealing. Bridges are usually structures with relatively simple programmatic and functional requirements. What about structures that support dual functions or a plurality of functions? What about structures that might support a plurality of meanings and messages as well as a plurality of functions? An architecture that is outward looking as well as inward looking has to engage with all kinds of conflicting, shifting and plural demands and must challenge 'efficiency' as the sole motivation for its resulting form. In fact, to counter Treib's case for elegance and efficiency, I believe that there is much to be said for providing a degree of indeterminacy and apparently 'inefficient' bagginess

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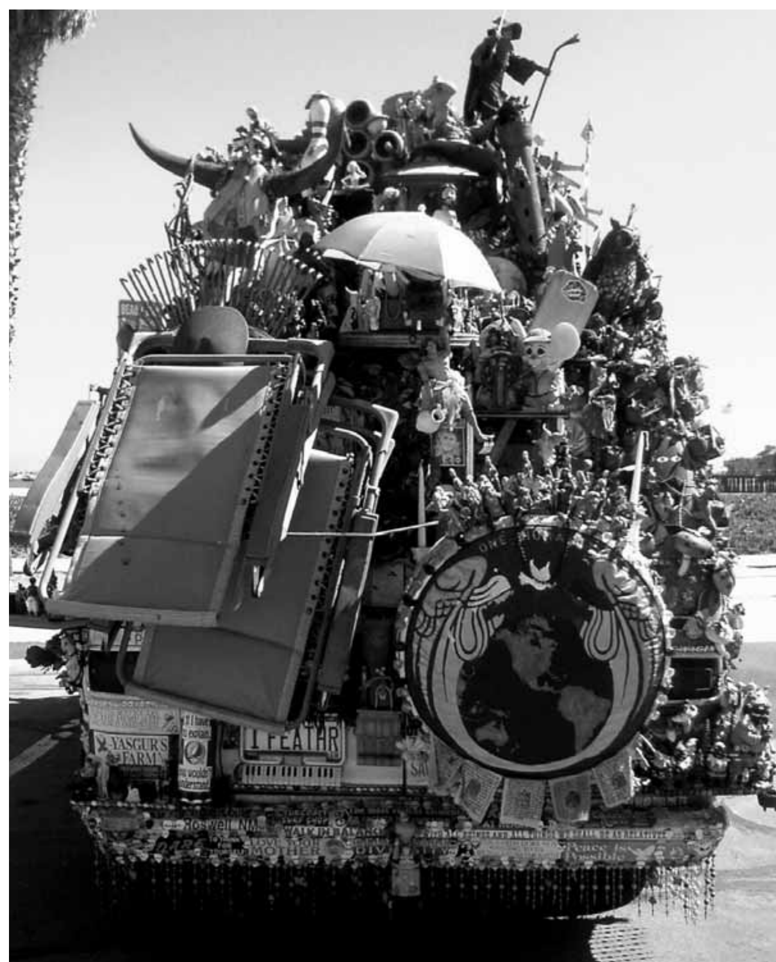

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'… part new-world-spiritual, part mobile chapel, part money-earning spectacle …', a VW camper, California

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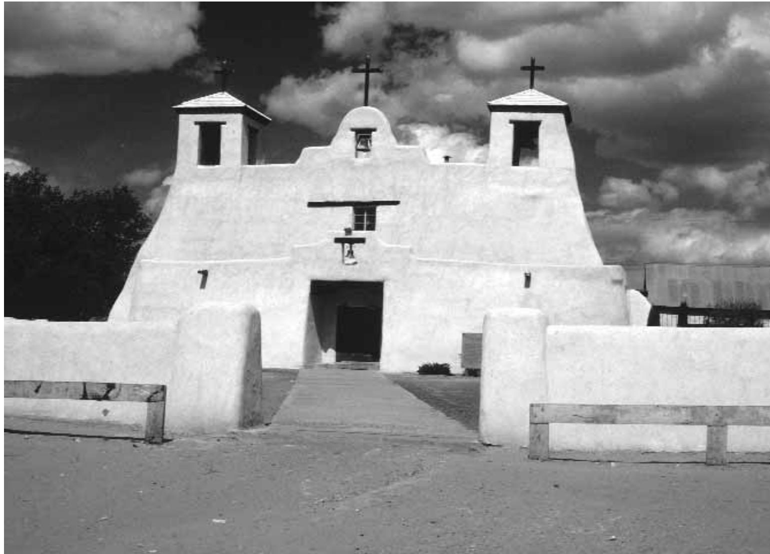

