

## Destroy Experimental Architecture!

Lebbeus Woods

Several years ago, following the Research Institute for Experimental Architecture (RIEA) First Conference on Experimental Architecture, I wrote the following statements:

*Experimental architecture propels architecture as an activity and result into unknown realms, without sanction, justification, or the promise of usefulness to anyone. While one can argue that experimentation is necessary for progress in any field of thought and work, one is then required to state in advance a goal that is progressive and essentially optimistic. The presence of goals prejudices experimental efforts, and the necessity of optimism ties them to a chain of logic that corrupts their actual purpose, which is experimentation for its own sake. The experimental architect claims for himself and herself a freedom to pursue ideas and work limited only by their internal possibilities. This claim puts the experimental architect at odds with the profession of architecture, and most especially with the schools that supply the profession with new architects. For them, architecture is a service to client and community, not to architects, and even less to architecture. To the experimental architect, architecture is autonomous.*

Some time later, a critic (who I will not name, simply because I do not want to increase the fame he has

acquired by attacking “paper architecture”) writing in a journal (which I will not name, for the same reason) responded to my statements with a frontal attack. An excerpt:

*I thought “paper architecture” was a problem. Well, there is a new disease attacking the profession of architecture. It is called “experimental architecture.” This disease is being spread by a group of pseudo-architects who have arrogated to themselves a kind of autonomous authority to play in the fields of architecture, as though it were their personal property. This play, so seductive to young people who have a serious desire to become architects, has now begun to infect the architectural schools. Some of these “experimental architects” have been invited by well-meaning deans and chairpersons to teach design studios, where they spread a gospel of “resistance” or “liberation.” Resistance to what? Liberation from what? More to the point, liberation to do what? The answer is: be irresponsible and waste time with improbable dreams of what architecture “might be,” thereby ignoring what architecture has always been and irrevocably is, and still needs to be. No one will deny that architecture, if it is to progress, needs serious research and responsible experimentation. But this can only be accomplished by architects with substantial professional experience, who understand from that*

*experience what questions to ask and have the expertise to address them. To ask students who have little or no background in architecture to conduct serious research or experimentation is a mistake. They can contribute nothing to the field of architecture as it is actually practiced, simply because they have no understanding of it. In attempting to be “experimentalists,” they only waste the time they could be spending learning important architectural fundamentals, such as functional planning and solar orientation.*

While this clever fellow makes many innuendoes, recalling the disreputable techniques employed by Pietro Aretino in his attack on Michelangelo’s Last Judgement, I decided not to write a rebuttal, but simply to let my statements stand or fall on their own merits. Within weeks of this first attack, the critic repeated (quite literally) his tactic, this time in a foreign journal of normally good repute. An excerpt:

*There is a new disease in architecture today, and it goes by the name “experimental architecture.” There is a historical basis, or one might say, a pathological history to this type of architecture, running from the Futurists, through the Surrealists (this was the real impetus behind Expressionism), to Archigram, a virulent strain of hyper-imagistic “paper” architecture that pollutes the*

*modern stream of consciousness, but—fortunately—very little of the actually constructed world. Nevertheless, it is a disease that could become terminal, because it destroys respect for the nobility of architecture, and takes up too much space in architectural publications. Students are seduced by self-proclaimed “experimental architects,” the most virulent bacilli of the disease now threatening architecture. The future is to some extent threatened, because students are always looking for some way to avoid the drudgery of hard but really valuable architectural work, and they have been given a convenient way out by these architects, many of whom must make a living teaching, having no professional work whatsoever. It is high time the profession takes this infection seriously, this experimental architecture, and dispenses with it once and for all.*

The threat implied in this last statement seemed double-edged, aimed at me and my experimentalist colleagues, but also at the students who might venture into experimental ways of thinking about and making architecture. The whole tenor of these criticisms recalled the chilling pronouncements of the Nazis about “vermin” and “bacilli” that must be exterminated “once and for all.” Images of Salman Rushdie also came to mind. In America (and Europe?) of the conservative, right-wing late ‘80s, would

we—who represent a minority of architects, at best—be denied even our right to work in the manner that suited our restless dispositions? Would we in fact be ostracized even more than we already are, being hounded from school to school, from loft to loft, from exhibition to exhibition? I decided to make a rebuttal, which the editors of *Oz* have been sympathetic enough to present here.

