

CALLUM MORTON'S *HABITAT* EXHIBITED AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA 31 MAY – 17 AUGUST, 2003.

HIS *MORE TALK ABOUT BUILDINGS AND MOOD* WILL EXHIBIT AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SYDNEY, 22 OCTOBER, 2003 – 26 JANUARY 2004

# MESSING WITH MIES



## CALLUM MORTON AT THE NGVA

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The first time I saw Callum Morton's work, I could swear Mies van der Rohe was cursing from his grave. It seemed to me that this pontiff of Modernist architecture, who spent his life reducing the idea of occupation to that of distilled existential being, was being violated, abused. An impression I didn't at all mind, since Mies himself has been accused [with some credibility] of abusing one or two of the inhabitants of his own buildings. I have since been reminded by the artist however, that this impression of abuse is only true "if you think of that object of modernity as untouchable. I would prefer to think of it, not as abuse but reconditioning".<sup>1</sup> I will return to the reconditioned Miesian box in a moment, suffice it to say that Morton has issues with the way architecture of the recent past has packaged human experience.

Let's look a little closer at this architecture in question, for it is not with any old loosely defined modernity that Morton is concerned. One can observe in his recent work a movement [one might almost consider it a graduation] from more generic objects of the urban architectural fabric – doors, balconies, highways – to more specific iconic moments of what is now somewhat oxymoronically known as classical modernism, Mies, Loos, Le Corbusier. An architecture for a time in which the rational application of new materials and processes, combined with a devotion to function and efficiency, held the prospect of making the world a better place. A moment of ideological optimism and aesthetic renewal, if not exactly born then augmented in the immediate post First World War period. For those parts of the world transformed by modernity, it was a time when anything was possible – housing the homeless, feeding the poor, revolutionising the workplace. Needless to say, the darkness of fascism that descended over Europe sent most of this optimism packing.

And so this resilient strain of modernist positivism did not die, it simply migrated to America. The utopian dreams of early modernist architecture, born in the first decades of

the twentieth century, bloomed in a thousand skyscrapers and a million affordable suburban tract homes. It was not long, however, before architecture's social project began to crack under the weight of exponential expectations and the consolidation of radical individualism. The collective solutions of the 'minimum dwelling', the new science of ergonomics, the birth of urban planning, the marvels of standardised production, all held such hope, yet were destined also to produce so many spectacular failures.

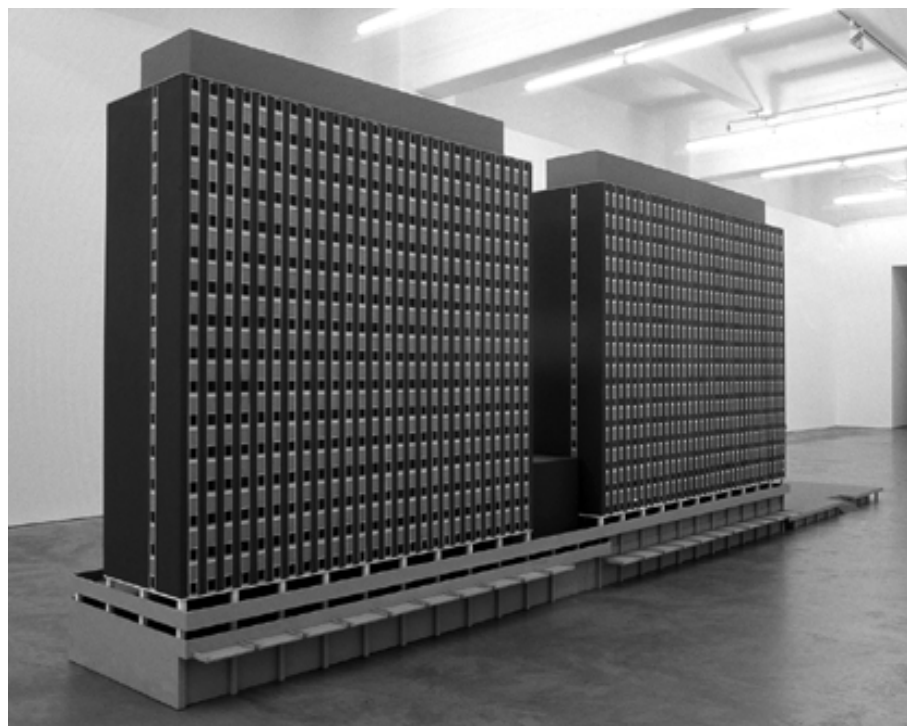
It is in this light that we must see Morton's 'reconditioning' of architecture through art, as a challenge to a certain overextended ambition of architecture's purpose, or put more bluntly, architecture's tendencies towards megalomania. Further, the discrepancy between reality and aspiration, between claim and achievement in the modernist idiom, is articulated in the self-conscious uselessness of his objects. That is to say, Morton's art disavows any claim to architecture's utility.

