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Topic: How does literature and art envision an anarchist future?

Title: Anarchitecture: Anarchist Principles Made Concrete

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Abstract

Anarchist futures are typically envisioned from a political perspective, as problem solving exercises for contemporary socio-economic ills. Consequently, their discussion is often confined to special interest groups within academic and activist circles, rendering anarchist futures less visible and accessible to broader society. The arts offer media through which anarchism can be imagined, depicted, and distributed outside these contexts, and architectural designs and installations in particular, whether virtual or physical, can provide the public with concrete, interactive experiences with anarchist futures, making anarchism more accessible and comprehensible.

This paper outlines the history of anarcho-architecture, or anarchitecture, describing its inception by an artistic collective in the 1970s, and its later influence on both architecture and pop culture through the work of outsider architect Lebbeus Woods. The paper concludes by presenting an argument for using both virtual and physical anarchitecture to educate broader society in the benefits of anarchist futures.

What is anarchitecture?

In a 2014 article appropriately entitled “Scars” in the online magazine *Sang Bleu*, Helen Levin writes:

An anarchist may be asked, “How will your free society begin, how will you end the government?” The anarchist may have no answer, no way of initiating a self-ruling society without fearing brutal retaliation from the rulers in power. But in a war, when violence damages the buildings, streets and cities, it also destroys the established authoritative order”” so who’s left to enforce the rules?¹

The answer to that question is anarchist architecture, otherwise known as anarchitecture, which Levin articulates throughout her article with particular reference to the anarchist outsider architect Lebbeus Woods. The first reference to anarchitecture appears to have been the title of an art exhibition in 1974, led by Gordon Matta-Clark, an artist with architectural training.²

¹ Helen Levin, “Scars,” *Sang Bleu Magazine*, 15 July 2014, <https://magazine.sangbleu.com/2014/07/15/scars/>.

² Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till, “Anarchitecture,” in *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Routledge, 2013).

Whether the exhibition was actually held or only planned is a matter of debate,³ but regardless, the idea of it led to the formation of a collection of artists referring to themselves as The Anarchitecture Group, who challenged the conventional role of architecture in society, and explored the ways in which architecture collaborates with capitalism.⁴

Matta-Clark's own interest in the intersection of architecture with capitalism may well have been prompted, or at least encouraged, by the death of a cousin as a result of an apartment ceiling collapse in 1973.⁵ This had been foreshadowed somewhat eerily by a set of black and white photographs Matta—Clark had taken in 1972, entitled “Bronx Floors: Threshold”, displaying holes in the floor and ceiling of apartments in the Bronx, an indication of architecture suffering from economic decay.⁶

Throughout the 1970s, the Anarchitecture Group produced a range of art works and literature both drawing attention to and critiquing the collusion of architecture with capitalist interests, and presenting conceptual challenges to this collaboration. Although the Group itself was relatively short-lived, its concepts and terminology have outlasted it and have become peculiarly distributed within popular culture, largely resulting from the massive influence of anarchist architect Lebbeus Woods, who ironically was not a member.

Lebbeus Woods: outsider architect

Born in 1940, Woods studied architecture and engineering. Despite never receiving a formal qualification in architecture, he referred to himself consistently as “Lebbeus Woods, architect”, and actually taught as a professor of architecture, at the privately funded Cooper Union in New York and the European Graduate School in Switzerland. In 1976 Woods appears to have abandoned conventional architecture, and devoted himself entirely to experimentalism and conceptual art. However, this did not mean he had ceased designing practical structures, though it is true that the vast majority of his designs were never realized physically, existing in the form of architectural plans and images which are more like artworks.

In an interview with the New York Times in 2008, he insisted “I’m not interested in living in a fantasy world. All my work is still meant to evoke real architectural spaces”. Significantly, he said his shift in focus was intended to illustrate “what the world would be like if we were free of conventional limits”, and “what could happen if we lived by a different set of rules”.⁷

³ Mark Wigley, *Cutting Matta-Clark: The Anarchitecture Investigation* (New York: Lars Müller Publishers, 2018).

⁴ Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till, “Anarchitecture,” in *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Routledge, 2013).

⁵ James Attlee, “Towards Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and Le Corbusier – Tate Papers,” *Tate Papers* 7 (2007), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/07/towards-anarchitecture-gordon-matta-clark-and-le-corbusier>.

