



OBLIQUE FUNCTION: DEAD OR ALIVE?

2010 FBUA BURSARY REPORT | WILLIAM LAYZELL

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In effect, the vertical-horizontal stationary position no longer corresponding to mankind's own dynamic, architecture will henceforth have to express itself in the inclined plane, in order to situate itself on the new plane of human consciousness. Failing that, all architecture projects will rapidly become unusable.

- Paul Virilio

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INTRODUCTION

They are barely remembered in England. Those who recall the names of architect Claude Parent and philosopher Paul Virilio may have thought that the derision heaped on them in their attempt to explain their theories – at a seminar in Folkestone in 1966 – signaled their demise. Not so. Parent and Virilio retreated to France but did not give up their notion that architecture needed to upset, disturb, challenge. They believed that buildings should be constructed on the diagonal in order to inspire debate. They called their theory “La Fonction Oblique” – and they put it into practice. Nearly fifty years later, their ideas live on in the work of architects such as Jean Nouvel. Right now, his prestigious Philharmonic Hall in Paris is being built. And it owes its origin to the work of Parent and Virilio. There could not be a better time to use a bursary from the Franco-British Union of Architects to study the work of two French designers whose work may be done but is not forgotten.

But it was controversial. And it is controversial still. It is the sight of the Church of Saint Bernadette du Banlay in Nevers that stirs the biggest reaction. “Why on earth did that piece of Nazi architecture ever get built...and as a church!” It is not an unreasonable reaction to pictures of a mass of concrete, emerging from the ground in suburban France. It is constructed and designed to look like a World War Two bunker – not the first aesthetic that springs to mind when designing a place of worship.

What interests me the most is the universal opinion that the church looked like a Nazi fortification – not a structure of architectural merit but a German fortification. The philosopher Alain de Botton writes about the notion of ‘associations’; that we are constantly relating and comparing what we see with what we know. It therefore comes as no surprise to the reader that all the comments were made by people, including me, who, for the majority of their lives have lived surrounded by reminders of German occupation of the Channel Islands. It is this which attracted me to the work of Claude Parent and Paul Virilio. Who were they? What did they aim to achieve by designing such a controversial building? Was it a form of architectural experiment? And, why did they see merit in the architecture of Hitler’s Atlantic Wall?

L’église du Saint Bernadette du Banlay was the apogee of a body of work by both Parent and Virilio; a collection of theories presented to the architectural world in 1966 in the publications of the Groupe Architecture Principe. Like many of the collaborations of the 60s and 70s, the Groupe Architecture Principe sought to present a solution to the ‘state of crisis’ in which the world exists. Virilio and Parent were unknown to me. Despite their apparent fame in France, I had never heard their names mentioned by tutors or critics whilst I was at university or, indeed, in my reading.

Perhaps it was not so strange. They had been firmly rejected by the European architectural avant-garde in June of 1966. Invited to the Folkestone IDEA Conference by Peter Cook, they were met with “Hail Hitler!” salutes and booed off stage. What, then, so repulsed the British architectural establishment?

GROWING UP

Claude Parent was born in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France in 1923, the son of a pilot and engineer. His childhood ambitions were to graduate from the Ecole Polytechnique as an aircraft engineer. It was, perhaps, only natural to want to follow in his father's footsteps but Parent and his parents soon realized that the genius for mathematics eluded him. From a young age, Parent had shown a promising ability to draw and it was soon the "brilliant idea of [his] brother" to become an architect that put the wheels in motion for what was to become a full and varied career.

In 1963 Parent met and embarked upon a friendship and collaboration with the French theorist, philosopher and urban planner Paul Virilio, a relationship that would produce some of the most interesting architectural theories in recent history and influence the architecture of today.

Virilio was born in Paris in 1932 but spent the majority of his youth in northern Brittany. It was the experience of living here during the Second World War that shaped his attitude towards architecture. It has often been said that the war "was his university". Indeed, Virilio was so fascinated by the bunkers of WWII built on the coast of Brittany that he went about studying and recording them, culminating in the publication of his book, *Bunker Archaeology* – a photographic record of the defensive fortifications of the 'Thousand Year Reich'.

It is obvious that there was a significant difference between Parent and Virilio from the outset. While both shared the same religious beliefs, it appears that Parent was the more artistic while Virilio entertained the theoretical and academic side of life. He was fascinated by the phenomenology of military space and the organization of territory.



ABOVE | IMAGES OF PARENT IN CHILDHOOD, PARENT'S PARENTS.

THE SITE IN NEVERS

I am walking along Avenue Colbert in the small French town of Nevers. Crossing the road, in search of relief from the sweltering heat of the day, I am surrounded by small two-storey detached and semi detached houses. With their faded, flaking timber shutters and cracked, heat-soaked facades they remind me of holidays to France when I was a child.

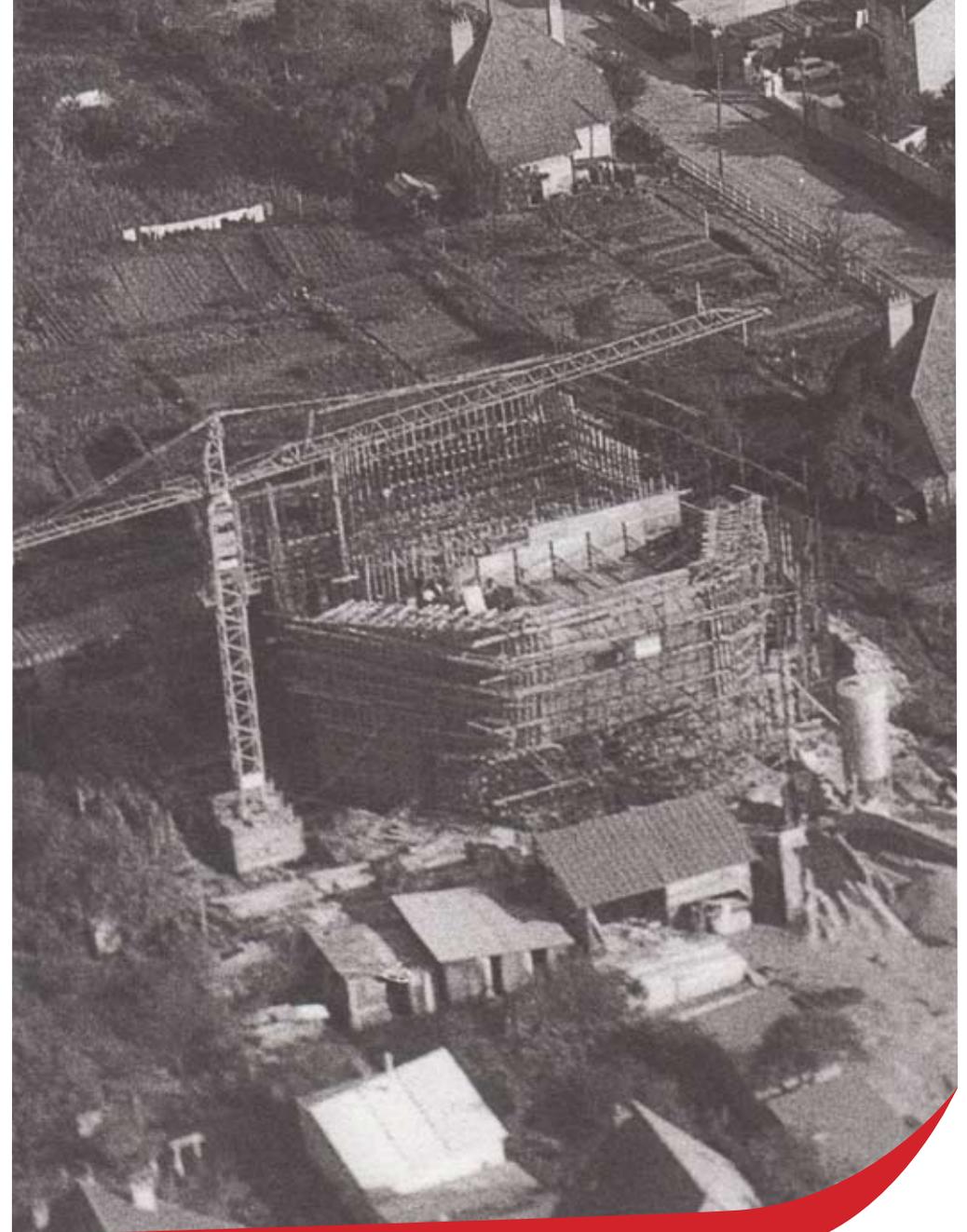
The streets become narrower and more private. It seems unbelievable that the directions I have in my hand can be correct. Somewhere in the surrounding suburbia there is a brutalist, concrete experimentation of French '60s architecture. A building that caused scandal and outrage: a building that placed the 'Architecture Principe' firmly in the history books of French architecture. Finally I round a corner and without warning, there it is – the church of Sainte Bernadette du Banlay. It is not, as photographs had suggested, a huge structure: quite the reverse. But it is certainly brutal.