It is true that many experimental architects have no commissions to build. Serious clients have yet to emerge for “landscrapers,” “suit-a-loons,” “subtle bodies,” “optigraphs,” “renegade cities,” “cactus buildings,” or “aeroliving-labs.” It is also true that these architects often earn their living by teaching in schools of architecture. While the phrase “those who can’t do...teach,” is particularly resonant in America, I shrug off the stigma that some would attach to teaching. It is also true that some students are intrigued enough by the possibilities of experimental thinking in architecture to make some intriguing explorations while they have the time and the liberty to do so. The period of one’s education—in the modern sense of the word—is meant to be a privileged time of asking questions for which no one knows the answers. Otherwise, it will only be a period of rote learning, the type of authoritarianism of ideas that may have been acceptable in earlier, more authoritarian epochs, but leads only to a dreary conformity in

an era that promises much more. To whomever might still desire dreariness and “drudgery,” as a cross to bear for the manifold sins of mankind, or for less noble, more pathological reasons, I can say nothing at all.

It is difficult to imagine a more demanding and critical task in architecture today than teaching young architects. Given the fast-moving architectural scene, with its trends, fashions, tendencies and general tumult, any architect—experimental or otherwise—is hard-pressed to offer to students anything that might in fact seem coherent to them. There are always the trends, but if one is a follower of such things, their propagation through teaching is merely a rear-guard action. The students know this better than the teachers who, steeped in the latest architectural journals, pass on the fashionable-forms and techniques of the moments, oblivious to the fact that the publication of anything is already proof of its passing. Or, the teacher may attempt to teach the timeless verities, the oft-cited “fundamentals” of architecture. The good critic’s “solar orientation” and “functional planning” are of this noble category. So are all the “foundation” courses based on the famous Bauhaus example, which was authored by stalwarts like Paul Klee and Johannes Itten. The former offers the promise of pragmatic verisimilitude, the latter aesthetic integrity. The problem with both of these approaches is not so much that

the principles they offer are no longer valid, but that they no longer (if they ever did) address the real mission of education—the asking of questions. In the end, they amount to rote learning, however many variations one might make on east-south orientations or the rotations of a cube in space. Yes, we must learn to read and write, but whoever thinks that the equivalent of these civilizing tasks in architecture is or can be acquired by the learning of pre-digested procedures forgets that both the substance and mission of architecture today is to create a resonance between the built world and human beings of today. And what are the “fundamentals” of such beings? Perhaps the good critic (and other “fundamentalists”) would wish they were as simple as having the morning sun at the breakfast table or distinguishing one cubical shape from the next. As a teacher and architect—as a human being living in the world of today—I would rather ask whether there needs to be breakfast tables at all, or even breakfast. I would rather ask, is the reiteration of cubic forms of any kind anything more than a reassuring sign of conformity? Regardless of the answers—and they will be various—their asking confirms the fluidity of contemporary life, and aims at an architecture resonantly flowing with it, or dissonantly against it.

In the end, one can only teach a way of thinking, and—by example—a way of living and working. Today, as per-

haps in no other time before, the fundamentals of living, and therefore of architecture, are not about static and timeless verities, but are instead concerned with the fluidity of things, and therefore with the achievement of a kind of dynamical balance, a poise in the midst of continual, often tumultuous and confusing change. The fundamentals are concerned with living and working affirmatively in the midst of uncertainty, even of doubt, even of questions which never stop coming, and for which the answers seem indefinitely postponed. Experimental architecture, like experimental living, is not an option in the present world, but a fact of existence.

