John Portman and "La Nuit Américaine": The Skyscraper in the Imagined City

In May of 1975, the cover of the journal *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui* featured a dramatic reproduction of Erastus Salisbury Field's *The Historical Monument of the American Republic* (1867-1876).[1] From afar, Field's painting can be interpreted as representing a triumphant trajectory of two and a half centuries of social, political and technological achievements in the form of ten monumental towers rising victoriously toward the sky. From up-close, the image reveals a more torturous path from settlement to the centennial. Rather than depicting scenes of triumph, Field chose ones of tragedy and violence to underscore a dramatically tormented perspective from which to illustrate this history.[2] In the space between the monumentality projected by the collection of towers of Babel and the catastrophic calamity of episodes engraved on their surface emerges a multifaceted history whose dissonance is amplified by the journal's title: "The Life and Death of the Skyscraper."

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE SKYSCRAPER

As the journal's editor, Bernard Huet translated the complex history depicted in Field's painting [1] into its equivalent narrative for the skyscraper, whose American inception temporaneously coincided with the painting's creation. In the translation from "towers-as-history" to a "history-of-towers," Huet suggested that the contemporary skyscraper can be understood as full of life, a "privileged product[s] in the domination of space," and witnessing its death as the result of a growing "rupture" between the skyscraper and the city.[3] A year before, Huet had edited a previous issue of *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui* exploring the increasingly disjointed relationship between the skyscraper and the city as a result of the inefficacies of professional practice.[4] American architects had fallen prey to two separate consumer systems: one entirely "based upon the market value of construction" and the other based on an art market that served the "speculative enjoyment of the collector or museum."[5] While John Portman, Philip Johnson and Kevin Roche were alleged to operate within the *realism* of a "commercial market,"[6] figures like Peter Eisenman, John Hejduk and Robert Stern served the *imaginary* musings of an "art-collector market."[7] Symptomatic of the impasse that arises from these two irreconcilable positions of "commercial" and "paper" architecture, Huet argued that the discipline was undergoing a long "Nuit Américaine" and condemned to perpetually question the terms of its own existence. Out of all

DANIEL LOPEZ-PEREZ

University of San Diego

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the protagonists mentioned by Huet, none focused harder at reconciling the contradictory nature between these two camps than John Portman.

Huet borrowed the phrase "Nuit Américaine" from Francois Truffaut's legendary film of the same title. Translated as "Day for Night," Truffaut's film was a "movie about film-making" where he played himself as a movie director.[8] Truffaut came to the idea of *a film-about-a-film*, one that merges the competing roles of director and actor into one, after finding an existing film set that replicated a Parisian street, including buildings, sidewalks, cafes, and the city's characteristic subway entrances. [2] Intrigued by the complexities of collapsing these competing roles and the way the set reproduced the space of the city, Truffaut explored the many perspectives that were produced both in front and behind the camera in search of glimpses where urban life could be seen "wrong side out."[9] Whether creating the simulacrum of nighttime with daylight, a "film within the filming of a film," or mimicking a city within a film set, Truffaut blurred the line between *reality* and *simulation* as a way to augment the "intoxicating" effect of both.

Truffaut's exploration into the ambiguous terrain of the film set selected the space of the city as its environment. Just as "Day for Night" blurred the distinction between the *real* and the *imaginary*, Huet transposed the difference onto two models of practice: one based on *realism* (in relation to market forces), and the other based on the

imaginary (understood through the autonomy of "paper architecture"). Huet used this dichotomy as a foil from which to suggest an alternative third position for architectural practice that could operate from within the terms of the commercial market, but also be capable of "demystifying" it, gaining a more critical perspective of its limits. Contributing to the "Life and Death" issue alongside Huet, Manfredo Tafuri challenged the assumption that skyscrapers resulting from market forces worked against the grain of a collective project.[10] Rather he argued that it was actually the instrumentality of an economic policy in the form of a repeatable structure that would give rise to the skyscraper as a collective project: the skyscraper resulted from more than market forces and while a structural part of the processes of production it also could be understood as embodying the civic and collective aspirations that shaped urban life. Production, after all, was a collective American project, and the skyscraper was both an instrumental part of this process and its expression. As for the city, Tafuri agreed with Huet that the 1970s signaled the transformation of the tall building into a new breed of "super-skyscrapers;" "crystalline golems" whose relationship to the surrounding city had definitively been "broken." While containing every part of the city within their interiors, their autonomous forms negated the very urban fabric that surrounded them giving rise to an "anti-urban paradox."[11]

IMAGINED CITY:

