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The Architecture of Explosive Slowness

Teresa Stoppani

Architecture as a discipline is, by definition, slow: slow in updating its technologies, slower than fashion in changing its styles, slower than the life that occupies it and alters it – even slower than the economy and the politics that so strongly affect it. In general, architecture takes time to embrace change, it needs manifestoes or paradigm shifts to proclaim its innovation, which are clamorously announced but then are slowly, gradually and often only partially enacted.

Architecture as a building is even slower, freezing materials and energy in its static composition.¹ Architecture does not move and does not prescribe its own changes and is subject instead, in the longer period, to the accidents of life, to weathering, use and obsolescence.² It is only the sudden accidental collapse, or the choreographed phasing of a demolition, that rapidly unleashes the energies contained in architecture. Structural failure and planned destruction release the energy that the building contains in its sudden change from building to non-building. Accidental collapse and planned demolition can both be considered to be part of the life cycle of a structure. Yet, while the accident is determined by causes and forces that are intrinsic to the structure,³ the demolition process applies to the building external forces that can be considered the ultimate ‘completion’ of its project (its un-building).

Externally applied forces are also those that determine the destruction of architecture by natural or artificial disaster. Although the causes of the disaster are in some cases difficult to distinguish – direct and indirect, natural and man-made factors often concur in determining disastrous effects – I have suggested a possible distinction based on the element of determination, indicating with the term ‘artificial disaster’ that which results not only from

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1 On this see Luis Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000. In this fascinating work Fernández-Galiano reintroduces energy to the discussion of architecture and proposes a reconsideration of architecture beyond the visual.

2 On the weathering of architecture see Mohsen Mostafavi, David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1993. On the use of architecture see Rotor (Tristan Boniver et al.), *Usus: État des lieux / Usures: How Things Stand*, Brussels: Communauté Française Wallonie – Bruxelles, 2010. On architectural obsolescence see Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (R. Tiedemann, ed.), Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999.

3 The theory of the accident is explored in Paul Virilio, *Unknown Quantity*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2003. The idea that the accident reveals the substance and that it is made possible by the very technology of the object is originally suggested in Aristotle’s *Physics* (Books I-IV, London, Heinemann, ‘Loeb’s Classical Library’, 1929).

a manmade action but, more specifically, from a carefully planned one, and is therefore the enactment of a project.⁴ The project of destruction which is realised by the 'artificial disaster' does not directly address the form of a structure and its undoing, as its aims are concerned primarily with other dimensions: what the structure represents, the values, ideologies and political systems that architecture is always invested with. Produced but not 'designed', the formal outcome of the artificial disaster exceeds the intention of the project of destruction, but is still implemented through and on the form of the building.

The project of architecture congeals forms and temporarily suspends the dynamics of materials and energies, establishing order and enabling legibility and inhabitation. The project of destruction is otherwise designed to affect the symbolism and the signification embodied in the structure of architecture; while its enactment violently affects form, its main concern is not primarily formal. Art projects that have intervened within the relationship between architecture/construction and disaster/destruction have articulated critical considerations on the nature of architecture in relation to its slow time and trapped energy, and to the fast speed of the disaster and its paroxysmal release of energy.

The works of sculptors and installation artists Cornelia Parker⁵ and Heide Fasnacht⁶ in different ways operate on the precarious balance between the cohesion and the explosion of the object. They question the issue of form by focusing on the explosion as the 'moment between' the composed form of the architectural object and the re-composed aggregate form produced by the artwork. Their projects of explosions – differently performed, recorded, modelled and represented – show to the viewer the sudden release of energy that makes manifest the time/space between form and non-form in architecture. Both artists' oeuvres have been (and are being) produced in the time cloud the surrounds the tragedy of 9/11, uncannily anticipating some of the critical issues raised by those disastrous events. A retrospective reconsideration of their artworks in the light of political world events may now seem to add to the meaning and socio-political implications of art; in fact, these works are never 'only' formal, but always already critical, and their criticality is produced through the very making (as well as melting, undoing, exploding) of form. By freezing the moment of the explosion and turning a random instant into a selected static frame, these works re-appropriate the exploded structure to a formal concern. They oppose the process of destruction because, by suspending it, they make explicit the tensions that hold together (suspend) the particles of form.

Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View (1991),⁷ the work that brought Cornelia Parker to

4 See Teresa Stoppioni, 'The Architecture of the Disaster', *Space & Culture*, 15:2, May 2012, 138-153. The essay considers the irruption of the *designed destructive event* (artificial disaster) in the order of architecture, arguing that it brings onto architecture sudden destructive forces of an intensity, speed and violence that are alien to those of architecture. While design and planning are about space definition and form making, the destruction inflicted by the disaster concerns the undoing of form, of planned orders and structures (be they societal, urban, economic, national). Through a series of examples, the text explores those operations of architecture that work on and with the energy released by the disastrous event, engaging it in a re-definition of form.

5 Cornelia Parker (1956-) is a British sculptor and installation artist living and working in London. See URL: <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/cornelia-parker/biography/>>. See also *Cornelia Parker*, The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, Boston: Art Data, 2000.

6 Heide Fasnacht (1956-) is an American sculptor and installation artist living and working in New York. See URL: <<http://www.heidefasnacht.com>>

7 Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, 1991. A garden shed and contents blown up. Dimensions variable. See URL: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/>>

international attention, consisted of the choreographed explosion of a garden shed, blown up for the artist by the British Army. Installed in the gallery space, the fragments resulting from the explosion were suspended from the ceiling around the shed's light bulb, in a centrifugal thrust of shards and splinters reproducing a moment of the blast, further extended by their shadows cast on the gallery walls. Suspending and protracting the explosion in time, containing and expanding it in space, this work questions (literally) the limits of the 'architectural' object. While the object is rendered unrecognizable and the form of its envelope is lost, what is made evident here is the variety of its heterogeneous components and contents (even in a modest garden shed - we still recognize timber and iron, a single boot, a bent bicycle wheel, etcetera), and what is highlighted by their violent scattering is the tension that held them together.

