

# WRECKITECTURE

(ARCHITECTURE OF DISASTER)  
GEORGE STOLZ

“When we consider the perverseness of human nature which is nakedly revealed in the uncontrolled relations between nations.... we may as well be astonished that the word ‘law’ has not yet been banished from war politics.”

Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*.

“Whatever the voice of conscience may be said to be, it cannot be said to be ‘silent’”

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*.

1947 was a momentous year in world history. The British Mandate for Palestine was partitioned, effectively clearing the way for the creation of the Jewish state of Israel. Pakistan and India came into existence. As did the Central Intelligence Agency. As did the microwave oven and the Polaroid instant camera. As did the Avtomat Kalashnikova – otherwise known as the AK – 47 assault rifle (the ‘47’ of the weapon’s name referring to its year of initial manufacture.) Cambridge admitted women for the first time. The Brooklyn Dodgers’ Jackie Robinson became the first black player in major league baseball. The Marshall Plan was established and implemented. The International Monetary Fund began to function. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in a series of caves near that sea’s northwest shore. The first sighting of flying saucers was reported by a lone American pilot on clear, cloudless afternoon near the Rocky Mountains. Hungary was seized by the U.S.S.R., the Truman Doctrine was declared, the Cold War commenced in earnest.

1947 was also the year that ground was broken for construction of the United Nations Headquarters in mid-town Manhattan. The United Nations as organization already existed, its charter having been duly signed, its permanent council having been established, its general assembly sporadically and nomadically convened. But it lacked a permanent seat, a headquarters to call its own, and without that permanence, without that architecturally manifested commitment, without possessing the concrete obstacle to dismantlement and disengagement, the tenuous concept underlying the entire idealistic endeavor still lay dangerously close to remaining nothing more than the “sweet dream” that it had been since Kant plaintively called for a “league of nations” in his curious essay “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” of 1795.

The ‘perpetual peace’ of Kant’s title is in fact a joke, and a rather grim one at that: it refers to the inscription on a sign hanging over an inn in Holland; a sign on which, above the apparently cheery phrase, is pictured a cemetery – a grave last laugh indeed. Yet in the face of such admitted pessimism, Kant nonetheless dares to outline the applied structural points on which such a peace and such a league are to be founded – including a noticeably realistic consideration of the “cost of peace.” For peace is indeed costly, as Kant points out; so much so that the cost of maintaining it supplies yet another incentive (as if another were needed) to wage war: and in a corollary fashion, the power of money – money used to finance the “cost of peace” -- is the most dependable weapon, more powerful than armies or alliances *per se*.

The high cost of peace, in Kant’s formulation, arises because peace is not a natural state: war is. War is mankind’s *status naturalis*, the inborn condition, particularly among ruling classes: “the natural state [among men] is one of war. This does not always mean open hostilities, but at least an unceasing threat of war.” And thus, under the unchanging, overarching, sempiternal threat of war, Kant calls for the formation a league of nations: not an enlightened transformation of human character, not a utopian and peace-fostering world state, not even a benign international alliance of shared interests and benefits, but rather a “negative surrogate of an alliance” which might at best restrain the worst and serve to avert the miseries of war. Thus Kant’s “sweet dream” in fact has little sweetness to it: it is no dream of return, no restoration of a fractured unity, no regaining of a paradise lost; rather, it is the warding off of nightmare.

Warding off of nightmare – this same desire underlay the impulse that initiated the construction of the United Nations Headquarters that September morning Manhattan’s Turtle Bay in 1947. Courbusier’s own sweet dream of improving men’s souls through a ‘new’ architecture belonged to 1927, not 1947: from an historical vantage, the United Nations Headquarters is not so much an instance of enlightened architecture as it is of *wreckitecture*. Rather than a celebratory monument to victory, it is a structure with a conceptual foundation anchored deep within the calamitous accumulated wreckage of History. Indeed, like Noah’s Ark, like the Tower of Babel, the United Nations Headquarters might come to serve as an icon, even if an indirect one, of the architecture of calamity – calamity that at the time of the building’s construction was not necessarily limited to past calamity. For although from today’s vantage 1947 is rightfully seen as post-war, at the time ‘post-’ could all too easily have become ‘pre-.’ Yes, the ferocious nightmares of the holocaust and World War II were at last over (although rubble still smoldered everywhere and peoples everywhere still hungered among the rubble). But the worst nightmares are those from which the dreamer awakes into nightmare, and in 1947 the threat of a more fiery holocaust loomed heavily, not in World War III (or IV or V) but rather in a single End-of-the-World War, in the mutual and assured destruction of nuclear Armageddon. Of all the momentousness of that momentous year, what was of greatest moment at the time was not what had been or what was, but rather what might be, and what might have been.