Shortly after the completion of the Atlanta Hyatt Regency in 1967, the project that brought him fame, John Portman began working on a high-rise hotel project in Times Square, New York. In such a renowned site, Portman sought to resolve Tafuri's divide between the large-scale skyscraper and the city by understanding the project as part of a much larger urban network.[12] Without sacrificing scale, Portman challenged the concept of a single building through the strategy of a complex network of interconnected concourses capable of integrating better with the surrounding urban fabric. [3] Rather than exalting the image of the mega-skyscraper as a single, abstract object, Portman's strategy drew upon Rockefeller Center as a complex of buildings interconnected by a public concourse made of lobbies, underground passages and plazas. In this effort Portman argued for the need to redefine the role of the architect in society by focusing on the design of "environmental architecture" as the search for a more holistic contribution to the city, one that in turn would also expand the terms of architectural practice into the fields of planning and real estate development.[13]

Figure 2: "Day for Night. A Parisian square, as constructed on the lot of the Victorine Studios in Nice." *Day for night,* [the complete script of the film] / François Truffaut ; translated by Sam Flores, (New York: Grove Press: distributed by Random House, 1975), 20-21.

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Dissolving the figure of the discreet skyscraper into a complex of interconnected atrium buildings effectively reversed their figure-ground relationship with the surrounding fabric through dispersion, with the promise of achieving more urban continuity by expanding public space deep into the building's interiors. Portman's commitment to devoting disproportionate amounts of built area to public space, albeit interiorized, aimed to thread together many buildings into a complex that would in turn become the surrounding city. These vast areas of public space stood within and yet outside of the conventional formulas of "commercial architecture." They were at once filled by substantial amounts of retail and disproportionately large for circulation purposes. Portman's atriums promised a new, mixed-use programmatic formula that would also transform the typology of the high-rise from within by hollowing out its inner core. Outwardly, the figure of the building would disappear, understood as a node within a much larger urban network, which Portman called a "coordinate unit."[14] Inwardly, the building's mass would also disappear radically opened in order to bring urban life deep into its interior. Portman found in the atrium a liminal architectural form that allowed fusion of exterior and interior environments into a seamless urban condition.

Frank Lloyd Wright served as a model for an "organic" architecture, one that Portman defined as working through to find that "kernel of truth" that defines a problem and "spinning outwards" to find a solution.[15] The atrium of Wright's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (1959) was an example this organic architecture, "spinning outwardly" spatially and conceptually to become much more than an urban interior. Within its space, Portman found himself "leaning on the rail and looking around, at the building, at all the other people. People have never looked more interesting. Their movements are graceful, their stops and starts intriguing, the profile of their figures sharp and unique. Some are seen from the
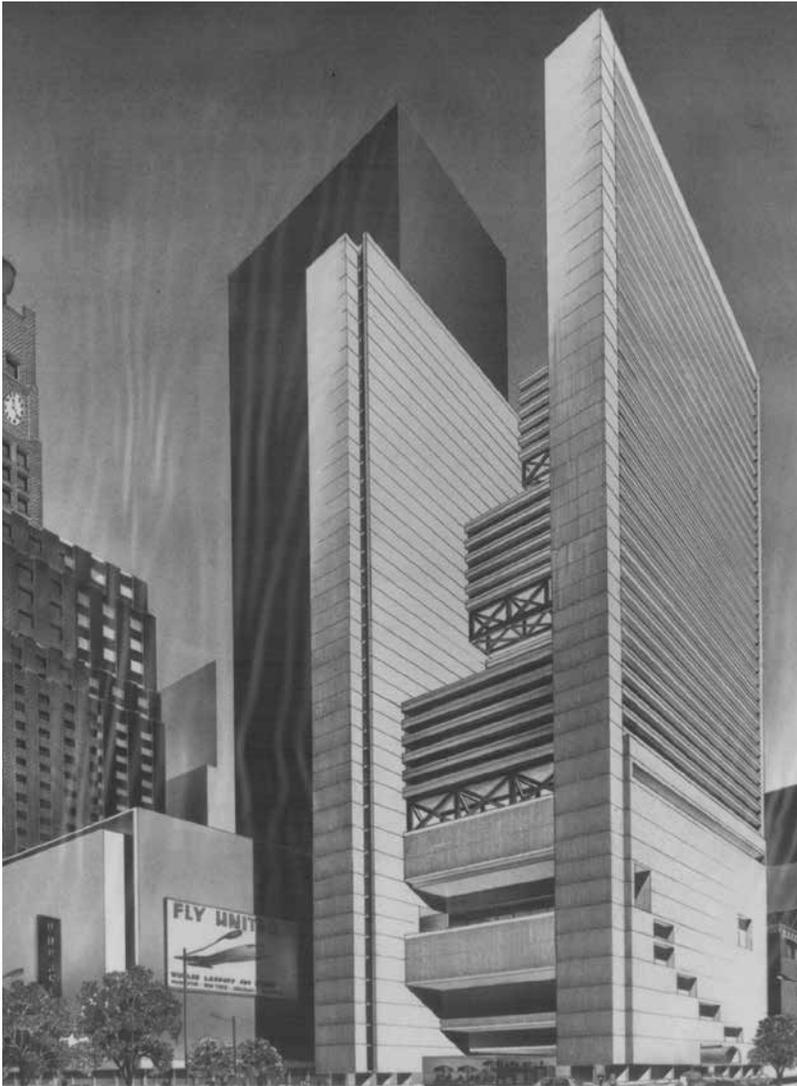
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waist up, others in full figure, those on the ground floor from a rare vantage point – all appearing abstractly free."[16] Portman translated Wright's atrium into a concept of "shared space," that woudl become his generative diagram.[17]

