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ICON

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ICONIC ON

BY KLAUS

[1, 1/1, 1+1, 1,111]

"Why are there two towers at New York's World Trade Center? All of Manhattan's great buildings were always happy enough to confront each other in a competitive verticality, the result of which is an architectural panorama in the image of the capitalist system: as pyramidal jungle, all of the buildings attacking each other. The system profited itself in a celebrated image that you had of New York when you arrived there by boat. This image has completely changed in the last few years. The effigy of the capitalist system has passed from the pyramid to the perforated card. Buildings are no longer suspicious one of the other..."^[1]

Jean Baudrillard

A decade now^[2], one of Manhattan's most distinctive icons, that which Baudrillard offered as the perfect architectural embodiment of the simulacrum of the model, disappeared from the island's skyline.

There are other über-New Yorker architectural icons, of course. Earlier and more widely broadcasted for the better part of the XX century, the Empire State and Chrysler buildings are expressive of a former New York defined by constant competition where each new building sought to top the preceding, "...each of them the original moment of a system constantly transcending itself in a perpetual crisis and self-challenge."^[3] In Baudrillard's discourse, the two towers of the World Trade Center put an (architectural) end to this scenario of vertical competition and mutual building suspicion: The effigy of the capitalist system (Baudrillard again) passed from the pyramid to the perforated card, and the twin WTC towers, perfect parallelepipeds looking like the mute, anonymous, indifferent to competition columns in a statistical graph, gave architectural shape to a system that was no longer competitive, but compatible, a new scenario where competition was substituted by correlation.

The twin towers represented the end of competition, but also, within Baudrillard's history of simulacra, the end of all meaning, for they were a pure (architectural) sign, already born replicated. Its meaning destroyed by the duplication itself, the denaturalized Janus of New York's old World Trade Center ended competition, but did not offer an iterative, serial alternative. If the doubled tower captured and aroused, as Baudrillard put it, the closure of the system in a vertigo of duplication, it also exuded a balance that did not open the door for longer serialiation. It was a series "closed on the number two, just as if architecture, in the image of the system, proceeded only from an unchangeable genetic code, a definitive model."^[4] Much as it implied the very idea of the series, the World Trade Center was not (meant to be) part of one, in the same way that it did not represent an original and its copy. And it was this dichotomy between singularity (one single design) and duality (two towers), and between repetition and the negation of indefinite serialization which helped build the strong iconicity of the pair.