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Txuspo Poyo’s *U.N.(inverse)* takes as its point of departure the United Nations Headquarters, which it subjects to an intense, lyrical,vivid and affectionate study. Like much of the artist’s work, *U.N.(inverse)* is driven by a conceptual approach to history that is as passionate as the final work’s execution is accomplished. But underneath the multitude of references – cultural, historical, social, political, cinematographic and artistic -- and behind the palpable delight in cinematically exploring cultural icons and artifacts, the real focus in *U.N.(inverse)*(as well is in the rest of Poyo’s historically based work) is not the past *qua* past but rather the present, *our* present. Like a prism that separates and thus reveals the individual bands of color that collectively compose the light that surrounds us, in Poyo’s work these cultural icons and artifacts of the past serve as lenses through which to isolate and thus perceive the elusive components of the culture that surrounds us and shapes us and of which we not only partake but that in partaking create.

This kind of art-making amounts to the exercise of a kind of history: and thus the artist here becomes a kind of historian, and moreover an historian in the sense that Hannah Arendt – explicitly taking Kant’s scant political writing, “Perpetual Peace” included, as her own point of departure – so powerfully advocated and indeed practiced: not historian as archivist (*pace* contemporary fashion and modes), not historian as chronicler or story-teller, not even necessarily historian as witness; but rather historian as judge in the Kantian sense of one who consciously exercises the fundamental mental faculty of judgment. And does so squarely in the present, to which history always, despite its insistent claims to the contrary, belongs. As Arendt made clear, unlike the activities of thinking or willing, the activity of judging – whether as a matter of aesthetic taste or moral conscience, the exercise is fundamentally and essentially the same -- deals with particulars, not abstractions: and while judgment is necessarily directed toward the past, it just as necessarily operates from and in the present. Where Arendt’s more lyrical companion Walter Benjamin may have glimpsed an angel of history being blown aloft above the wreckage of the past into the future, the more steely-eyed vision maintained byof Arendt – who unlike Benjamin survived the calamities and whose testimony and analysis indeed shaped much of our understanding of them -- remains rooted in the present, and in the ongoing obligation of individuals to pass judgment. As she wrote in the *Postscriptum to Thinking*, the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*: «If judgment is our faculty for dealing with the past, the historian is the inquiring man who by relating it sits in judgment over it. If that is so, we may reclaim our human dignity, win it back, as it were, from the pseudo-divinity named History of the modern age, without denying history’s importance but denying its right to be the ultimate judge.»

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Txuspo Poyo’s *U.N.(inverse)* exercises this very sort of judgment. The work functions on the one hand as an historically oriented and vaguely iconoclastic study of the United Nations Headquarters, replete with a recording of Eleanor Roosevelt’s crackling voice reciting the Human Rights Charter and ghostly fleeting images of the U.N’s tapestry version of *Guernica* (to name but a few such references). But at the same time, and precisely via this technique and material, *U.N.(inverse)*conjures up in the mind of a present-day viewer a stylistically related architectural icon – the World Trade Center – and the blatantly iconoclastic act of that building’s destruction and the ensuing horrific massacre of thousands that has been seared into the collective memory of an age.

But calamity has a way of following upon calamity – or, more cynically, of being *made* to follow upon calamity. And in parallel fashion, *U.N.(inverse)*deftly layers not only its references but also its conjurations -- indeed it is precisely in this deftness that a great measure of the work’s success, aesthetic as well as moral, resides. As a result, in the mind of the present-day viewer of *U.N.(inverse)* -- and again, Poyo’s work is above all concerned with the *present* – it is impossible not to recall at the same time what took place at the plenary meeting of the United Nations Security Council in February 2003. It is impossible not to recall General Colin Powell standing in that same space, the space around which *U.N.(inverse)*revolves. Standing before the world’s eyes and fumbling with a shockingly amateurish presentation of pseudo-diagrams and cartoonish computer generated images. Standing before the world’s eyes and setting off a chain of tragic events that as of today has not yet reached or even, it seems, begun to approach its end. Standing before the world’s eyes and lying. Standing before the world’s eyes and calling for war.

That was a profoundly calamitous day for the United Nations. But in response *U.N.(inverse)* offers an example of dealing with the recent past precisely in order to sit in judgment and assert a claim for human dignity, as Arendt enjoined. In this the work is as exemplary as it is urgent. For there may well be no other way to salvage the United Nations and the dream that once engendered it from the rubble-heap of history’s *wreckitecture*.