⁶ James Attlee, “Towards Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and Le Corbusier – Tate Papers,” *Tate Papers* 7 (2007), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/07/towards-anarchitecture-gordon-matta-clark-and-le-corbusier>.

⁷ ““I’m not interested in living in a fantasy world,” Mr. Woods told me. “All my work is still meant to evoke real architectural spaces. But what interests me is what the world would be like if we were free of conventional limits. Maybe I can show what could happen if we lived by a different set of rules.””, Nicolai Ouroussoff, “An Architect Unshackled by Limits of the Real World,” *The New York Times*, 24 August 2008, § Arts.

Woods referred to his own distinctive style of architectural design as “anarchitecture”,⁸ articulating it as an architectural expression of anarchist principles. Woods’ connection with anarchism is recognized across academic disciplines. In a 2012 obituary in online architecture journal *Architect*, Mercedes Kraus notes “Woods explored anarchy and the politics of space”.⁹ Architect Koen Huijs writes “I see Woods as an anarchist, since he is very sceptical about hierarchy”.¹⁰

Deconstructivist scholar Niall Lucy referred to Woods as “the twentieth century’s anarchist of experimental architecture”.¹¹ Likewise, anarchist Michael Truscello of the University of Waterloo comments on what he refers to explicitly as Woods “anarchitecture”, which, according to Truscello, “attempts to create “freespaces” through indeterminate structures, identifies the relationship between architecture and ideology”.¹²

Woods’ designs provide a detailed vision of what distinctively anarchist architecture could look like. In an article in *The New York Times* on 24 August 2008, Nicolai Ouroussoff rightly describes Woods’ art as depicting “bombed-out cities populated by strange, parasitic structures, they seemed to portray a world in a perpetual state of war”, but thoughtfully adds that this is also a world “in which the architect’s task was to create safe houses for society’s outcasts”.¹³ This is indeed Woods’ original vision.

Noteworthy is the almost complete absence of humans from Woods’ designs, with very few exceptions, including a number of images in which people appear to be making their best effort to continue normative life among the wreckage of conflict and destruction. A 2017 blog post on the Ideas For Philanthropists website makes the same observation.¹⁴

⁸ “Woods called it Anarchitecture: a place of anarchism and architecture, of both order under construction and falling apart, and of the continual drawing out of our human potential to create connections, collaborations, and knots of mental material.”, Aaron Bestsky, “Lebbeus Woods: The Alchemist,” *Architect*, 31 October 2012, https://www.architectmagazine.com/Design/lebbeus-woods-the-alchemist_o.

⁹ “With his drawings, Woods explored anarchy and the politics of space; death and destruction; and crisis, war, and conflict.”, Mercedes Kraus, “Architect and Draughtsman Lebbeus Woods Dies at 72,” *Architect*, 30 October 2012, https://www.architectmagazine.com/Design/architect-and-draughtsman-lebbeus-woods-dies-at-72_o.

¹⁰ “To put it in my own words, I see Woods as an anarchist, since he is very sceptical about hierarchy.”, Koen Huijs, “オンデマンドの建築 ARCHITECTURE ON DEMAND” (23 May 2021), 5.

¹¹ “Lebbeus Woods, the twentieth century’s anarchist of experimental architecture.”, Niall Lucy, *A Dictionary of Postmodernism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 163.

¹² “Architect Lebbeus Woods, whose “anarchitecture” attempts to create “freespaces” through indeterminate structures, identifies the relationship between architecture and ideology.”, Truscello, “The Architecture of Information: Open Source Software and Tactical Poststructuralist Anarchism | POSTMODERN CULTURE,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Thought on Contemporary Cultures* 13.3 (2013), <https://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/19/the-architecture-of-information-open-source-software-and-tactical-poststructuralist-anarchism/>.

¹³ “Foreboding images of bombed-out cities populated by strange, parasitic structures, they seemed to portray a world in a perpetual state of war, one in which the architect’s task was to create safe houses for society’s outcasts.”, Nicolai Ouroussoff, “An Architect Unshackled by Limits of the Real World,” *The New York Times*, 24 August 2008, § Arts.