The plans for Portman's Times Square Hotel were publicly announced by New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay on July 11th, 1973. [4] The press release described a "2,020-room, $150 million, convention Hotel on the west side of Broadway between 45th and 46th Streets."[18] Mayor Lindsey praised the project for its contribution to the revitalization of Times Square and exclaimed: "Welcome, John Portman, to new York City!"[19] In planning the use of the Times Square site, Portman described in the original press releases how he "tried to capture the feeling of New York [as] a vertical city."[20] The massing of the building expressed "two structures – a hotel on top of a shopping complex" unified by the internal atrium spaces.[21] The project description defined the atrium as a "controlled environment which also created a sense of closeness with nature and the soaring dimensions of New York's skyline."[22] Within it, many elements would come together to provide a dynamic sense of order: "gliding elevator cabs, large sculptures, sidewalk cafes, pools, trees, and planters with hanging greenery."[23] [5]

Figure 4: Exterior Rendering, Hotel Project in New York, (1973). Collection of John Portman & Associates Archives, Atlanta.

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Figure 5: Upper Atrium Rendering, Hotel Project in New York, (July 11th, 1973). Collection of John Portman & Associates Archives, Atlanta.

ENDNOTES

1. Erastus Salisbury Field, *The Historical Monument of the American Republic*, Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Mass., (1867, with additions made in 1876, and 1888).

For Portman, vegetation and water are kinetic elements that augment the life of a space. In the atrium, the systematic and highly regulated distribution of the vegetation, particularly as it hangs from the balconies, gives the space a strange sense of scalelessness and artificiality. The ubiquitous presence of water, vegetation, and in some cases the sounds of birds, turns the atrium into a forest-like space that follows the logic of foliage, clearings, and meadows. In the juxtaposition of these natural elements and the geometrical built forms, a new kind of synthetic landscape emerges. The organic and the inorganic ostensibly fuse into a space closer to that of geological formations, much like rocks with moss growing on their surfaces. Portman describes this effect of "Artificial nature [as] treelike columns rising from the lake [at Renaissance Center]; shimmering glass beads for a chandelier that create an effect not unlike a waterfall; hanging Lucite geometric shapes, part icicle and part vine."[24] It is in the resemblance, or ostensible mimicry, between organic and inorganic elements, where these fuse into a new synthetic whole, one that Portman believed to be "indigenous" to human nature.[25] Ultimately for Portman, all manmade architecture must challenge its inherent state as an "artificial environment" and using elements from nature serve to create a "psychological union"

between man and the built environment. In the threshold between an organic and built environment, Portman's interior stands frozen in time, projecting a post-apocalyptic image of a future where humans coexist with plant and wildlife in an interiorized, controlled environment as the last remnants of the first machine age.[26] This is both a utopian and dystopian perspective. On the one hand, Portman's optimistic descriptions of the space point to a utopian synthesis between the organic and the manmade, the skyscraper and the city, as in the combination between natural and artificial light into a state of what he called "ambient light."[27] On the other, the general abstraction of each layer that forms the space, one in which even vegetation is highly regulated into abstract pattern formations cannot fully escape a dystopian sense of artificiality upon its inhabitants.