*The following course description and commentary depicts an experimental project for a Third Year Options Studio at the Harvard University Graduate School of Architecture. The project is entitled Boston Free Zone, in which Lebbeus Woods is a critic.*

#### **Course Description**

The concept of “hierarchy” dominates architecture and urban design, enforcing systems of authority that work from the top down. However, as technology frees individuals from the control mechanisms of mass culture, by increasing mobility, choices and access to information, lateral systems of authority are developing within existing hierarchical structures. In cybernetic terms, these are “heterarchies,”

whose continually shifting forms are derived from the continually evolving performances of the individuals comprising the heterarchical system.

The “free-zone” is the spatial manifestation in the urban landscape of the “heterarchy.” It is comprised of distinct spaces—“freespaces”—inhabited by individuals participating in an urban heterarchical network through both direct, physical and indirect, electronic means. Free-zones and freespaces require a wide range of individual design interpretations.

The project for this studio is the design of a free-zone for the city of Boston and an exemplary freespace structure. Each student will work independently, but it is hoped that a heterarchical spirit will prevail in the studio.

#### Commentary

The nature of the project given to the studio was conceptual, not pragmatic. The point of beginning was a set of ideas, without a clue as to how they might be realized, if at all, in building. Heterarchy, free-zone, and freespace are concepts without historical precedent in architecture, except the very recent history of three projects of my own, which are at this point developed only to a very schematic level. I considered it appropriate that the students in this studio should conduct genuine research, seeking possible answers to questions not previously asked in architecture, giving them the opportunity to learn something new from the inside out, and to make a contribution to the development of specific ideas within the scope of architectural interest.

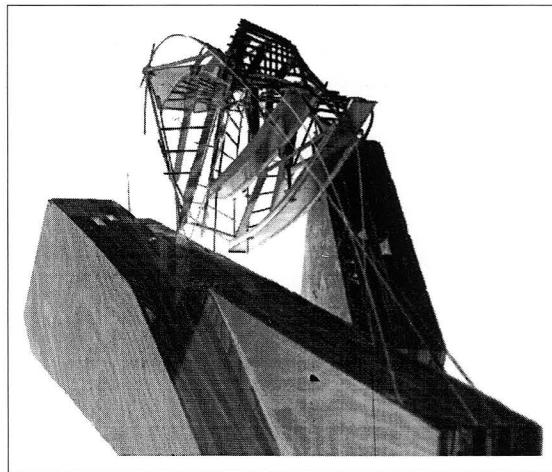
The work produced by this group was, in a number of cases, of a very high level. Of particular interest were projects which interpreted the given concepts in terms of space not previously considered to be in the domain

of architecture. New ideas often find root in previously neglected soil.