¹⁴ “At first, the lack of people depicted in Woods’ drawings appears to contradict all his arguments of designing architecture for people. With further thought, there is a reason there are no people shown in his drawings, with no

However, the article proposes that Woods “does not want to formulate how people should live in the worlds he imagines, but just create a different architecture that has the potential to reinvent how people could live”.¹⁵ This is an incisively accurate interpretation of Woods’ philosophy. Nevertheless, although Woods’ anarchitecture was intended to be liberating, it was often also intended to be ideologically transformative. Ouroussoff observes that Woods’ anarchitecture project “Berlin Free-Zone” has an explicitly ideological function, writing “Cramped and oddly shaped, the interiors were designed to be difficult to inhabit - a strategy for screening out the typical bourgeois”, and quoting Woods himself stating “You can’t bring your old habits here, if you want to participate you will have to reinvent yourself”.¹⁶

This is certainly in tension with Ouroussoff’s idea that Woods did not want to “formulate how people should live”. This tension can be eased by observing that Woods did not want to coerce people into living a certain way, rather he used his anarchitecture to illustrate that certain ways of living require concession to a specific ideological framework. The concept of architecture which disempowers hierarchy and incentivizes anarchist approaches to life is radical, and should be explored further by anarchists.

This concept is articulated further in Helen Levin’s 2014 article “Scars”, in which she describes how Woods was inspired by his experiences in the ruins of post-civil war Sarajevo. Woods’ anarchitecture, Levin explains, is a way to remove power from the authoritarian social hierarchies responsible for the war, and empower the individual survivors, who construct their own buildings, suited specifically to their own needs.¹⁷ As Levin put it, “The anarchy would emerge through the desire to build a city for oneself, by oneself, from the discarded fragments of the established, violent government”.¹⁸

This is explained in various posts on Woods’ own blog, especially a post in 2011 entitled “War and architecture: three principles”, in which he provides images of his anarchitecture designs, and explains their meaning. One of these images Woods describes as “A typical residential block, badly damaged in places, reconstructed with new types of spaces for residents’ use”.

indication of how they would inhabit the world.”, ideasforphilanthropists, “Lebbeus Woods’ Architecture of Possibility,” Ideas for Philanthropists, 29 October 2017.

¹⁵ “He does not want to formulate how people should live in the worlds he imagines, but just create a different architecture that has the potential to reinvent how people could live. He is not dictating how people should live, but creating the possibility for people to live differently.”, ideasforphilanthropists, “Lebbeus Woods’ Architecture of Possibility,” Ideas for Philanthropists, 29 October 2017.

¹⁶ “Cramped and oddly shaped, the interiors were designed to be difficult to inhabit - a strategy for screening out the typical bourgeois. (“You can’t bring your old habits here,” he warned. “If you want to participate, you will have to reinvent yourself.”)”, Nicolai Ouroussoff, “An Architect Unshackled by Limits of the Real World,” *The New York Times*, 24 August 2008, § Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/25/arts/design/25wood.html>.

¹⁷ “The destruction of Sarajevo in the ’90’s inspired architect Lebbeus Woods to speculate on how to divest from authority and initiate individual empowerment by repairing the city. He saw an opportunity to reinvent the society in Sarajevo, a chance to end the authority-sponsored war cycle and replace it with peaceful individual authority.”, Helen Levin, “Scars,” Sang Bleu Magazine, 15 July 2014.

¹⁸ “The anarchy would emerge through the desire to build a city for oneself, by oneself, from the discarded fragments of the established, violent government.”, Helen Levin, “Scars,” Sang Bleu Magazine, 15 July 2014.

He adds that this form of reconstruction “integrates people’s experiences of the destruction into needed social changes, as well as architectural ones”.¹⁹ Under an image of his design for a new parliament building, Woods wrote “The purpose of the New Parliament is not simply to replace the old, Socialist parliament, but—in the first place—to study and debate what a post-war Bosnian parliament should be and do”.²⁰

Levin’s article comments that Woods “saw the potential for healing the trauma through architecturally mending the city”. This is why the architecture in his designs shows signs of age and conflict, and appears parasitic and predatory. In reality it is only parasitic in the sense that it is sustained by the structures to which it is attached. It is best described as scar tissue.²¹

In his 1997 work “Radical Restoration”, Woods says “The scar is a deeper level of reconstruction that fuses the new and the old”, adding it is “a mark of pride and of honor, both for what has been lost and what has been gained”.²² He further describes this architectural scarring as “a mutant tissue, the precursor of unpredictable regenerations”.²³

Anarchitecture in popular media

In a 2014 conference paper, art historian Dr Mark Bonner, lecturer for Media Studies at the University of Cologne, wrote “Woods thought of his structures as overcoming outdated hierarchies and fatal harm”, contrasting Woods’ images with the way they were later re-imagined by art designer Viktor Antonov, whose graphic work in the cult classic video game Half Life 2 was heavily inspired by Woods.²⁴

¹⁹ “A typical residential block, badly damaged in places, reconstructed with new types of spaces for residents’ use. The principle here is that reconstruction integrates people’s experiences of the destruction into needed social changes, as well as architectural ones.”, Lebbeus Woods, “WAR AND ARCHITECTURE: Three Principles,” LEBBEUS WOODS, 15 December 2011.