Completed in 1966, this unusual church was dedicated to St. Bernadette of Nevers. Bernadette was born in January 1844 and, although she died at 35, she is said to have witnessed apparitions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary at a small grotto in Lourdes. It is those visions which made Lourdes the place of pilgrimage it is today.

St. Bernadette lived for the majority of her short life in extreme poverty with her parents, Francois and Louise Soubirous. Bernadette, her mother and father and five sisters and brothers lived together in a one-room basement called le cachot - 'the dungeon'. It was on one of her trips to collect firewood to heat le cachot' that she had her first vision.

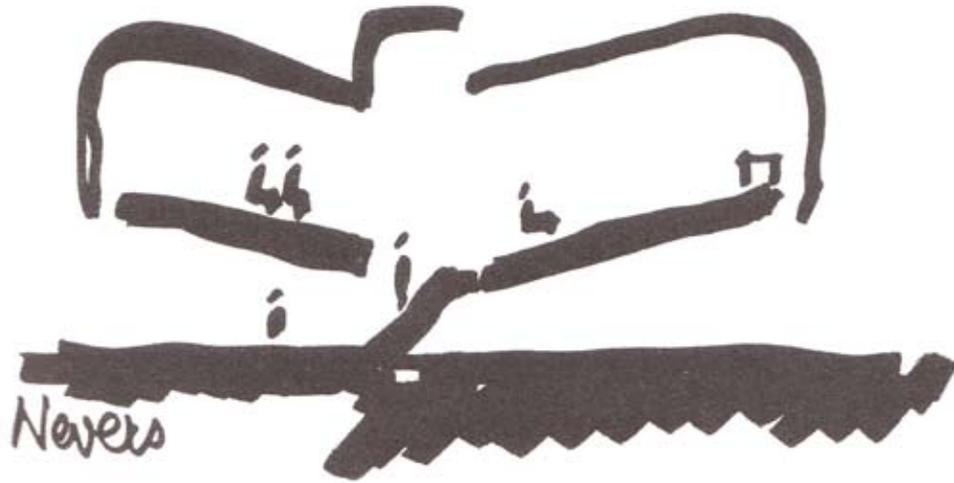
This image, and metaphor of the dungeon, appears to have had a significant influence upon the architecture of the Church in Nevers. St Bernadette, speaking of moving to Nevers, told of how she "[came] here to hide" and that "the cave was my heaven on earth". Virilio speaks of the cave metaphor at great length; "For Bernadette, it was the prison where she lived with her family, the cave and the church. We had to find a synthesis between the two."

RIGHT | L'ÉGLISE OF SAINT BERNADETTE DU BANLAY DURING CONSTRUCTION
BELOW | IMAGE OF THE CHURCH TODAY









ABOVE | CONCEPT SKETCH BY CLAUDE PARENT OF THE CHURCH OF SAINT BERNADETTE DU BANLAY
BELOW | IMAGE OF THE CHURCH TODAY



The competition entry submitted by the duo was stuffed with complex metaphors and theories. Although, to the general public it appeared as an insensitive, offensive joke to Parent and Virilio it was a highly complex response to the actions of the past, present and future. There seems to be no one single concept that explains the Church of Saint Bernadette du Banlay; it presents itself as an example of a cryptic architecture steeped in metaphors and complexity.

Reading the many publications and interviews with both Virilio and Parent it's clear that they both wanted this small church to convey an incredible amount. Indeed, in hindsight Virilio admitted; "Parent and I were young. I was surrounded by music at the time. It is a work of youth but a youth that had experienced many things." ¹

The image of the cave seems to have been a comment on the state of the world at the time. Virilio explained how the problem of designing a church was not "a problem of a cruciform plan or of a bell tower, but the fact that we were living in a period without references. Atomic structures were being constructed everywhere."² This was the Cold War at its hottest. Mutual Assured Destruction was the game being played by the post-war superpowers.

At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Catholic church held the Second Vatican Council. So fearful was it that the end of mankind had come, the Church decided to present to its faithful – and the world – a God of mercy rather than a God of judgement. It was the idea of Him as the saviour and forgiver which led Parent and Virilio to the sacred heart of Saint Bernadette... and on to their church in Nevers.

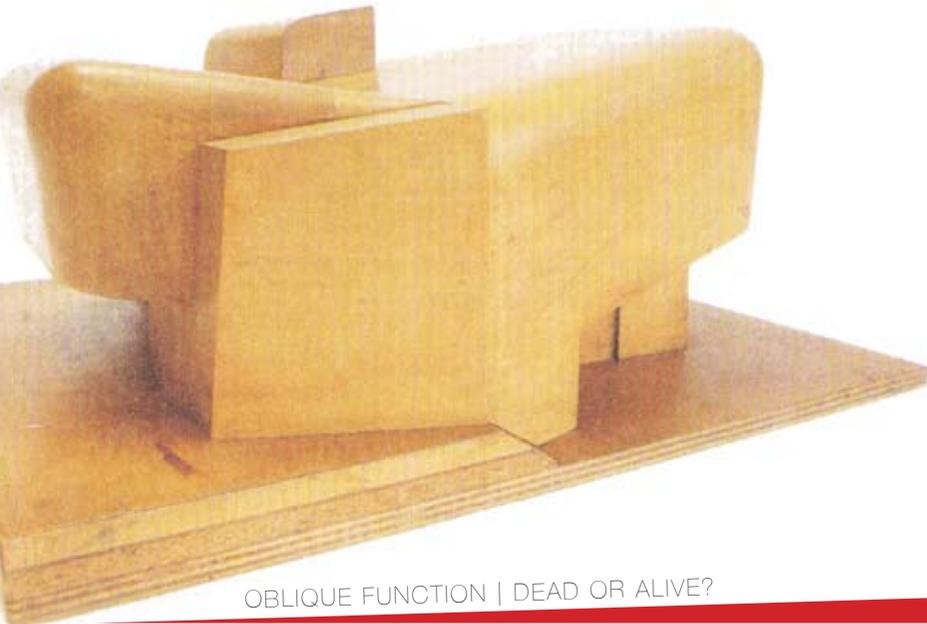
Approaching the building I am more and more intrigued as to what this mass of concrete conceals. The monolithic aesthetic is a defensive image. The rough imprint of the timber formwork on the concrete makes it difficult not to see this structure as a bunker, a relic from a period in history everyone would prefer to forget.