Produced but not 'designed', the formal outcome of the artificial disaster exceeds the intention of the project of destruction, but is still implemented through and on the form of the building

In *Mass (Colder Darker Matter)* (1997)⁸ Parker continued her investigation of the cohesion and tension of form. Here charcoal fragments retrieved from a church struck by lightning were suspended in a reconstructed centrifugal taxonomy, from the larger and heavier elements in the centre to the smaller and unrecognizable ones at the edges of the reconstructed volume. This work focuses on the nature of the material (the 'mass' of the title), and on the fire that destroyed the building, rather than on the dynamics of its trigger (lightning). Missing here is the dynamic thrust of the fragments embodied in *Cold Dark Matter*.

In Parker's works the suspended debris seem to await yet another possible recombination, suggesting potentially endless intermediate stages between form and non-form. The distinction here is interestingly complicated through the explosion and its freezing, which first suddenly accelerate and then visibly display the processes of alteration and fragmentation that will eventually affect all architecture. The still suspended fragments that make up these works act as high speed accelerators of the dynamics of decay of architecture. The added triggering force of the explosion allows the artist to render them physically manifest in emptiness and space dilation. What used to be a solid and usable form is now a low-density assemblage of fragments which attempt in vain to re-establish coherent relations. *Mass* and other later works by Parker present a suspended taxonomy of fragments, and paradoxically in this visual and more sedate order the possibilities of recombination become looser, or are irredeemably lost. The importance of the frozen explosion of *Cold Dark Matter* lies in the only partial amnesia of its fragments, whose heterogeneity and disorder seem to suggest (or remember) compositions and relations beyond taxonomy.

Heide Fasnacht's works reach beyond the suggestion of broken relationships, as the destructions that they perform suggest the possibility of self-generated implosions. It is this ambiguity that allows Fasnacht to stage a very material emesis of the buildings' innards, triggered perhaps from the outside but certainly powered from within. Fasnacht's work shows us that 'bodies, whether of land, water, or flesh, are unstable aggregates ... caught only by coincidence in forms we recognize.'⁹ They track 'the energy released when that familiar cohesion is

8 Cornelia Parker, *Mass (Colder Darker Matter)*, 1997. Installation. Charcoal retrieved from a church that was struck by lightning suspended from steel wire and cotton thread, dimensions vary. See URL: <<http://artpace.org/about-the-exhibition/?axid=30&sort=artist>>

9 Heide Fasnacht, *Drawn to Sublime* (essay by Nancy Princenthal), New York: Kent Gallery, 2003. Text from the





ruptured, and the always-present world of particles in collision is made manifest.' And this applies also to architecture. Fasnacht's project of instability¹⁰ starts with the nearly realistic representation of suddenly released inner energy, as seen in the large drawing of *Sneeze I* (1997).¹¹ It then translates into a vomit of black Styrofoam balls and the semi-collapse of the building in the sculptural *Demo* (2000)¹² and into an ejection of silvery particles in *Exploding Plane* (2000)¹³, both uncannily and disturbingly produced before the events of 9/11 in New York City. Here plane and building explode together but separately, apparently from internal and unrelated causes. It is only in the later installations of *Jump Zone* (2005)¹⁴ and *New City* (2007)¹⁵ that the built structures are fully exploded, reduced to voided and fractured skeletons, and, in the latter piece, seeming to suggest the possibility of a re-construction or new construction with, or within, the remaining fragments of the broken old one.

In different ways these artworks or, better, artist interventions on architecture, help render explicit the precarious nature of the apparently solid form of architecture. By working on time, halting and representing the instant of the planned explosion, they return the fast project of the disaster to the slow project of architecture. By slowing down the instant of form undoing to the temporality of the image they render visible the space (Parker) and the matter (Fasnacht) of architectural form.

catalogue cover. See URL: <<http://dl.dropbox.com/>>

10 'By turning her attention to instability in all its realms – political, atmospheric, geologic, molecular, social, psychological – Fasnacht has created . . . a kind of poetics of catastrophe.' *Heide Fasnacht, Strange Attractors* (texts by Edward Albee, Ted Potter and Raphael Rubinstein), Richmond, Virginia: Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2004. Text from the catalogue cover. See URL: <<http://dl.dropbox.com/>>

11 Heide Fasnacht, *Sneeze I*, 1997. Graphite on paper, 40 x 60 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania. See URL: <<http://www.kentfineart.net/artists/heide-fasnacht/>>

12 Heide Fasnacht, *Demo*, 2000. Polychrome Neoprene, Styrofoam. 112 x 125 x 120 in. Ibidem.

13 Heide Fasnacht, *Exploding Plane*, 2000. Graphite, acrylic over Neoprene. 20 x 20 ft. (dimensions vary). Ibidem.

14 Heide Fasnacht, *Jump Zone*, 2005. Tape, Styrofoam, Neoprene. Work located on inside corner wall of the Kent Gallery, New York. 15 x 17 x 15 ft. (dimensions vary). Ibidem.

15 Heide Fasnacht, *New City*, 2007. Tape. Work located on inside corner wall of the Kent Gallery, New York. 10 x 16 x 12 ft. (dimensions vary). Ibidem.

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