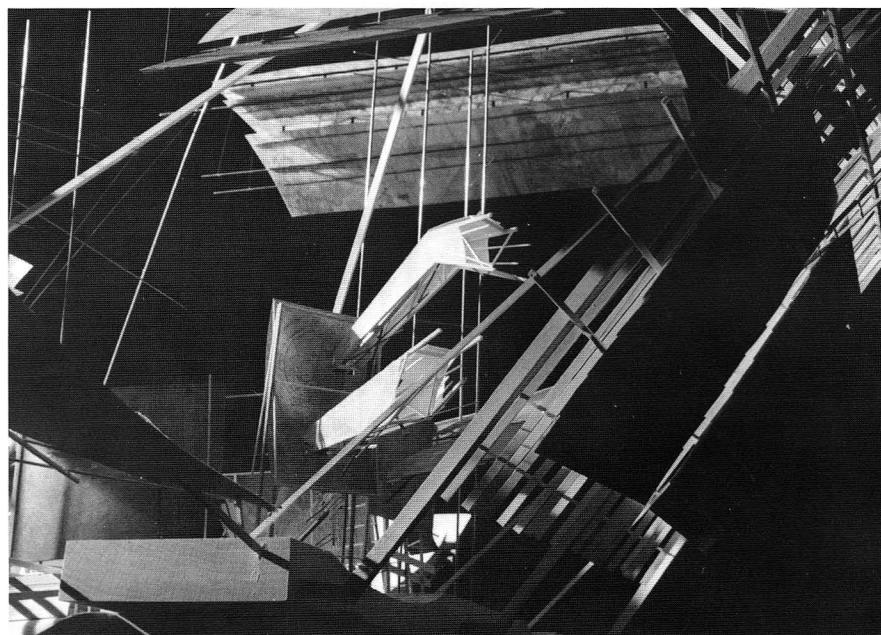
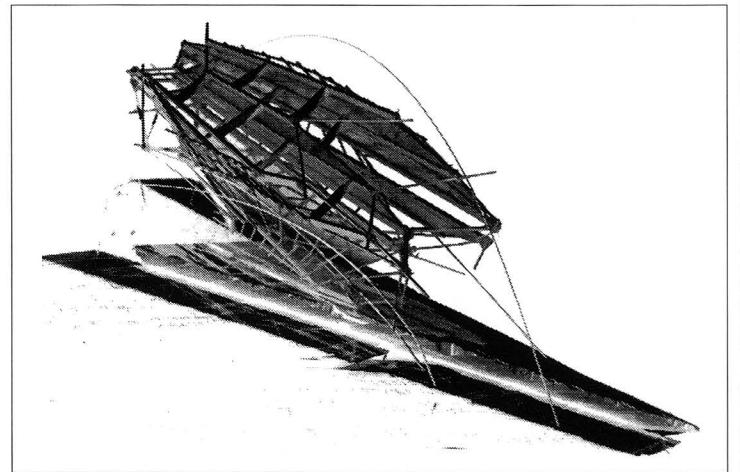
James Braam’s free-zone was the air traffic control space over Boston. He researched this existing, if invisible, structure of large dimensions which involves certain aspects of heterarchy. In particular, the decisions to assign specific airspaces—approaches, takeoff and landing patterns—to specific aircraft cannot be predicted in advance, because of the continuously shifting conditions of weather, wind direction, and air traffic. The interweaving of

deterministic and free geometries results, in his design, in a complexity that is conceptual as well as visual. Applied at the scale of the sky over Boston, or a more human-scaled landscape within the city, this architecture defines a space of understanding and a form of knowledge. These structures are built, as mental and physical constructs. I, for one, will never fly into Boston without passing through Braam’s zones of decisive uncertainty. His is an architecture of an age of realities both invented and found, parallel zones of tangibility.

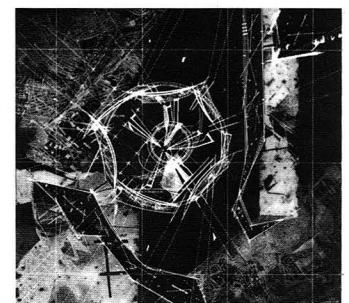
The free-zone of John McLaughlin also occupies the airspace over Boston: the space defined by the ephemeral energies of decision-making along a corridor of corporate media headquarters extending from the Back Bay to Cambridge. His project takes on a decidedly political dimension. Into the intricate webbing of electromagnetic lines of thought and communication generated along this corridor, McLaughlin insinuates an architecture of dynamic forms and spaces, as if to forcibly, but subversively, occupy a territory between those rigidly