The front is marked by a large over-hanging shell, one piece of concrete that forms an entrance of simple, utilitarian metal doors. My guide – a member of the community and an architect - took me with great pride through the metal shutters into the main spaces of the church. He, like others, is inspired by this place.

The first room is a relatively small foyer with a large set of steps. I ascend the staircase and without warning I am lifted up into the middle of a large, uninterrupted, flowing, top-lit cave. Is this le cachot? It comes as a shock to find an interior so vastly different from what is indicated by the construction and aesthetic of its envelope. There are clever games played from the moment you penetrate the defensive shell of this building. It is almost as if you are rising up to seek enlightenment, releasing yourself from the



ABOVE | THE MAIN NAIVE OF THE CHURCH TODAY
BELOW | CONCEPT MODEL MADE BY PARENT'S FATHER



OBLIQUE FUNCTION | DEAD OR ALIVE?

problems and issues of the real world into a place of reflection. The space is calming. My guide – and the party in his charge – falls silent.

I find it very interesting to see how people inhabit spaces, especially when that space is new to them. The church of Saint Bernadette du Banlay is no disappointment; after a couple of minutes I find myself and the others at the back of the church, taking in all that is presented before us.

The main church space was conceived as the unification of a double ventricle of the heart, with the staircases acting as arteries. This image of the Sacred-Heart – so central to Catholicism - sets up an obvious interest in Virilio and Parent's work of the God of Mercy. There is no justice without mercy. Perhaps this was a product of the society and films they were surrounded by at the time. Virilio explains that films such as Hiroshima My Love expressing love for the enemy, forgiveness and compassion, helped to shape his attitude towards the past.

The Church of Sainte Bernadette du Banlay exposes the true interests and motivation of both Paul Virilio and Claude Parent as both architects and academics. Virilio concerned himself with the psychological and phenomenological possibilities of architecture. His early studies at the Sorbonne led him to the work of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. That, in turn, nurtured an inquisitive mind which constantly questioned architecture and urban spaces.

But there is more, for me, here. Like Virilio, I was brought up surrounded by reminders of a period of history in which architecture was dominated by the defensive architecture of Hitler's Germany. I was Virilio's mirror: he looking north on the Brittany coast, me looking south from the Channel Island of Jersey, the only part of the British Isles to be occupied during the Second World War. I have lived a life with German bunkers. There are ammunition dumps, gun positions, direction-finding towers and searchlight platforms within yards of my house. Built by slave labour, they formed part of Hitler's Atlantic Wall, stretching from Norway to Spain. Strange, then to find, a bunker built twenty years after the end of the war by an architect who might have been expected to look forward rather than back.



LA FONCTION OBLIQUE & L'ARCHITECTURE PRINCIPE

There is, however, more to the Church of Saint Bernadette du Banlay than just the obvious aesthetic connotations.

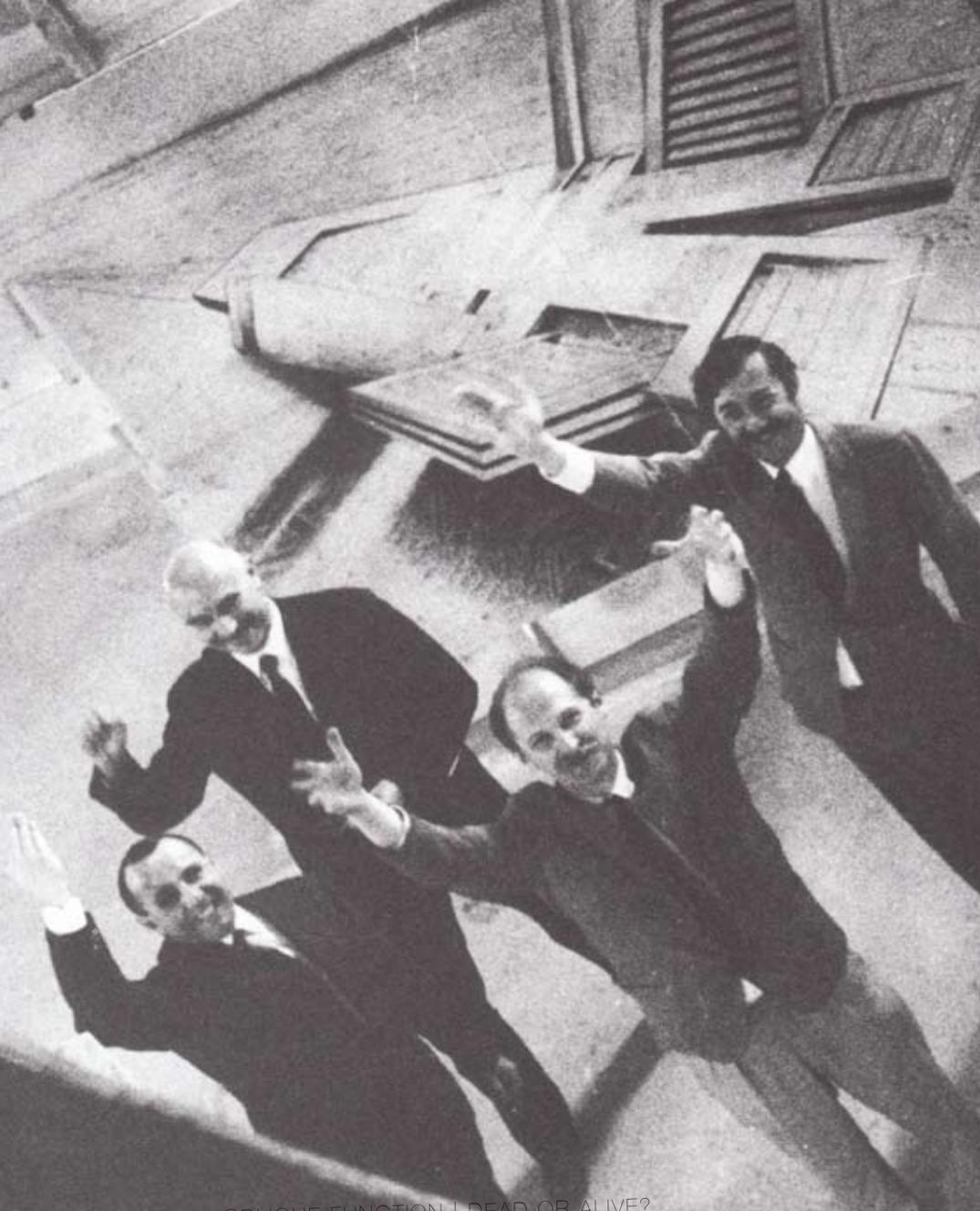
Its form and plan derives from a well thought out theory presented by the Architecture Principe in 1966 entitled 'La Fonction Oblique'. The church stands today as an exemplary synthesis of the research pursued by both Claude Parent and Paul Virilio within the Architecture Principe. The reaction of many was one of absolute disgust. When it was completed in December of 1966, people echoed those words muttered today by my contemporaries ... "Do this to us! This, a church? But it is a bunker, a warehouse, it is appalling!"

Over the course of 1966, the members of the Architecture Principe published their manifesto containing nine chapters on the state and future of architecture and the urban "state of crisis which is manifestly affecting all human activities."