Another important quality to the foregrounding of this work is that of ambivalence as a defining feature of Morton's relationship to modernism. A shrewd ambivalence that is in fact profoundly un-modernist [as distinct from the term anti-modernist, the very evangelical fervor of which serves no more than to reiterate a modernist conviction par excellence]. Ambivalence is a word that has been misrepresented by a world hooked on certitude, as meaning lazy, half-hearted, and uninterested. On the contrary, Morton's ambivalence in its true sense is a precise tension between opposing ideas, beliefs and opinions. It is an ambivalence between a respect for the social conscience and the aspiration of modernism's heroes, married with an awareness of the damage that aspiration can wreak when imposed as a template or grid, from on high. These properties then – the ambiguous relationship of Morton's objects to the 'real world' of utility, combined with an specific ambivalence to architecture's claims to progress – set the stage for a consideration of this work.

Returning to Morton's reconditioned *Farnsworth House* [both the last house but one to be designed by Mies van der Rohe and certainly the most iconic of all modernist homes], we find in this modified architectural model one of Morton's earliest and most astute attacks on the ideology of modernism. The first thing you notice, as you approach, is that it is occupied. You don't see anyone, since the glass walls for which Mies is famed are here lined, made blind one might say with banal indifference, by curtains. But there are people there. You hear them. A party is going on, a bawdy party of drinking, dancing and loose behavior. An argument develops, followed by gunshots and then, after a pause the party starts up again. To understand fully the sense of violation this suggests, it is perhaps necessary to quote one of Mies' more aphoristic reflections on architecture and life: "Only through philosophical knowledge is the correct order of our tasks revealed to us, and through this the meaning and dignity of our existence".<sup>2</sup> Thus the temples, which Mies designed for dignified repose, were never designed for out-of-control parties. This kind of deviant behavior is rather, the stuff of cheap pulp fiction and the marginalia of suburban dysfunction. The Farnsworth House, as with other Miesian studies in a similar vein such as the House with Three Patios [plans for which Mies obsessively worked and reworked for many years], were all designed for degrees of austerity and solitude worthy of Zarathustra. But while the House with Three Patios always remained on paper – more an object of philosophical enquiry than an actual document for construction – the Farnsworth house was actually built for occupation, albeit as a weekend holiday home. Therein began one of architecture's more notorious relationships between client and architect.

The details are long and convoluted, but it is enough to say that within months of describing her first conversations about the house with Mies [harbouring affections that were never returned], as being "like a storm, a flood or an act of God"<sup>3</sup>, Edith Farnsworth was remonstrating in society magazines on the building's inhumanity and brutality.<sup>4</sup> Mies sued for unpaid fees and she counter-sued for over-run budgets. Mies won. And so, by imposing the impurity and disorderliness of a party gone wrong upon Mies' single-minded quest for transcendental purity, Morton does no more than refigure the disjunction between expectation and reality contained within the story of that building. Making visible and audible that which is hidden or silenced.

In a later work, *Cabanon*, Morton reconditions a primitive shack by Le Corbusier, a diminutive building built for the architect in his later years and in which he died of a heart attack. It, like the Farnsworth house, is a building that contains a story of human occupation somewhat less than accounted for within the rational orthodoxy of modernism. The hut, little more than a lookout post perched on rocks overlooking the Mediterranean at Cap Martin in France, seems an innocent enough place for Le Corbusier to while away his twilight years and to work on his cubist drawings and painting. This would be the end of the story, were it not for the fact that Cabanon also overlooked [spied on even] a building by his one-time friend turned competitor, architect and designer Eileen Gray. Principally the background story revolves around Le Corbusier's willful destruction of Gray's building next door, when in an act of sheer misogyny on her departure to a new home further north, he began a series of murals on the walls of her building. Murals intended, in his own words, 'not to enhance the wall, but on the contrary, as a means to violently destroy the wall'. The pathology of Le Corbusier's relationship to this building, and by Freudian association Gray, takes some unpacking. Certainly *Cabanon* is transformed from being simply an inoffensive bolthole to a site of disturbing psychosexual voyeurism. In Morton's work, as we approach the small model we hear the sound of a heart beating, it quickens and quickens until suddenly it flat-lines. It is a sound that draws the viewer closer. Peering inside, a light is visible through a small dark window and acts metaphorically in place of the architect's heart. It is as if his famous line, that of architecture as 'a machine for living' transforms the cabin into an object literally taking the place of, embodying, the old recalcitrant master. Engaging with this work, we the viewers, snooping through the little doll's house window, become complicit in the role of peeping tom. In this manner the cabin becomes a rather sordid cipher for the betrayal of privacy, which Le Corbusier enacted on fellow architect Eileen Gray. The broader analogy to architecture as an unassailably male dominated profession is here barely camouflaged.



