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Grotesque Missing Others

Dr Mirjana Lozanovska

On returning to Australia after spending some time overseas I opened the Winter 2007 issue of Architect Victoria, and while I am no fan of Barry Humphries who was pictured on the cover (Les Patterson), the word ‘grotesque’ captured my attention. Because Melbourne can become a bit dry, as it has been dominated by a modernism excessive in trying to be modernism against a history of resisting modernism, this attention to something other than modernism was welcomed. The editorial was enjoyable reading – stimulating references to popular culture alongside highly intellectual references to the sublime, Bakhin, Schwitters etc. Conrad Hamann’s essay, as always, was bubbling over with titilating information and witness, and a gradual understated argument that was both humorous and dangerous. In addition, it was exciting to see the publicity of work not always looked upon for publication, as well as the usual suspects (ARM, Edmond and Corrigan, Cassandra Fahey).

But on reflection, there was something disturbing about the overall effect of the issue and its topic. This was revealed firstly by the way the term the ‘other’ has slipped into architectural discourse without enough resonance to its discursive meanings, therefore diminishing the ways that architecture engages with these other cultural fields, even while developing a more explicit cultural platform for discussion. Carey Lyon more carefully articulates this position when he suggests that the grotesque should not be perceived as an opposite tradition but more as the ‘other’ in order to enable a way of looking at the canon as absurd (p. 22).

For that reason it is surprising to me that quite an important essay that addresses the grotesque and the other together is not drawn upon alongside the other academic references. Gülçin Baydar Nalbantoğlu’s essay (G Nalbantoğlu, ‘Toward postcolonial openings: Rereading Sir Banister Fletcher’s History of Architecture’, Assemblage, no. 35, 1998, pp. 6–17) analyses the so-called non-historical styles of Banister Fletcher’s well-known book and the illustration of the ‘Tree of Architecture,’ in the sixteenth edition. Baydar Nalbantoğlu illustrates Fletcher’s simultaneous fascination and disdain for non-Western architectures through the terms “excessive” and “grotesque,” terms that appear again and again in Fletcher’s analysis to indicate undesirable exaggeration. Certainly Baydar Nalbantoğlu understands this exaggeration within the framework of the relationship between ornament and structure, but in her text the emphasis is on the inseparability of ornament and structure rather than the reversal of the dominant role of structure over ornament. Baydar Nalbantoğlu argues that from this perspective, other architectures were defined as not having, or lacking a history, while being excessive in ornament. However, this lack and excess of the other architectures occurred when Western architecture had to redefine its identity in positive terms as historical, and it did so by naming non-Western architecture as non-historical. A tension between pleasure and self-preservation became a part of the historian’s way of looking.

What else is going on in architecture in Melbourne in relation to the grotesque and the other? For one, I would suggest it is the other of Toula from Fat Pizza mentioned in the editorial essay (but why is a picture of her not on the cover?), the other of the migrant enclaves in the Australian suburbia (rather than all those iconic Australian references), the eagles and lions that adorn the gateways of the migrant house, the estranged multi-culturalisms that enliven Federation Square.

The issue on the grotesque was confronting because underlying the texts was (again) a self-consciousness about its Australian identity. And yet (again) the same grotesque or exciting others were missing, that of other architectural cultures in Melbourne. ■

Editor’s note: Mirjana Lozanovska was guest editor of Architect Victoria: New Australian Architecture: April 2002. It was not edited by Mirjana Lewandowska as stated in the appendix to the summer 2008 edition.