²⁰ “The purpose of the New Parliament is not simply to replace the old, Socialist parliament, but—in the first place—to study and debate what a post-war Bosnian parliament should be and do. New types of spaces woven into the surviving Cartesian structural frame, create a dialectic between timeless and timebound, a network of the unknown that inspires both dialogue and innovation:”, Lebbeus Woods, “WAR AND ARCHITECTURE: Three Principles,” LEBBEUS WOODS, 15 December 2011.

²¹ “Lebbeus saw the potential for healing the trauma through architecturally mending the city. This would create personal space in the depths of ruin. He knew it was necessary to holistically process the urban detritus, to think about both destruction and construction as a cycle to rebirth.”, Helen Levin, “Scars,” Sang Bleu Magazine, 15 July 2014.

²² “The scar is a deeper level of reconstruction that fuses the new and the old, reconciling, coalescing them, without compromising either one in the name of some contextual form of unity. The scar is a mark of pride and of honor, both for what has been lost and what has been gained.”, Lebbeus Woods, *Radical Reconstruction* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 15.

²³ “It cannot be erased, except by the most cosmetic means. It cannot be elevated beyond what it is, a mutant tissue, the precursor of unpredictable regenerations.”, Lebbeus Woods, *Radical Reconstruction* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 15.

²⁴ “However, the slim, blade-like verticality of its outside is contradicted by the grand and vast rooms in the inside that rather resemble heavy metal production facilities. While Woods’ thought of his structures as overcoming outdated hierarchies and fatal harm, Antonov uses them as architecture representing fear and dominance of an

Antonov's work has left a legacy in the video game franchises to which he contributed. Despite leaving development studio Valve after his work on Half Life 2, Antonov's distinctive vision for alien architecture is clearly visible in Half Life 2 Episodes 1 and 2, as well as in Half Life Alyx. Likewise, despite leaving Arkane Studios after his work on Dishonored, Antonov's art style was preserved faithfully in the later games in the franchise, Dishonored 2 and Death of the Outsider on both of which he acted as consultant.

In all of these games, the architectural influence of Lebbeus Woods is very obvious. Through Antonov's adaptation of Woods' designs, the anarchitecture of Woods himself has been presented to millions of video game enthusiasts across a span of 13 years from 2004-2017. Unfortunately, so few of them are aware of the ideological significance of Woods' designs, and his aims.

However, Woods' original anarchist vision is being presented accurately and explicitly in the recent video game Afterlight, which has been in development by Silent Road Studios since 2018. In an article on the gaming website 80level, the team has not only described the game's architecture as taking inspiration from Woods' manifestos, but also explained how their game's narrative follows Woods' theme of "the matter of struggle and the scars and marks the conflict leaves on things".²⁵ Very importantly, they recognize the distinction between Woods' own understanding of his architecture, and Antonov's interpretation of it, writing thus.

"We have taken a lot from Antonov's interpretation of Woods like the parasite relationship between humanity and the aliens – the scars of the conflict are the "alien shapes" and "alien technology" over the human cities."²⁶

In a unique extension of Antonov's interpretation, the Afterlight team explain how they "reimagine this concept in order to put humanity on the parasite side as a conqueror of nature on Titan". Consequently, in Afterlight "Lebbeus' architecture turns humanity into a scar over nature in the conflict of colonization".²⁷ This is an application of Woods' anarchitecture which is highly congruent with his own principles. It is very likely he would have been delighted to see his work not only interpreted accurately and sympathetically, but extended thematically and applied to such socially relevant topics of discourse as colonization. Video game development certainly offers an important channel through which anarchists could communicate anarchist ideology powerfully and effectively to a wide audience, through a compelling medium which could help present it as realistic and practical.

occupier or of an aristocracy.", Marc Bonner, "Analyzing the Correlation of Game Worlds and Built Reality: Depiction, Function and Mediality of Architecture and Urban Landscapes" (presented at the DiGRA 2014: <Verb that ends in 'ing'> the <noun> of Game <plural noun>, Salt Lake City: University of Cologne, 2014), 7.