In other works by Morton, this kind of anthropomorphic and often libidinal treatment is visited on a variety of architectural icons, rendering buildings as psychologically charged sites of trauma, claustrophobia, obscenity, desire, voyeurism and all manner of regular human conditions, otherwise denied and locked out of the official inhabitation of modernism. This brings me to Morton's most recent reconditioned icon, *Habitat*, which as perhaps the largest and most ambitious of Morton's works, befits an architectural subject whose social ambition was equally expansive.

Designed by Israeli architect Moshe Safdie, the original Habitat was a prefabricated housing shell of 354 modules composing 158 homes, commissioned and built for the Montreal Expo of 1967. A prototypical mega-structure of infinite expansion and divisibility, it was however more a product of architectural ideology than social pragmatism. Across the world other examples abound, from Kisha Kurokawa's 1962 Nagakin [pretty much the only real built achievement of the Japanese Metabolists], while at the same time a motley team of hairy idealists just graduated from college, Archigram [ARCHitecture + teleGRAM], were busy fantasising the Walking City, the Plug-in City and the Instant City, from their North London bed sits. Echoing the inventiveness of the Weimar years, though this time pumped up on new construction technologies and a more insistent politics of social equity, all these projects and Safdie's Habitat in particular, displayed a fusion of communitarian idealism and industrial prowess. But here as with all of Morton's subjects, in reconditioning the rhetoric of architectural intention, a more disturbing subplot of reality emerges. Morton's 1:50 model once again contains the sounds of occupation within, as always tantalisingly almost legible, though ultimately beyond coherence. Compressing a day in the life of *Habitat* down to twenty-eight minutes [the temporal equivalent of 1:50 scale], we watch as the building goes through its day – the blue flicker of TV, the sound of an argument, one guy playing drums, another masturbating – evocations of the detritus of life. This interminable repetition of the daily grind is here institutionalised in the gallery setting by the programmed cycles of audio and light controls. As night descends, the surrounding theatrical setting of the model darkens and lights appear from within the apartments. A chorus of nocturnal sounds from the Lilliputian residents compete with each other like many cicadas. A perpetual loop of existence, a farce of 'lifestyle', suggesting not habitation but imprisonment.

It is in reconditioning the utopian dimension of this project that we see Morton's ambivalence clearly delineated. For who can truly knock the audacious aspirations of architects such as Safdie, Kurokawa or Archigram in this current era of low grade, market driven real estate speculation? The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition includes a photograph of the artist installing *Habitat* in the gallery. He has a look of concentration, one might say an earnest look, as one re-enacting the care in construction that surely attended Safdie's conscientious responsibility to house hundreds of families. Certainly this is not simply an exercise in humiliating the architect. It even suggests the caricature of the model maker, be it of trains, planes, cars or buccaneering ships, of laborious dedication to the dream of possession, or at the very least of the curiosity of inhabiting that space oneself.

From here one logical step is to move into the virtual realm. Not only because this offers greater opportunity to inhabit and mess up the perfect paradigms of modernity [I almost shudder to think what disruptive shenanigans gaming technology could provide in the Barcelona Pavilion or the Villa Savoye], but because in many ways the language and polemics of virtual technology in architecture has assumed the mantle of modernity in aspiring to a tabula rasa condition – of erasing that which went before in triumphal anticipation of building the world anew, and better. In a series of works entitled *Local+or General*, Morton has already suggested this direction, collaborating with the Melbourne based team the UDL. Hijacking a series of the lean economic monuments to modernity, including again his favorite muse, the Farnsworth House, the team employed the standard computer tools of design [auto-CAD, 3-D Studio Max, Illustrator and Photoshop] in destroying the formal clarity of these buildings with badges, banners, neon, logos and the signage from hell. Lurid toy stores, franchise cafés and gloomy petrol stations transform the hallowed churches of yesterday into a banal theme park to our brand culture of today. The temptation to expand this exercise further into the virtual realm is irresistible, for in doing so, it implicates the rhetoric of hyper-surfaces, revolutionary spatial conditions, paradigm shifts, and other 'never-done-before' hogwash of virtual sophistry, within an unbroken lineage of modernity's claim to the new. It is in this manner that Morton finds his strongest resistance to modernity, in questioning the myth of progress, of knowing better now. Refusing to simply reject the immediate past he denies the modernist game. Rather it is in the past that we must learn our most valuable lessons. Ultimately, although this work has comedic overtones, it's not about cheap jibes at our silly forefathers, but about rethinking what happens when creativity becomes dogma and when design ideology enters the world of real social space.

#### Notes

1. Interview with the artist. 20 July, 2003
2. R. Evans, 'Mies van der Rohe's paradoxical symmetries'. *AA Files* 19, 1990
3. Franz Schulze, *The Farnsworth House*, 1997 [illustrated booklet available to visitors of the house]
4. Edith Farnsworth, Chicago physician and translator of Italian poetry, who commissioned the house in 1945. The court case in 1953 was ostensibly over money matters, though it is more likely that the antagonism related more to her disappointment with the man than the building