CELEBRATING THE MARVELLOUS

SURREALISM IN ARCHITECTURE
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THE MARVELLOUS
SURREALISM
IN ARCHITECTURE
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March/April 2018

02/2018

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Print ISSN: 0003-8504
Online ISSN: 1554-2769

Prices
Individual copies: £29.99 / US$45.00
Mailing fees for print may apply

Student: £90 / US$137 print only
Personal: £136 / US$215 print and iPad access
Institutional: £388 / US$725 combined print and online
6-issue subscription on the App for iPad: £44.99 / US$64.99

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Neil Spiller is Hawksmoor Chair of Architecture and Landscape and Deputy Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of Greenwich, London. Prior to this he was Vice-Dean at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London (UCL). He has an international reputation as an architect, designer, artist, teacher, writer and polemicist.

He has a long association with D, beginning in 1992 when he was one of a very few young architects asked to exhibit their work at the ‘D Theory and Experimentation’ events held at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and Royal Academy of Art in London, alongside Daniel Libeskind, Coop Himmelb(l)au and Lebbeus Woods. He is on the D Editorial Board and this is the eighth issue he has guest-edited. In 1995 he guest-edited (with Martin Pearce) D Architects in Cyberspace, the seminal first edition of an established international journal to herald the impact of virtuality on architectural design. This was followed by D Architects in Cyberspace II (1998) and D Reflexive Architecture (2002). His interests also include all manner of emerging technology, particularly biotechnology and synthetic biology. In this vein he guest-edited (with Rachel Armstrong) D Protocell Architecture (2011), another groundbreaking issue.

He is the founding director of the Advanced Virtual and Technological Architecture Research Group (AVATAR). Established in 2004, the group continues to push the boundaries of architectural design and discourse in the face of the impact of 21st-century technologies. Current preoccupations include augmented and mixed realities, technological singularity (nano-bio-info-cogno convergence) and science fiction.

As a teacher of architects, he believes firmly that students must leave university with a thorough grounding in professional techniques and protocols to cope with the immediate demands of practice, but that education must also teach them the mental dexterity required for the changing future of their profession. He is an active supporter of students and young architects, frequently publishing their work in this and other publications.

He is perhaps best known for his architectural designs and drawings, which have been exhibited and published all over the world and are in many international collections. His 30-year career can be seen as a cartography of how drawing and architectural speculation have changed over the last few decades. These changes, and the subsequent reinvigoration of the architectural drawing, were explored in his D Drawing Architecture (2013). He is an architectural scout, surveying the future ground of the profession before its main body arrives, and this edition of D is no different in this respect.

He is the author of numerous books on the education of architects, the visionary tradition in architecture, and architecture and technology. His most recent book is Architecture and Surrealism: A Blistering Romance (Thames & Hudson, 2016). D

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THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW
The drawing attempts to cartographically represent the un-representational, to map the great chunking engine of chance of the contemporary city.
Let us not mince words: the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful.

— André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, 1924

The title and theme of this edition of Surrealism and Architecture was initially suggested by my realisation that 2018 would be the 40th anniversary of the seminal Surrealism and Architecture. Guest-edited by the Czech architectural historian, theorist and teacher Dalibor Veselý in 1978, the issue is constantly referenced by historians of Surrealism and densely packed with critical essays that deal with surreal notions of buildings and cities. The volume is also remarkable for the inclusion of two young architects who would later become starchitects – Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi. Both presented architectural game-changing texts from recently drawn and written projects, that were yet to be fully published: Koolhaas’s Delirious New York (1978) and Tschumi’s Manhattan Transcripts (1981). These opened up new ways of conceiving architecture, both being derived from Surrealist understandings of space.

Koolhaas’s piece was about the contemporaneous arrival in New York of Le Corbusier and Salvador Dalí. It highlighted Dalí’s and Koolhaas’s own joy in the great churning engine of the city: an engine that mixes the programmes, functions and forms of buildings to create the marvellous ambience and peculiar Surrealist maelstrom of New York. Tschumi’s contribution posited a cinematic architecture of event informed by the Surrealists’ privileging of the active onlooker/participant’s point of view. It emphasised the performative nature of the city while developing new ways of representing these time-based conditions. A pivotal influence on Tschumi, these explorations led him to develop his characteristic future forays into architectural notation and event space. In this issue, architectural historian and theorist Anthony Vidler further explores these texts, their influences, resonances and ramifications (pp 16–23).