*John McLaughlin*



*James Braam*



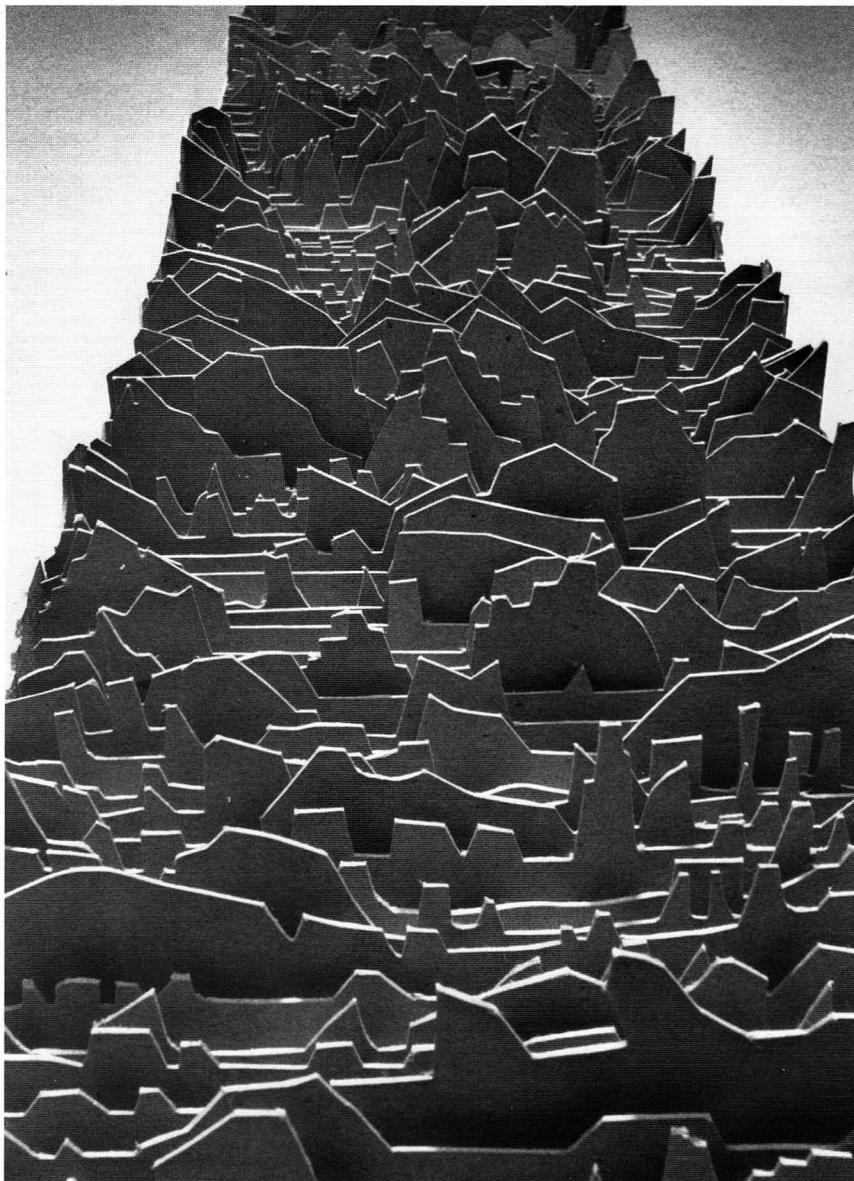
controlled by corporate policy and process. The aerial equivalent of a computer virus, this architecture of instantaneous presence commands its zone of ethereality in the name of continuous transformation, both physical and epistemological. By feeding back into the corporate world (in waves crossing the dimensions of space and thought), this architecture finds the cracks and seams and opens them wider. The breakdown of monoliths and monologues can only invoke heterarchy and the dialogues of open communication.

Yutaka Miyazaki subtly transformed the city of Boston into an entirely different city. He looks at the present city through a series of views as a stranger would, and finds it stranger than one might expect—a continuum of fragments joined into an endless visual field. On this he constructs a city—an *Urwelt*—obeying only the commands of celestial light to have surfaces on which to become incarnate. From a primordial mass, the city is carved, rather than modeled. Carving is the discipline of hermetic philosophy, giv-

ing light the space of its natural presence, rather than rising to meet and challenge it. Miyazaki's is a beatific Boston, an alternative history to culture, a critique of all that demands too little of thought and commitment in architecture and existence.

Beginning with the permutations of a simple pattern generated by computer, Mark Smith constructed pure architecture. While some would argue that architecture cannot exist without a site, or scale, or a definite

program for use. Smith's city is a four-dimensional armature of movement, the joints of which offer resistance, and therefore provoke accretions. It could be an architecture seen only by aid of a microscope, or one on an interplanetary scale. The issues of inhabitation it addresses are urban in essence: density, complexity, variation and finally, diversity. The determinism of a geometrical field reaches its climax at the limits of predictability. The webbing of matter finally forming space transcend the system that spawned them.