²⁵ "From architecture, we got some ideas from Lebbeus Woods' manifestos. Lebbeus' works talk about the matter of struggle and the scars and marks the conflict leaves on things. To us, it's about how humankind is obsessed to spread the species along the cosmos -and by doing that, how we pollute and transform everything at our reach.", Kirill Tokarev, "Afterlight: Embodying Symbols in Game Design," 80lv, 10 July 2019.

²⁶ Kirill Tokarev, "Afterlight: Embodying Symbols in Game Design," 80lv, 10 July 2019.

²⁷ "In Afterlight, we reimagine this concept in order to put humanity on the parasite side as a conqueror of nature on Titan. That way, Lebbeus' architecture turns humanity into a scar over nature in the conflict of colonization.", Kirill Tokarev, "Afterlight: Embodying Symbols in Game Design," 80lv, 10 July 2019.

Conclusion

From its inception in the early 1970s as a form of conceptual protest art with limited scope, anarchitecture has developed into a widely disseminated approach to architecture, appearing in a range of media. The width of this dissemination has nevertheless come at the cost of depth, and anarchitecture is spread so thinly in pop culture that it is rarely recognized for itself. However, there are clear signs of an anarchitecture revival, as artists, architects, and game developers turn to anarchitecture not only for artistic and ideological inspiration, but also as a practical solution to economic problems.

In 2010 a joint Finnish and Taiwanese anarchitecture project called Ruin Academy was constructed in Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan. Taking advantage of an abandoned five story building, team members rebuilt the interior as a living and working space, according to explicitly anarchist principles. Looking very much like some of Lebbeus Woods designs, Ruin Academy was equipped with dormitories enabling staff and students to live on site, as well as social areas for discussion and interaction, and a public sauna for comfort and relaxation. The building was deliberately made open to the elements by cutting six inch holes into the walls and removing the windows. Vegetation for both decorative and practical uses grows freely within, outside, and through the building. The last formal update of the project seems to have been in 2013, but the website is still online, presenting a good introduction to this bold physical realization and demonstration of anarchist principles to social organization.

However, anarchitecture today is not merely confined to art and architecture installations. In fact it is being taken increasingly seriously in the professional architecture industry. In an article on the Forbes website on 8 December 2017, artist and critic Jonathan Keats posed the question “Can The ‘Anarchitecture’ Of Gordon Matta-Clark Save New York From The Plague Of Gentrification?”. In his article Keats described the socio-historical context of Matta-Clark’s work, and explicitly appealed to anarchitecture as a solution to inner city gentrification. Importantly, Keats also acknowledged the continued relevance of anarchitecture to mainstream modern society, writing “Anarchitecture is clearly an influence on social practice in contemporary art and so-called relational aesthetics”.²⁸

Even more relevantly, on 27 January 2022 Paul Dobraszczyk, researcher at the Bartlett School of Architecture at the University College London, wrote an article entitled “Anarchist Architecture Could Help Cities Rebuild after COVID-19. Here’s how”, citing examples of architecture by intentional and non-hierarchical communities from as far back as the 1970s, and proposing that an anarchist form of architecture could be a successful methodology for architectural restoration in the post-COVID era.²⁹

Anarchists and anarchist organizations should take heart from this revival of interest in anarchitecture, and examine ways in which it could be used to propagate anarchist thought. Both virtual and physical anarchitecture offer a powerful way to help non-anarchists comprehend a vision of practical anarchism.

²⁸ “Anarchitecture is clearly an influence on social practice in contemporary art and so-called relational aesthetics.”, Jonathon Keats, “Can The ‘Anarchitecture’ Of Gordon Matta-Clark Save New York From The Plague Of Gentrification?,” *Forbes*, 8 December 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathonkeats/2017/12/08/gordon-matta-clark-bronx/>.

²⁹ Paul Dobraszczyk, “Anarchist Architecture Could Help Cities Rebuild after COVID-19. Here’s how,” *Fast Company*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90716271/anarchist-architecture-could-help-cities-rebuild-after-covid-heres-how>.

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