The 1978 D is also remarkable for two omissions: Daniel Libeskind and John Hejduk. At the time, both were working on iconic, theoretical and, I would argue, Surrealist-inspired projects. Hejduk was embarking on creating a series of ‘Masque’ projects (1978–89) situated in many differing city locations. These sought to distil the essence of place, its genius loci and the rituals and day-to-day activities of a city’s occupants in eloquent, archetypal, architectonic forms. Meanwhile, Libeskind was collaging and drawing pieces intimately inspired by Surrealist precedent, and these forays into Surrealist ways of working would result in his Micromegas series (1979).

This image can be viewed in the print edition of the issue.

Cover of Surrealism and Architecture, 1978

The cover features Salvador Dalí’s Millet’s Architectonic Angelus (1933), which shows two architectural forms in the vague attitude/stance of the two peasants standing in a ploughed field in Jean-François Millet’s original painting The Angelus (1857–9) – see p 21 – their heads bowed for prayer at the sounding of the Angelus bell. Millet’s painting was an important source of inspiration for Dalí’s ‘paranoiac critical method’ of creativity.
Tschumi’s preoccupations with the event, the point of view and urban performance would also give him a disregard for the traditional protocols of architectural drawings and provoke him to seek alternative methods of choreographing other architectural experiences in the city, resulting in his seminal book The Manhattan Transcripts.

The definition of what might constitute Surrealist creative practice was left intentionally flexible by its founder, writer André Breton, and the Parisian Surrealist Group, from its birth in the early 1920s. However, later, in the early 1940s, Breton began asking the group to research the notion of the ‘Great Transparents’. He wondered whether there were mythic, invisible, multidimensional ideas and ‘creatures’ that were waiting to be discovered/created by the Surrealists. And it is this last phase of Bretonian Surrealism that resonates with today’s architects, and within contemporary architectural discourse, as they struggle to keep up, and be creative with, digital and biological technologies. Today’s architectural technologies are hybrid – virtual and actual. Surrealism can inspire...

The definition of what might constitute Surrealist creative practice was left intentionally flexible by its founder, writer André Breton

Daniel Libeskind,

Libeskind’s first iconic project distils architecture to almost nothing except a lexicon of junctions and collisions.
Luke Lupton,
*Great White Bankruptcy*, 2016

Luke Lupton,
*Ominous Equine Empire of Radiation*, 2016

Luke Lupton,
*Pinocchio’s Proboscis and its Deceptive Shadow*, 2016

This project for a narrative-based betting shop utilised the construction of a scanning machine built from three proprietary scanners operating in different dimensions simultaneously. This tactic for choreographing chance produced these and other scans that were then named and used to inspire characters and the interaction of narratives and forms – models and drawings were later made that describe a most bizarre agglomeration of interactions and architectural spaces.

Salvador Dalí,
*Mae West room,* Dalí Theatre-Museum, Figueres, Spain, 1974

Dalí was a master of the double image. Here Mae West’s face is constructed from elements deployed in an architectural space.
both architects and students in the 21st century by suggesting other, less architecturally traditional methods of combining materials and constructing space.

This explicitly makes the connection between contemporary architectural technology such as virtuality, synthetic biology and architectonic hybridity with issues, protocols and tactics of Surrealist practice and theory for the architectural world of now. Softness, metamorphosis, anamorphosis, wetness, the magical and the fantastic are all common to both paths of creativity. The issue will therefore be a seminal touchstone for anyone interested in the interaction with and inspiration of Surrealism for 21st-century architecture, and aims to introduce a new generation to its possibilities as a tactic or mindset rather than just a style – a means of infusing greater creativity into the architectural profession. It brings surreal architectures up to date with a survey of some of the most innovative, contemporary, architectural work being produced to illustrate a continuum of thought that stretches back through the 20th century and beyond.