The world, according to Parent and his peers, was at a point of drastic metamorphosis "of immediate consciousness, a toppling over of all sensible givens, an elementary transformation of the notion of dimension." Virilio stated that the idea of the vertical, as expressed by the skyscrapers of Manhattan, and the horizontal, as embodied by the urban sprawl of cities across the world, had come to an end. No longer did this way of living correspond to "mankind's own dynamic". He concluded that architecture could only express itself in the inclined plane. The solution to the crisis of urban order was to live on the oblique angle.

POTENTIALISM & HABITABLE CIRCULATION

Potentialism, according to Virilio, is the route to a 'true architecture'. It is the idea that any architecture which resists man and provides an obstacle in his path becomes true. Real, honest architecture has supposedly lost its honesty over the centuries and is 'degrading itself into ease'. Potentialism allows man to feel part of the architectural surroundings he is inhabiting. It is designed to place a man into a state of 'receptivity' through 'displeasing them to the point of placing them in a state of refusal'. To this end, Virilio states that there are three main stages of Potentialism.



OPPOSITE | CLAUDE PARENT & PAUL VIRILIO

LEFT | FOUNDING MEMBERS OF THE ARCHITECTURE PRINCIPLE: CLAUDE PARENT, PAUL VIRILIO, MORICE LIPSI, MICHEL CARRADES

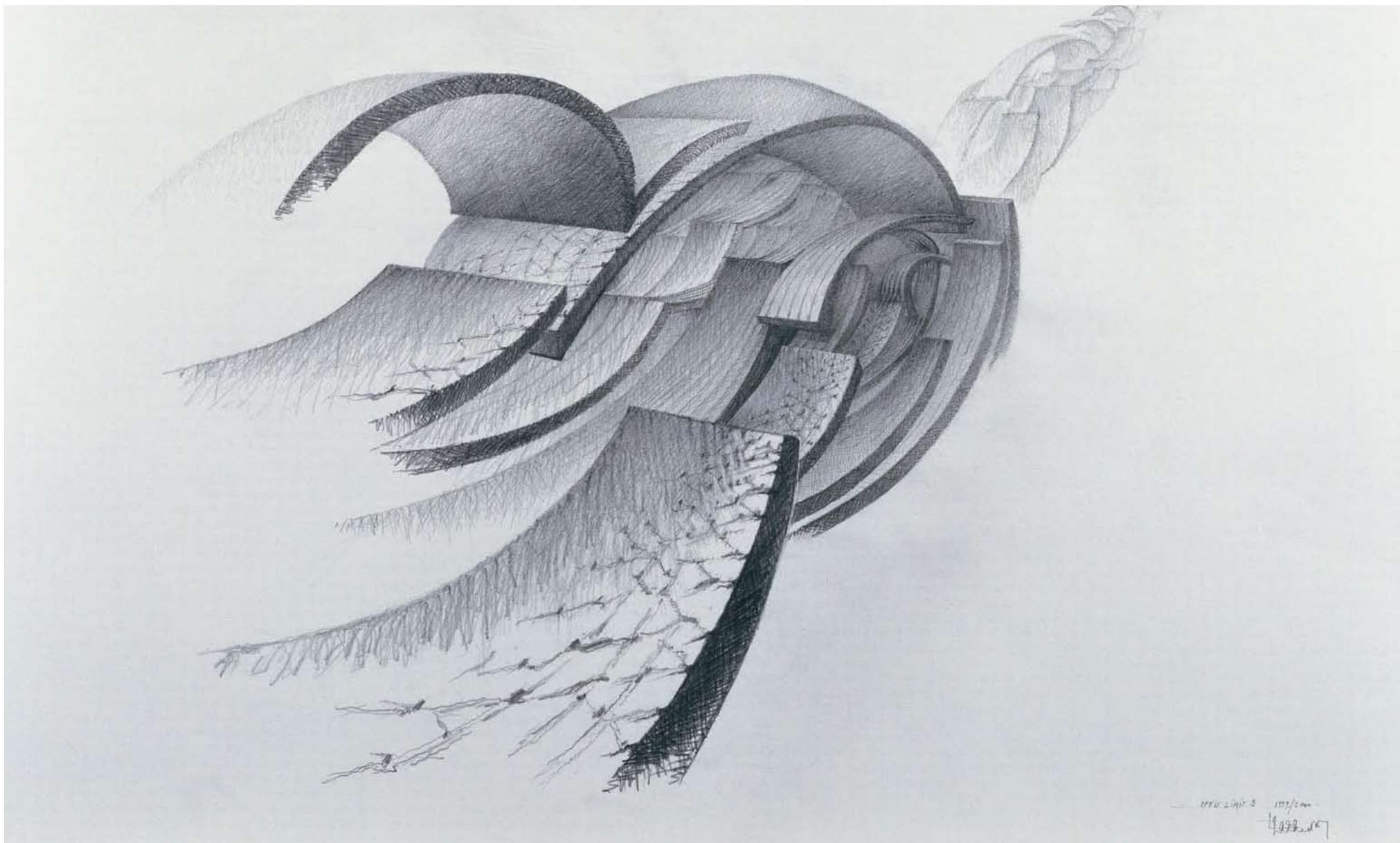
The first is to place the user of a building into a state of raised consciousness. The second is to allow them the possibility of surpassing this refusal - 'the possibility of going further.' The third is to combine the two and, in so doing, man can establish a 'non-conformist communication' with the building he is in – to reach a point of equilibrium in which man and architecture unite.

Re-thinking the way we experience and interact with architecture was not un-common in this period in history. The avant garde of the European architecture community were initiating and shaping the architecture that would affect generations to come. L'Architecture Principe, however, was suggesting something that at the time was deemed ridiculous and radical. Virilio saw the current modern city as an impossible model in which to master fluidity: "In effect, the vertical-horizontal stationary position no longer corresponding to mankind's own dynamic, architecture will henceforth have to express itself in the inclined plane, in order to situate itself on the new plane of human consciousness. Failing that, all architecture projects will rapidly become unusable."

It has often been said that the work of Parent and Virilio was much influenced by that of Le Corbusier. After all, Parent was, for a short time, a student of the great architectural visionary. However, this is heavily denied by both. Understanding the detailed components of the French duos theories does uncover a fundamental difference from the work of Le Corbusier.

Le Corbusier published his manifesto in *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning* (1925) and *The Radiant City* (1933). Like Virilio years later, he appeared as a radical, proclaiming, "the world is sick" and suggesting: "existing [city] centres must come down. To save itself every great city must rebuild its centre."³ His proposals to cure the world's 'sickness' came in the form of mass housing - buildings that emanated from his obsessions with ships and monasteries⁴ and which would provide a strong sense of "order and clarity which was the relationship he envisaged between architecture and the city."⁵ Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* (1925) proposed razing part of historic Paris and building a new town to address the problems of the slums.