As a translation of the reality of urban life into an interiorized equivalent, Portman's atrium space emerges as an abstraction of the natural and the built environment. This space between the *real* and the *imaginary* coincides with Truffaut's "Nuit Américaine." The duality projected in the film's plot, simultaneously moving across individual scenes that convincingly replicate urban life and across the breaks that reveal the layers of cinematographic staging behind each scene, crystallizes the ambiguity between the *real* and *imaginary* in Portman's space. With Truffaut, the plot offers glimpses of both sides (in front and behind the camera) by fragmenting the stage into different scenes edited together, allowing travel back and forth between the illusion of *the film as reality* and *the reality of the film as staging an illusion*.

As in Truffaut's exposition of the dual worlds that constitute the cinematographic staging of urban life, Portman's atrium is equally characterized by its "ambiguousness" with respect to the *real* and *imaginary* elements of public life.[28] Natural and artificial surfaces merge together with disparate programmatic configurations that in themselves become individual reflections of urban life but as a whole add up to a foreign and fragmented space that is imbued with a sense of muffled sound and alienation. If Huet and Tafuri warned of the alienating effects of the modern city, particularly as its crystalline high-rise forms grow in density and abstraction, these same concerns would eventually come to define the space of the atrium as one closer to an *imagined city*.

SKYSCRAPER-AS-CITY/CITY-AS-SKYSCRAPER

Today, the physical presence of Portman's Marriott Marquis in Times Square has all but disappeared behind flashing signs and people lining up in the atrium to catch a show in its theater. Although the space of the atrium has never fully replicated or replaced the space of the city, the project's disappearance into what constitutes a new Times Square is a testament to its success in reconciling the space between the skyscraper and the city. As in Truffaut's *film about a film*, perhaps the virtue of Portman's project lies in our understanding of it as an early archetype that no longer was based on dichotomies of "interior vs. exterior," "natural vs. artificial," "public vs. private" but rather one that operated through degrees of each of these conditions. In the face of the dissolution of the *real* and *imaginary* brought about by social media, one in which we live in "an invasive, all-inclusive, revealing transparency in which everyone becomes everyone else's guard;" perhaps Portman's project can serve as a model from which to begin to translate this virtual condition into a new spatial reality that does not just disappear behind LED screens, but rather one where the potential to transform the city lies.[29]

2. Jamestown (1622),Roanoke (1836) the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and King Philip's War (1675–1678).

3. Bernard Huet, "Meurtre devant la cathédrale," "The Life and Death of the Skyscraper," *L'AA*, no. 178, (March-April, 1975), .VII

4. Huet, *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui*, Ibid.

5. Bernard Huet, ed., *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui*, no. 176 (August – September 1976).

6. Huet, "La Nuit Américaine," *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui*, no. 176, Ibid., XXXVII.

7. Huet, *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui,* Ibid.

8. François Truffaut, *Day for Night*, (New York: Grove Press: distributed by Random House, 1975), vxii.

9. Truffaut, Ibid., viii.

10. Manfredo Tafuri, "La Dialectique de L'Absurde, Europe – U.S.A: les avatars de l'idéologie du gratte-ciel (1918-1974)" *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui*, no.178 (March – April, 1975), 1-16.

11. John Portman interview with the author, John Portman and Associates Offices.

12. John Portman and Jonathan Barnett, "An Architecture for the People and not for Things," *The Architect as Developer*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 60.

13. Portman, "The coordinate unit," "Part 2: Architecture as a social art," *The Architect as Developer*, Ibid., 131.

14. Portman, Ibid., 60.

15. John Portman, "New View on the Guggenheim," "Letters to the Editor," Architectural Review, (November, 1961), 8.

16. Portman, "Shared Space," *The Architect as Developer*, Ibid., 117.

17. "Press-Release, 11am (EST), July 11th, 1973," "Hotel Project in New York," John Portman and Assoc. and Bell & Stanton Inc., (1973), 1.

18. Portman,"Architect's Concept," John Portman and Ass. , Ibid.

19. John V. Lindsay, NYC Mayor, "Hotel Project in New York," Ibid.

20. Portman,"Architect's Concept," John Portman and Ass. , Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. John Portman, "Water," *The Architect as Developer*, 107.

25. John Portman interview with the author.

26. Reinhold Martin, "Money and Meaning: The case of John Portman," *Hunch*, no. 12 (2009), 40.

27. John Portman, "Light, Colors and Materials," *The Architect as Developer*, Ibid., 85.

28. Paul Goldberger, "John Portman," *Global Architecture*, A.D.A. Edita, (Tokyo, 1974), 2.

29. Rem Koolhaas, "Atlanta." (1987, 1994)." "Atlanta," *S, M,L,XL, [Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large]* (New York, N.Y. : Monacelli Press, 1995), 841.