Technology, Attunement and Enigma
Contemporary technology demands that architects design atmospheres and atmospheric connections that are functional, semiotic and poetic. Surrealist discourse often illustrated the personal attunement of individuals to architectural space, and contemporary commentators such as theorist Alberto Pérez-Gómez maintain that the use of computerised algorithmic imaginings of architecture in recent times has dislocated the relationship of buildings to site and of people to buildings, and that this has hastened the demise of personal attunement to space and place. In this issue of he argues persuasively and eloquently for its reinstatement and poetic potential (pp 24–9).

Others, such as Dagmar Motycka Weston (pp 30–35), argue that the metaphysical cityscapes of Giorgio de Chirico are a lesson for contemporary architects not to over-rationalise the beautiful complexity of the city and its enigmas, and to leave room in their work for the emotional. Surrealism made a great contribution to such notions of the city, as was defined by Roger Cardinal in his seminal essay ‘Soluble City’ in the 1978. Here Cardinal defined six Surrealist readings of the city: as a dream, as a love affair, as a palimpsest, as a poetic text, as a psychic labyrinth, and as a system of signs. As I have written elsewhere: ‘These are not mutually exclusive, but simultaneous and concurrent. Like quantum fields of events, everything exists at once as potential readings until it condenses, momentarily provoked by an observer, read and captured as a trace of another reality where the familiar rules are not obeyed.’ In this most subtle of ways, yet unmistakably adhering to Cardinal’s analysis of the surreal city, is the work of Eric Parry, both as a student of Vesely and as a practising architect.
However, much has changed since 1978, particularly for architects. Every aspect of architects’ work has radically altered: whether it is the way they operate; their position in the construction-industry food chain; the manner in which they are commissioned; the way they represent and analyse their projected buildings or how they build them. Computers and the digital worlds they construct have become ubiquitous as an engine for these changes. The boundaries between the real and the virtual are disappearing daily, and splines, lofting and render farms have become part of their everyday life. Also, many are now experimenting with biology, and some with synthetic biology and autonomous systems. This issue therefore examines Surrealism as an often overlooked stream of artistic thought that needs to be reassessed in the light of the impact of emerging technologies on architectural space-making and the human habitation of those spaces. It offers us, as architectural designers, much-needed inspiration for how to be joyous and not reductive makers of architectural space. Swiss artist HR Giger eschews architectural reductivism and gives us a maximalist, disquieting yet beautiful vignette into the possibilities of biomechanical synthesis in his Giger Museum Bar in Gruyères (see pp 36–41).

Vortex City, Nature’s Vicissitudes and the Surreal House

The complex, forever dynamic vortex of the city also offers prospects for the fulfilment of desire, a visual and visceral feast of strangeness and charm, of danger and lust. Architect Nigel Coates (pp 42–9) treats us to not only a very personal reflection on his work relative to Surrealism, but also lets us into his new proposition for Voxelcity, a contemporary Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, its tactics of space-making highly surreal and marvellous. Like his friend and colleague Will Alsop, Coates appears to have a long history of surreal work, featuring reconciled forms and thoughts that are, at least, seemingly conventionally alien to one another. Visceral pleasures in the city again feature in Mark Morris’s explorations into the strange world of autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) (pp 50–57) – the satisfying nervous cascading tingle (‘braingasm’) provoked by altruistic attention in hairdressers, architectural desk crits and the scraping of wet paint on canvas, among other things.
Will Alsop, Sketchbook, 2004

Alsop explores his building projects through his paintings, which become vehicles to communicate his design intentions to clients and stakeholders, but equally possess a surreal gravitas.

PAD Studio, Space Place & Urban Design (SPUB) and Stephen Turner, Exbury Egg, Exbury, Hampshire, 2013

The egg motif has a long and complex history within the Surrealist lexicon. The floating egg frequently appears in Surrealist works, here as eye and protective womb utilised as a boathouse – simple and effective yet having a profound, uncanny effect on its context.