As Colin Rowe points out in his text, *Crisis of the Object: Predicament of Texture*, this new 'modern' reformist vision of the city and complete departure from the notion of a traditional grain "may be seen as a transitional piece, a proposal which eventually... may lead to the re-establishment of an unadulterated natural setting."⁶ Indeed, Lewis Mumford advocates that "modern



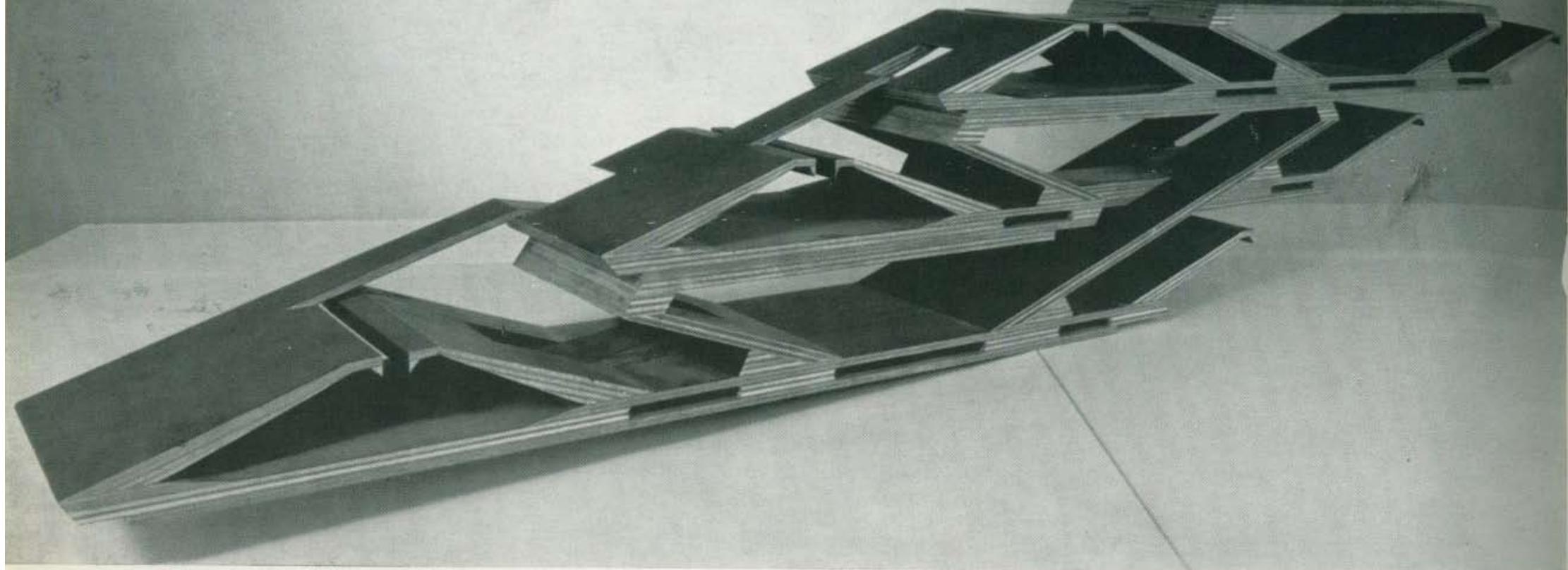
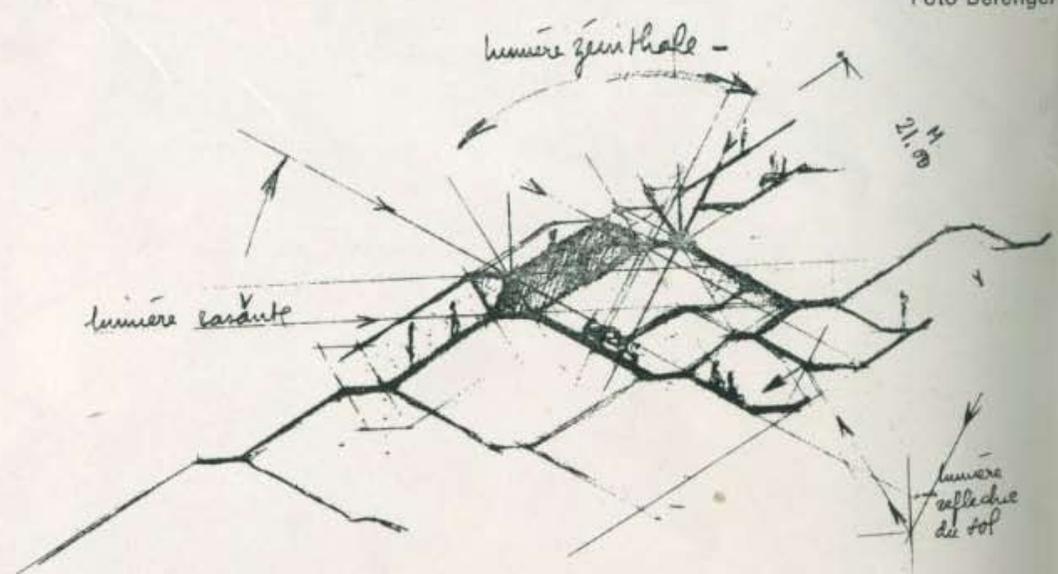
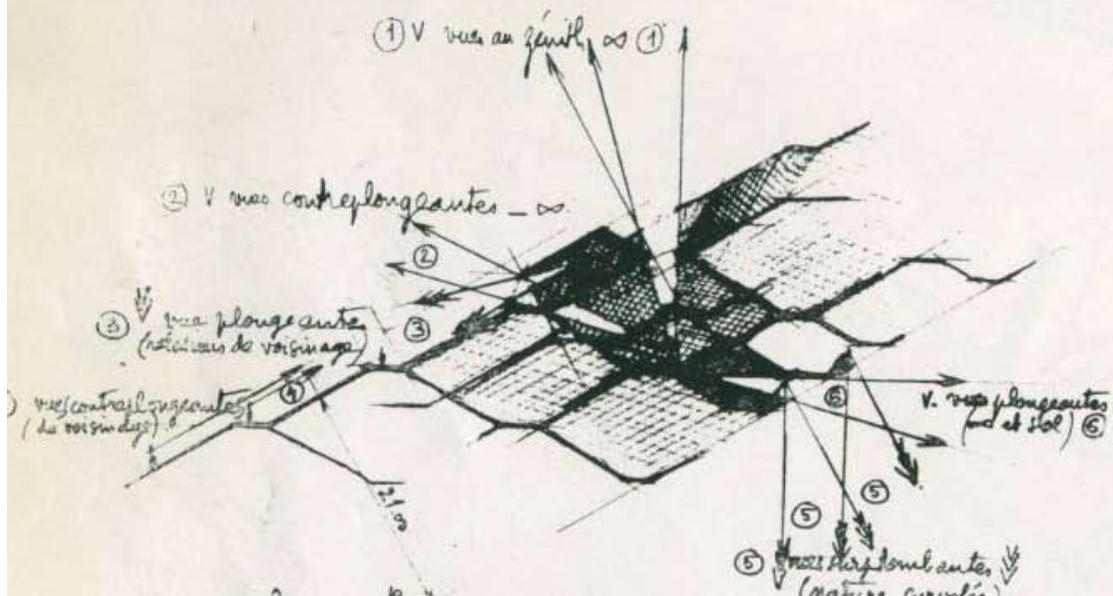
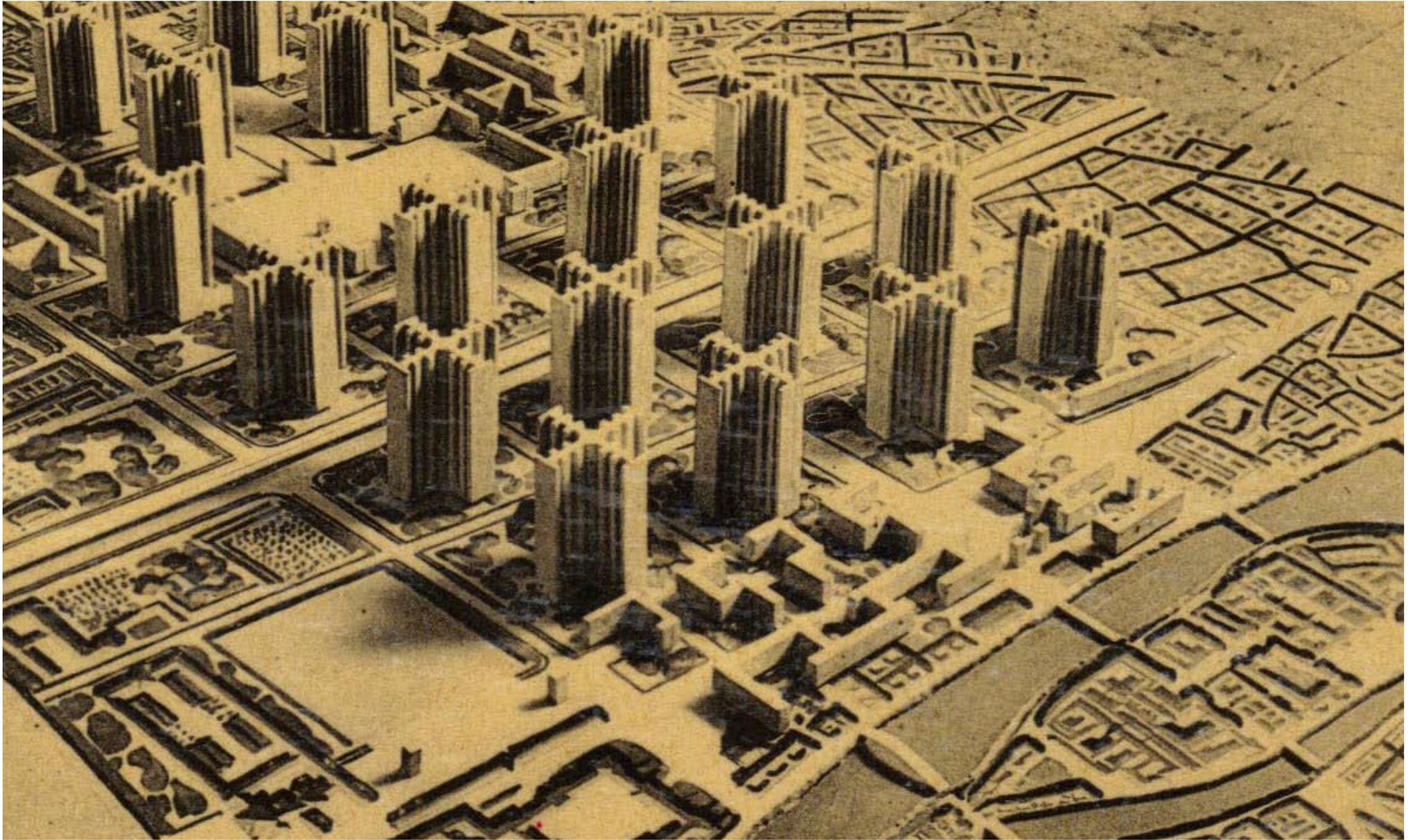