*Yutaka Miyazaki*



*Mark Smith*

*Editor's note:*

*Lebbeus Woods sent us this manuscript, which he called "incomplete", with a brief note, stating that he didn't want to say more than this. He sent with this piece the works of several of his students in the Third Year Options Studio at Harvard this past Fall semester, including a synopsis of his program for them. That would have been the end of this story, but for a strange twist. Two weeks after receiving this material we received a fax from the architectural critic that Lebbeus Woods refers to in his essay. The critic asked that his article be used in place of the essay we had received from Lebbeus Woods, but we decided to print them both, out of fairness.*

**It's Getting Worse**  
Critic

I had occasion recently to visit Gund Hall, the building housing the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. It is, by the way, a great modern building. The semester was finishing up, and there were some final reviews underway. There was a lot of fine work on display—housing projects modeled on the great projects of the '40s in New York and London, but with some odd curves and angles that gave them the look of today, some urban squares and piazzas, some really sensitive projects for an addition to the Cranbrook Academy of Art by Eliel Saarinen, and a few beach houses that went far beyond the things being done in the Hamptons a few years ago. It was really stimulating, and more than

a little inspiring, to think that these students—working under some of the best architects in the US—would one day soon be building in the real world. Charlie Gwathmey, Bob Stern—move over!

Just as I was leaving, I came across a room on the first floor, a little out of the way. In it a review of the students of Lebbeus Woods was going on. I recognized a few of the guest critics. They were the familiar band of "experimental architect." One of them, Michael Webb, is mentioned rather favorably in Ken Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, but the rest are not.

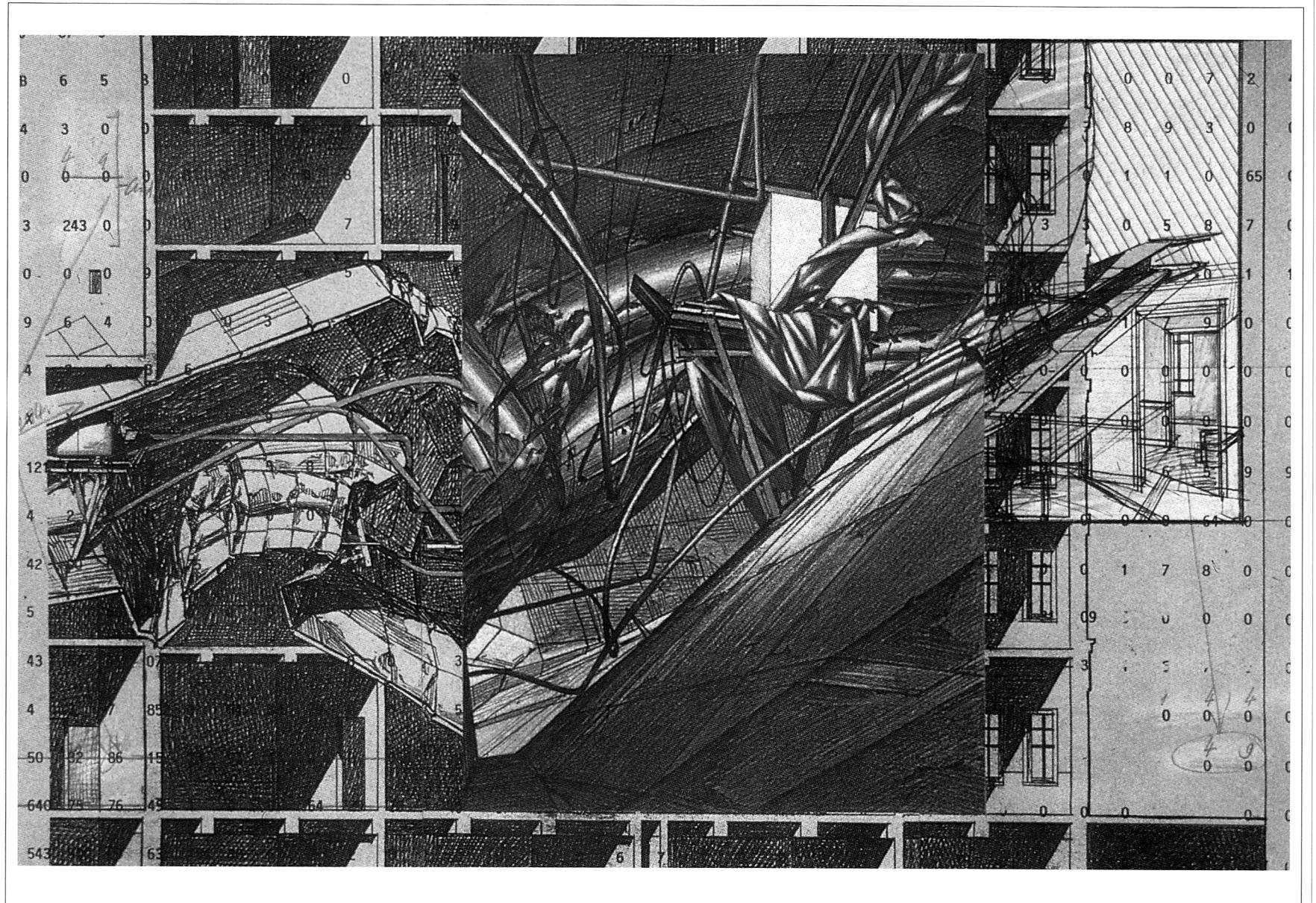
I watched for a while from the open doorway, unobserved. One after the next the students presented their projects, while a throng of other students looked on. Perhaps they were as thunderstruck as I was by the works being presented, and by the comments of the reviewing "experimentalists." One after the next projects of a completely fantastical nature were displayed in the most abstract drawings and models I had ever seen. These were discussed by the reviewers with portentous seriousness leavened occasionally by their outrageous jokes and sometimes vulgar laughter. I want to be specific.