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Church of San Agustín, Isleta Pueblo, New Mexico

in architecture to allow for an engagement with shifting contexts. One example of the value of bagginess can be found in the kind of over-blown, wastefully ornamental Victorian facade that fans of simple means and efficiency are prone to despise. Extraneous ornament usually also doubles-up as an unintended landscape rich in biodiversity – providing nooks and crannies perfect for nesting sites for birds and habitats for all kinds of insects and flora. This is perhaps akin to the value of the in-between *poché* space referred to by Venturi; the gap between inside and outside that negotiates a 'duel between native constitution and the outside environment'. This is the baggy, in-between space in architecture and cities that allows them to be knocked around and adapt to changing conditions, aspirations and dreams. The space in which serendipity, future memory and future pigeons might find a home.

AOC's Crown Terrace project in Elephant and Castle, South London, uses ornament, pattern and varied materiality as a 'way in' for future residents. It invites them to take ownership, make their own marks. Combined with this, an element of baggy, fallow space provides residents with the freedom to extend their living space up and out. This is space for expression, space for mistakes, space for difference. It brings to mind Cedric Price's call for architects to 'aim to miss'. In contrast, Treib's examples of Shaker buildings and the churches of New Mexico suggest that an economy of means somehow leads to a distilled aesthetic of simplicity, 'cleanliness and functionalism' that resonates with some kind of higher truth. 'The roots of thought and emotion' as Treib puts it. These examples do demonstrate that an economy of means *can* result in a particular, simple and undeniably beautiful architecture, but they are better at demonstrating the way in which a very singular and particular system of belief and set of motivations is condensed into built form. But economy of means combined with very different but equally specific 'beliefs' and motivations can result – with equal validity – in the complicated as well as the simple. The most beautifully bizarre, ambiguous, visually and spatially complex manifestations can be found. The labyrinthine troglodyte settlement of Matera, with its mind-boggling network of super-blobby interiors, is the result of harsh necessity and extremely limited means for instance.

Another example is a VW camper van that I came across on a Californian beach last summer. Home to a nomadic hippy, it was encrusted with a bristling baroque fantasy of plastic toys, plastic landscapes, silly scenes and shrines. It was part new-world-spiritual, part mobile chapel, part money-earning spectacle (I paid him a dollar to take some photographs). It was a very different kind of product of very particular beliefs, motivations, an economy of means and a wonderfully unique imagination.

Nature may tell us – as Treib states – that necessity is the mother of invention, but it also allows us to dream up the fantastic; whether the strange half monkey, half fish, 'Merman' or voodoo constructions made from bits of old toys on display at the Horniman Museum in London, the fantastical drawings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi or those of Birds Portchmouth Russum, the latest jazzy computer-generated fly-through or the surreal, painterly but pragmatic urban visions of Will Alsop.

For me, it is not that such examples are any more truthful – or any more worthy of 'belief' – than Treib's Shaker architecture or the Church of San Agustín in New Mexico. We should simply be open to all of these things existing ambiguously in the same world at the same time. They are each beautiful in their own way.

So hooray for simplicity and condensed complexity. But hooray for messiness, vulgarity and quirkiness too. Hooray for the Shakers' 'functional cleanliness', but hooray for knick-knacks, dust and honky-tonk homeliness. Hooray for quietness and the limited means of New Mexico's churches and hooray for the contrived baroque of the hippy camper van and the fashionable forms of computer-generated architecture. Hooray for bagginess and blobs. Hooray for beautiful buildings and hooray for ugly ones. Hooray for Takefumi Aida's Nirvana House in Tokyo and hooray for my mum and dad's semi-detached house in Croydon. Hooray for washes of light that dissolve walls, and hooray for walls of neon and rolling digital displays. Hooray for Big Lamp Corner in Weston-Super-Mare. Hooray for Robert Venturi and, of course, hooray for Marc Treib.

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Stirling and Florey

Igea Troiani's paper 'Stirling's worth' (**arq** 11/3+4, pp. 291–299) raises interesting and important issues at the intersection of architectural history, architectural criticism and conservation, fields that collide in real life, but are normally kept as separate discourses for academic purposes.