Foto Berenger





functional planning distinguishes itself from this purely visual conception of the plan, by dealing honestly and competently with every side, abolishing the gross distinction between front and rear.”⁷

The reality of this new planning was, in fact, a completely non-committal architecture which, ultimately, led to the failure of housing blocks across the world.

Le Corbusier appeared to turn his back on the city and its context. He refused “to take into account any specific siting constraints”⁸ The ground landscape was merely a plyboard base accentuating and presenting his objects – “a machine-sculpture, abstractly determined.”⁹ Robert Hughes spoke of Le Corbusier’s city planning in his series *The Shock of the New*: “...the car would abolish the human street, and possibly the human foot. Some people would have airplanes too. The one thing no one would have is a place to bump into each other, walk the dog, strut, one of the hundred random things that people do ... being random was loathed by Le Corbusier ... its inhabitants surrender their freedom of movement to the omnipresent architect.”¹⁰

The idea of habitable circulation, proposed by the *Architecture Principe* many years later, proposes a solution to the crisis of Le Corbusier’s verticality – “we have never been able to combine the solid and fluid elements... this incompatibility between stance and circulation is destroying the modern metropolis.”

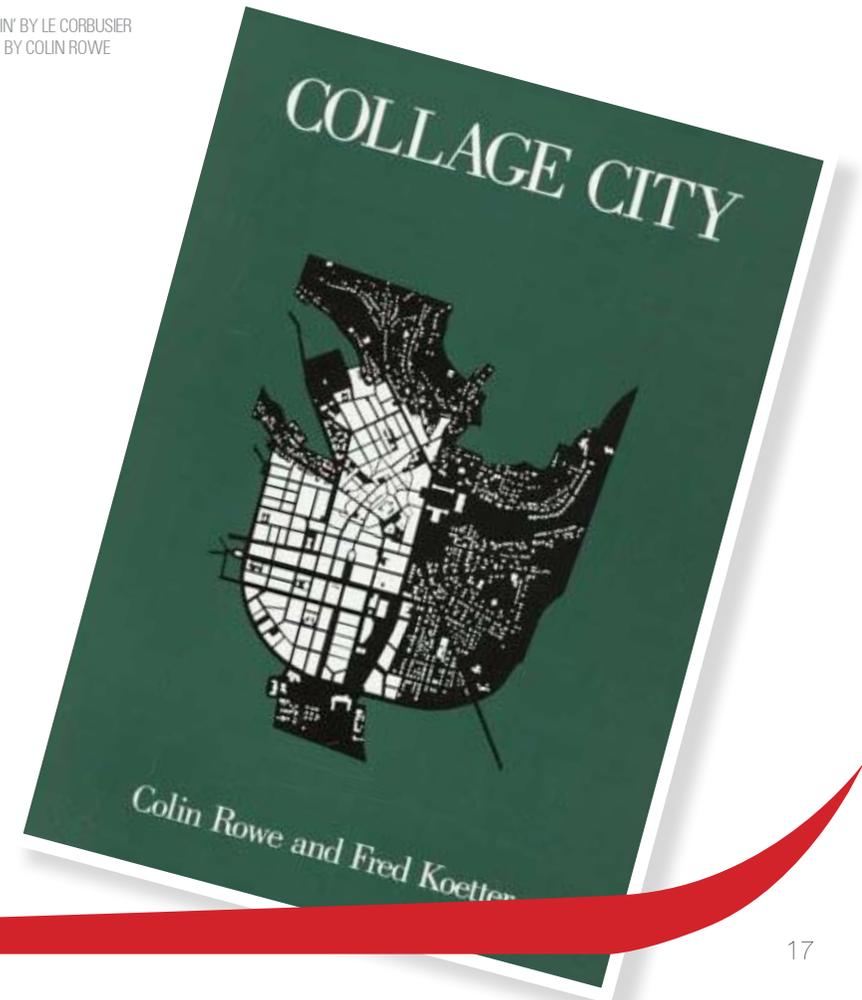
It is a theory that I very much understand and to which I attribute much merit. Upon studying the work of Le Corbusier and the many projects built in the 60s and 70s based on the *Unite d’Habitation*, I have come to appreciate and believe that the high-rise residential blocks were never destined to succeed. For two years, I embarked upon a study of the sixteen high-rise blocks in the *Za Zelazna Brama* area of central Warsaw. The area was known as the ‘Iron Gate’ – it was this investigation into the design and concept of ‘streets in the sky’ that led me to realise how Le Corbusier’s model was a failed architectural utopia.

Virilio and Parent challenge this model of building vertically and dislocating the inhabitants from the ground plane. “It is not by chance that vertical architecture so often takes refuge in the staircase, in the bridge, in the dam or the highway interchange, for it found there an exercise, whilst in the case of habitat it remained doomed to the most absolute passivity.” They see a future where both architecture and circulation between spaces, communities and civil nodes come together. This in turn would promote communication between the users – between ‘mankind’. Le Corbusier’s model denies the inhabitants of cities what the philosopher Alain de Botton describes as “incidental discoveries”¹¹. In order to

understand these ‘incidental discoveries’ - and ultimately the city as a whole - one has to be able to experience and interact with the intricacies of the spaces it presents.