Two or three of the student projects had to do with the design of aerial spaces over the city of Boston. One could have accepted schemes proposing balloon-supported megastructures, for exam-

ple—students must be allowed the chance to exercise their imaginations. But the schemes in question proposed to somehow materialize quite invisible or intangible things in the air—radio waves, thought waves, patterns of air traffic and the like—and present them as architecture. When asked by one astute student observer, whether or not these aerial "architectures" could actually be inhabited by people, the answer given was "yes, in the sense that their spaces can be experienced in thought, through the drawings and models." Everyone was so stunned, I suppose, or so bored by the whole affair, that the natural follow-up question never came: but is it, then architecture? The answer, no doubt, if given by Woods or his colleagues, would be a loud and noisy, "yes—experimental architecture!" I've heard this kind of answer before. Teachers like Woods have seduced these poor, gullible students into thinking that thought is a substitute for flesh-and-blood experience.

I left the doorway at this point, walking out of Gund Hall with feelings of anger and depression. It's a pity that the fine educational experience those students had been privileged to enjoy at Harvard, evidenced by the work I'd seen earlier that day, had to end on such a false note. While most of them will probably forget this "experimental" nonsense, no doubt some will actually go out into the world with the idea that they will be able to "materialize the intangible," for whatever good that

would do them or anyone else. Even worse, they might imagine that architects are in some way responsible for proposing ideas way beyond their scope as service professionals—really crazy, "experimental" ideas that, if built by some fluke, could actually affect the way people live and think and work. What would the profession of architecture—or the world—be like, if that attitude were to get around? Frightening. Experimental architecture is a disease. Together, we can purge ourselves of it. We shouldn't be afraid of what we have to do. Let's begin by adopting this simple motto: destroy experimental architecture!



*Lebbeus Woods, Berlin-Free-Zone*  
*Composite drawing: freespace section and perspective*