Disappointingly, the essay does not pursue these issues very far, and leaves the same problem with which it began: that there are incommensurable standards and criteria for judging architects and buildings. For this purpose, the narrative of the project, with which the article is largely concerned, is only of secondary relevance. A more complete assessment and taxonomy of the building's

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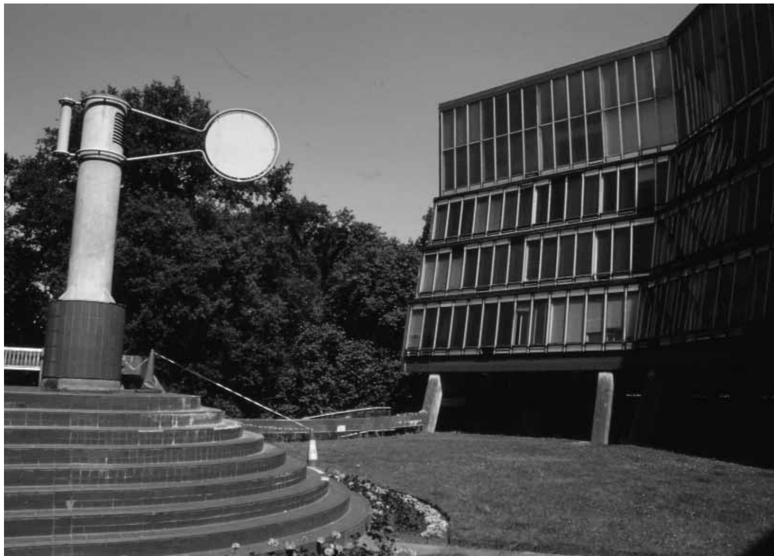

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'The grassed courtyard of the Florey building', by Andrew Holmes, 2006

problems in use would have provided a better starting point from which to separate the issues around which judgements might be made. While problems of structure, servicing and lack of privacy were touched on, there are in fact more problems experienced by student residents in the building, including the small size of the rooms, resulting from a reduction in the size of the rooms from 180 to 130 square feet, when estimates came in over budget. Some of these problems might, in theory, be soluble. The tile cladding and glazing system are essentially technical, but their solution could have varied effects on the outward appearance of the building. Better window coverings, while difficult to achieve, might solve the overlooking and solar gain. However, the size of the rooms does not seem to allow for any kind of technical fix, unless two rooms were to be thrown into one.

Troiani scarcely mentions the positive aspects of the design, without which we could more easily write it off as a technical failure. The form of the building is closely fitted to the difficult site with a predominantly northern aspect and a modest urban context. It was noted on completion as a modification of the traditional Oxford quad, similar to Harvey Court, Cambridge, another inward-looking building with a stepped section of the same decade. By raising the body of the building off the ground, not only is a standard Modernist gesture achieved, but the act of shutting out the verdant view from the approach road is alleviated by allowing views through the entrance between the stair and lift towers. Writing in *The Architectural Review*, Mark Girouard commented on the 'continual pleasurable surprises' inside the building, 'as in all Stirling buildings, moving through the circulation spaces is a constant source of variety and pleasure'.[1] While this could be deemed a matter of opinion, it is still an aspect of the architectural intention that needs to be weighed in the balance.

The evaluation of the Florey building is not a purely academic exercise, given that it could well be put forward for listing in the near future. Whether it is or not, some dialogue will be needed between Queen's College and the external interested parties over the continuing problems. The College may never recover from its forty-year trauma, and consequently may find it difficult to see the positive aspects, not only aesthetically, but even commercially, of owning what probably remains Oxford's most famous postwar building. Today, a large part of the role of conservation concerns the creation of imaginative but credible scenarios for alternative uses. Have any been considered here? Would Schrager Hotels or Urban Splash be interested? Would Oxford Brookes house its architectural students there, or even take the whole building as its architecture faculty, and occupy those generous circulation spaces?

The incommensurables remain unresolved, and we should probably acknowledge that definitions of the 'good' architect cannot be reduced to a single set of values, when we know how the interesting can be careless, while the conscientious may be dull. We would like the interesting and conscientious to come in the same package, but, failing that, we need to set some value on the capacity of architecture to stimulate, even if this stimulation seems largely limited, at least so far, to those with specialist knowledge of how to understand it. With the task of conservation comes a responsibility for explaining to a wider public, and the benefits of this go further than an individual building.

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Note

1. 'Florey Building, Oxford: Criticism by Mark Girouard', *The Architectural Review*, 152 (November 1972), 266–268; 277 (p. 268).

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