Le Corbusier’s attitude towards the urban poche could not be more different from that of Virilio and Parent. The group’s manifesto presented a third urban order; that through the use of the oblique, habitable circulation and the theory of potentialism, would provide the solution to the stagnant state of crisis that the urban poche is currently experiencing.

OPPOSITE | ‘PLAN VOISIN’ BY LE CORBUSIER
RIGHT | ‘COLLAGE CITY’ BY COLIN ROWE
AND FRED KOETTER



The Second World War was a dramatic moment in contemporary history. It caused a rupture of society that changed the face of the world in five years, acting as the catalyst for many changes and shifts, not least the re-thinking of the role and interaction of architecture and people. Virlio was a child of the war. He was profoundly affected by the Blitzkreig and the fortification of his home town and he soon developed a fascination with the monoliths of the 'thousand year Reich' – bunkers.

Parent studied the bunkers of the Atlantic wall for many years, developing an attitude and understanding of them as shapes and architectural elements. He went beyond the superficial 'associations' of war and suppression and investigated them with an archaeological approach. This study and analysis led him to the development of a much more complex and influential theory; the notion of Cryptic Architecture.

'Cryptic Power', according to Virlio and Parent, resides in creating a 'continuum' by making the conditions of architectural space inseparable from the conditions of disappearance. It describes a type of 'infra-architecture' which provides the "support and foundation of apparent architecture." This comes as a very interesting concept, something that separates those objects which we consciously design and those which are the 'anti-objects' of life. Virlio argues that, without these 'anti-objects', the central inspiring organ of architecture would die.

The German bunker appears to me as an unconscious normality. I have lived with them for most of my life. However, I have never consciously contemplated their spacial dynamics and atmospheres. For example, the idea of the ramp, built out of necessity to supply the guns of war, creates an increasing and changing appreciation of height, exposure and vista. This 'anti-object' - along with many more like it - has, through its cryptic energy, resulted in the "calling into question of some of today's widespread certainties concerning art and architecture."

These elements of "repulsive architecture" within society have, Virlio believes, been relinquished over the years. It is only relatively recently that they have started to be requisitioned. He cites the bunkers of the Atlantic Wall as a prime example. "After twenty years of relinquishment, the army has requisitioned the bunkers little by little... thus the history of the content of places continues."

The anti-objects of society represent what went before. They represent the history and integrity of a city; without this consistent tide of 'cryptic-architecture' there would be no reference on which to build the cities of today.

CRYPTIC ARCHITECTURE & BUNKER ARCHAEOLOGY



ABOVE | BUNKERS OF THE 'ATLANTIC WALL'
RIGHT | PAUL VIRILIO PHOTOGRAPHING THE BUNKERS OF THE FRENCH COAST. PHOTOGRAPHS THAT WOULD BE FEATURED IN THE PUBLICATION OF 'BUNKER ARCHAEOLOGY'







PARENT AND HIS OTHER WORKS

Although Parent's name is synonymous with the 'oblique function' and L'Architecture Principe we should not overlook his other works. During his career, he created a significant number of buildings throughout France some of which I visited visit to ascertain how important and heartfelt the theories and concepts of the 1960s really were. Did he really live by the design principles?

On a balmy evening and I am ascending the steps from the metro stop Porte de Vanves on my way to the Théâtre Sylvia de Monfort, designed and built towards the end of Parent's career in 1990. I'm going to a performance of 'La Dame de Chex Maxim', an amusing comedy about relationships and adultery.

Set within the grounds of the Parc Georges Brassens, the theatre appears to be invisible to the public, with only the signs motioning you towards, perhaps unsurprisingly, a concrete slope to give away its location. After passing through a set of tall gates, I descend into a basin. At the bottom sits a rather small pyramid. It is evident that Parent has not forgotten the experiments of the 60s. The moment you arrive you are forced to contemplate this space. I am reminded of a magic carpet ride at the fair. It seems inconceivable that this pyramid can hold an entire theatre and all its associated spaces.

In the lower level you progress through into the foyer, bolted on to the main pyramid-shaped building. It is only when you go through the foyer doors and into the main performance space that you start to understand what was in Parent's mind. The seating drops away into a large auditorium carved out of the ground. It produces an oblique angle from which you view the stage.

There are parallels with the Church of Saint Bernadette du Banlay. First, a trick employed to deny 'man' the ability to fully understand and comprehend the building. Second, the change in levels and use of the oblique angle obviously aims to instill 'potentialism' - raising the user's level of receptivity by 'displeasing them to the point of placing them in a state of refusal'. Although not quite being repulsive architecture, the theatre does start pose questions and is definitely not 'degrading itself into ease'.

The experiments of the 60s never left Parent. Although the church in Nevers was a "work of youth"¹² it embodied theories and ideas that both he and Paul Virilio believed in. Those ideas were formed early, as evidenced in a private residence in Versailles. Built in 1965, the Villa Drusch is particularly interesting because it shows that Parent was already experimenting with the ideas which were to become his trademark several years before they were formalised in the Architecture Principe. The villa is an



ABOVE | 'VILLA DRUSCH', VERSAILLES BY CLAUDE PARENT 1963
BELOW | 'VILLA BLOC' HOUSE, CAP D'ANTIBES BY CLAUDE PARENT 1959-62



articulated space around an angle of 120 degrees. Parent introduced the diagonal as a line of force, exploring instability by setting the main living area within a giant concrete framed cube suspended in mid air, balancing on one of its corners.

One year later, Parent's radical architecture appeared in the Bordeaux le Pecq house, completed at the height of Architecture Principe's fame. It is an extremely unusual building. Dominated by ramped roof structures, perched on top of a rectilinear plan, the building explores the architecture of movement, instability and 'potentialism'.

Both Villa Drusch and the Bordeaux le Pecq house were designed at the height of Parent's creativity. They appear as brutal structures. It shows that he was prepared to be bold and experimental at the risk of being labelled unprofessional. He was not interested in creating 'pretty' buildings, rather structures that would test and further his theories.

On my way back to Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, I visited the Centre d'Animation. Built in 1995, the building currently houses the offices for various aeronautical companies. It was a collaboration between Dominique Henriot, Christian Morandi and Parent's daughter, Chloé Parent.

This expressive building is easily missed. Thousands of people pass through the transport interchange at Roissy Pole every day without realising that they are within stepping distance of a Claude Parent building. The centre, designed in the shape of an aircraft wing, displays a distinctive image, a bold and obviously expressive architecture. But, curiously, it lacks the oblique angle in relation to the ground plane. Where are the continuous sloping angles? Is this the architecture of Potentialism?

At first, the building is rather difficult to understand. Sandwiched between a forest of utilitarian, plain commercial aircraft hangers and offices, it is dominated by the main central element. As you move closer towards the core of this building it becomes apparent that Parent has not forgotten to incorporate his old tricks of instability, movement and expression.

The central section is formed from a series of rectangular planes on the oblique angle. In fact, Parent has gone to the trouble of articulating the oblique by forming a grid pattern out of the cladding, just in case the user is starting to become 'at ease' with the building. There is a definite sense of movement throughout the design – rather appropriate given the building's location. Shards of metal penetrate the oblique planes with violence and energy. It is more than evident that Parent is keen to raise the user's consciousness; it is well on the way to a 'true architecture'.



ABOVE | 'CENTRE D'ANIMATION', CHARLES DE GAULLE AIRPORT, 1995
BELOW | CONCRETE PANELS DESIGNED BY PARENT'S DAUGHTER, CHLOE





ABOVE | BORDEAUX LE PECQ HOUSE, BUILT IN 1963 LEFT | THEATRE OF SYLVIA DE MONFORT
BELOW | L'ÉCOLE VINCENT-D'INDY BUILT IN 1988 RIGHT | 'RESIDENCE NEUILLY MICHELIS' 1966







DEAD OR ALIVE?

The legacy of the radical 'Continentials'¹³ features more than ever in today's modern and conceptual architecture. Arguably one of the most prevalent and influential architectural models of the last seventy years has been Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation. The diluted high-rise has littered our cities; we cannot go anywhere in the world without being exposed to dislocated towering monoliths. We still associate success and progression with the construction of high-rise buildings. Whether it be the Shard in London or the corporate towers in Warsaw, society sees this as placing a foot forward, rejuvenating the urban environment.

In the 1960s, Virilio and Parent questioned the very essence of vertical construction. Of course, at the time the architectural elite had no time for their very different ideas. The members of Archigram were on the up. They saw no need for two French architects to divert the tide of high-tech, futurism: "A new generation of architecture must arise with forms and spaces which seems to reject the precepts of 'Modern' yet in fact retains those precepts. We have chosen to by-pass the decaying Bauhaus image which is an insult to functionalism. You can roll out steel – any length. You can blow up a balloon – any size. You can mould plastic – any shape. Blokes that built the Forth Bridge – they didn't worry."¹⁴

Did the "Fonction Oblique" die with the 'scandal' of Saint Bernadette du Banlay? No. At least, not in my opinion. It seems to me that the ideas explored by Parent and Virilio back in the sixties are actually the basis for many of the conceptual, 'contemporary' designs of today's competition winners.

It seems that the world of architecture is going through a period of oblique revival. The architecture critic Andre Bideau articulates this nicely – "... the post Eisenman generation gave the material experience of space, structure and surface a new legitimacy. Its design-based research out-maneuvered a tired discourse steeped in iconography, linguistics, and self-reflection."¹⁵ Architecture has been transformed from a typologically coded, rational and ordered system into an "abstract infrastructure."¹⁶

La Philharmonie de Paris designed by Jean Nouvel, a student of Claude Parent, is the most obvious proof that the oblique function is alive. Designed as a concert hall that will raise the 'international prominence' of Paris as a centre for music, the brief was to provide plenty of space not only for the performance but

LEFT | 'CENTRE D'ANIMATION', CHARLES DE GAULLE AIRPORT, 1995

RIGHT | LA PHILARMONIE DE PARIS BY JEAN NOUVEL. NEXT PAGE | LA PHILARMONIE DE PARIS, JEAN NOUVEL



STRAVINSKY
LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS

DUTILLEUX
LE TEMPS L'HORLOGE

DEBUSSY
LA MER

ORCHESTRE DE PARIS
PAAVO JARVI • RENEE FLEMING

12.09.12 20H





also for the practice of music. According to Laurent Bayle, the new president of the Philharmonic Project, the aim is to create an iconic concert hall as well as a “facility that will provide a motivating work space for musicians.”

The concert hall is described by Nouvel as a building that “maintains harmonious relations.”¹⁷ He separates these harmonies into four movements. The first (primo) is harmony with the light of Paris. The building and its cladding is an “architecture of orchestrated reflections” placing itself within its landscape by reflecting that which surrounds it. The second movement (secundo) talks of harmony with the neighbouring Parc de la Villette. It aims to create a sinuous “walkable mineral landscape”. The third and fourth movements aim to create harmony with both the Cite de la Musique and the neighbouring ring road through “sloping surfaces” and iconic architecture that creates a unifying beacon for the suburbs.

Nouvel goes on to explain that this is not only a building for concert goers; the “Philharmonic is an open space”. It is designed to be a building of habitable circulation. Cafes, boutiques, bistros and lounges inhabit the walkable landscape and create a new addition to the urban fabric of this part of Paris.

Nouvel has designed an astounding homage to his mentor and it is being built right now. My discovery of the competition winning design has put Parent and Virilio’s work sharply into perspective. It has given me a better understanding of the ‘conceptual’ designs of Odile Decq, Coop Himmelbau and Zaha Hadid. Virilio has articulated thoughts and feelings that I had not previously been able to put into words. Claude Parent and Paul Virilio’s concepts of movement and time, potentialism, instability and the cryptic have helped me to understand the so called fashion for ‘sculpture’ architecture. The likes of Zaha Hadid and Odile Decq create what appeared to me as sensationalist architecture that is sculptural for the sake of fashion. Looking through the eyes of both Parent and Virilio I have found a new appreciation and, most importantly, understanding of the theoretical, radical designs of today’s leading architects.

The advances in technology have, perhaps, played a large part in the evolution of the total realisation of the oblique function. The use of computers to calculate complex geometry has meant that buildings such as La Philharmonie de Paris can actually be built. While the Architecture Principe presented “Nautacite”, a futuristic utopia, the technology was not advanced enough to deliver the complex structural geometries it contained. Given that, the ideas of Archigram prevailed.

Being awarded the FBUA bursary allowed me to study an architect and period of history which was new to me. What I discovered has informed my attitude towards architecture. What did I conclude? That the passage of time can change views.



ABOVE | 3D RENDER OF LA PHILARMONIE DE PARIS, 2011
BELOW | LA PHILARMONIE DE PARIS IN SECTION



When I visited the Centre d'Animation at Charles de Gaulle airport it did not seem as radical as the Church of Saint Bernadette du Banlay - which I had seen two days before. Sainte Bernadette seems as shocking to me now as it did to those who first viewed it in 1966. But the Centre d'Animation, built thirty years later, seems rather less outrageous. Could it be that, in the intervening period, Parent's ideas became more mainstream? There is an argument that, when they were ejected from that meeting in Folkestone in 1966, Parent and Virilio were ahead of their time. It has taken four decades for their ideas and theories to be accepted by the European architectural establishment.



NEXT PAGE | ZAHA HADID'S RABAT GRAND THEATRE, MOROCCO
RIGHT | PAUL VIRILIO AND CLAUDE PARENT AT WORK IN 1966
ABOVE | ZAHA HADID'S PIERRES VIVES BUILDING IN MONTPELLIER, 2006







ENDNOTES

1- Virilio, Paul – Interview with Paul Virilio, Nevers – Architecture Principe

2- Ibid

3 - De Botton, Alain (2006) The Architecture of Happiness p242

4 - Urban Forms: Death and Life of the urban block p114

5 - Ibid p114

6 - Rowe, Colin and Fred Koetter (1978). 'Crisis of the Object: Predicament of texture'. Collage City p51

7 - Rowe, Colin and Fred Koetter (1978). 'Crisis of the Object: Predicament of texture'. Collage City

8 - Urban Forms: Death and Life of the urban block p114

9 - Ibid p116

10 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ville_Contemporaine

11 - De Botton, Alain (2006) The Architecture of Happiness p246

12 - Virilio, Paul – Interview with Paul Virilio, Nevers – Nevers, Architecture Principe: Claude Parent, Paul Virilio

13 - Folkstone IDEA press 1966 – Nevers, Architecture Principe: Claude Parent, Paul Virilio

14 - Greene, David – 1st Publication of Archigram Magazine

15 - Bideau, Andre - Claude Parent Vu Par "La Fonction Oblique, Subtext for the Nineties?"

16 - Ibid

17 -Nouvel, Jean – "A Word from Jean Nouvel" <http://www.philharmoniedeparis.com/>



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