Facing page:
In the Shadow of No Towers

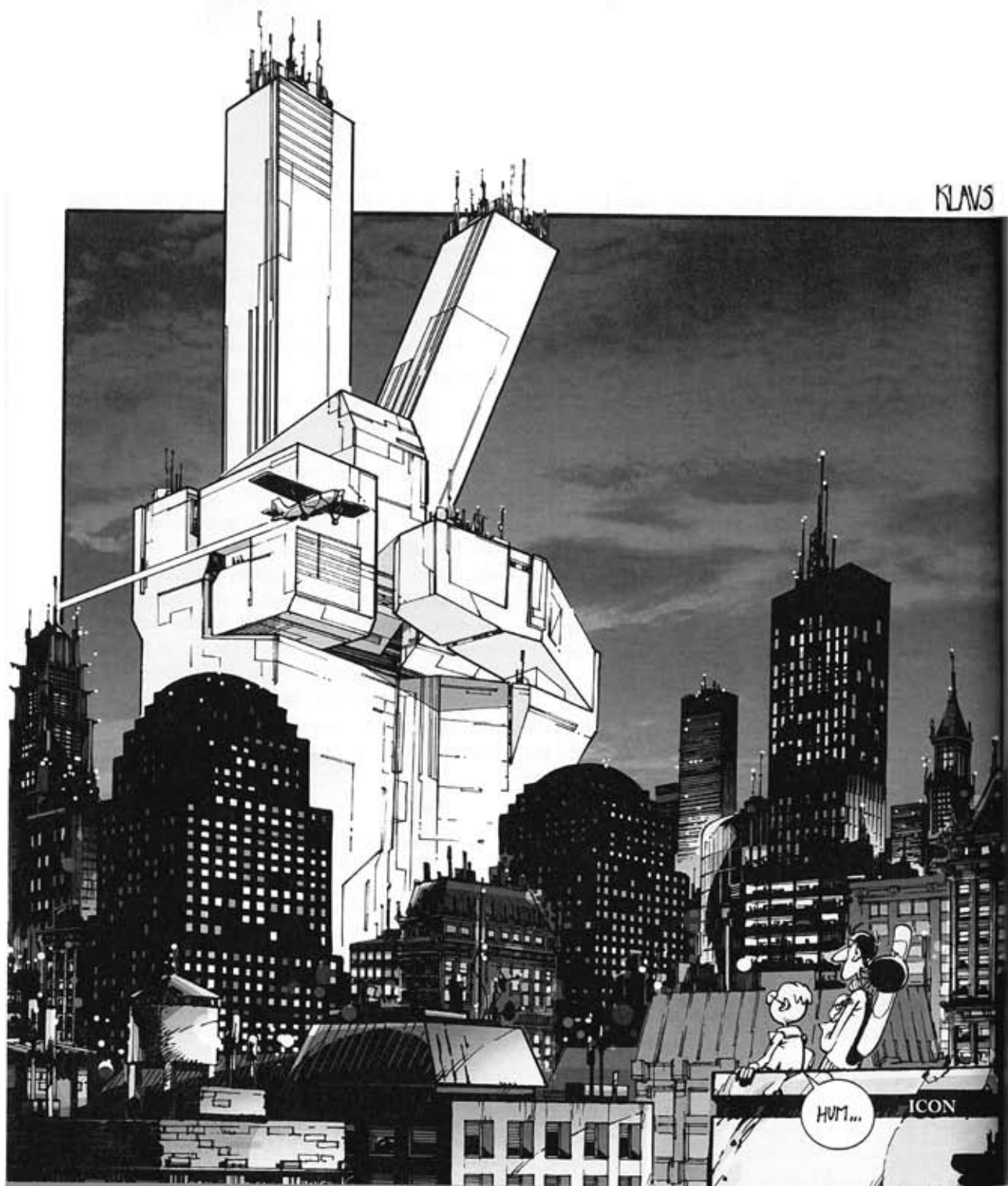
^[1] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulations", Translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Phil Beitchman, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983.

^[2] This text, as well as the cartoon that was with it, were originally meant to be published as "In the Shadow of No Towers - Ten years After", a post for Klaustoon's Blog on occasion of the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 events. Even though it had already been finished, different circumstances prevented it from going online, and it was put to sleep till a better moment. The -sort of- essay here is a corrected and augmented version of the ideas in that original text.

^[3] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulations", Translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Phil Beitchman, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983.

^[4] *Ibidem*

KLAUS



my by interposing a new order: doubling that which was already doubled, the old WTC archetype was integrated in a bigger system that collected some classic Eisenmanian tropes: the grid, the naked form, redundant structures... which seamlessly intersected with Holl's own obsessions (Spatial Retaining Bars, Lynked Hybrid), and with the iconic original. Expanding into enormous perpendicular Tic-Tac-Toe structures, the proposed new WTC reconstructed the icon without replicating it, instead twisting its generative rules (after all, the only way to play by them), thus extending it beyond extendable by applying the simplest of strategies.

EXPANDING INTO ENORMOUS PERPENDICULAR TIC-TAC-TOE STRUCTURES, THE PROPOSED WTC RECONSTRUCTED THE ICON WITHOUT REPLICATING IT

Indeed, as interwoven as it was within the trajectory of its designers, there is very little in the way of the architect's presence within the design, very little that had not been there already. The horizontal slabs, looking like purposefully bad carbon copies of the real, standing towers, could be easily related to the sky lobbies that divided the original towers, which were extended here to the point of mutual

interlocking. And the very creation of the standing dihedron was something that underlay the scheme of the original towers. Set in a non-aligned position, the towers had acknowledged the presence of the city grid in the ground plane, which, in return, allowed the viewer of the plan to envision a virtual extension of their footprints till they met at an angle in the Southwest corner. This is ultimately the key to the new design, a project bred in the intersection between the towers and their additaments (vertical studs, horizontal aerial lobbies), and the infinite extensiveness of Manhattan's endlessly growing grid. Other than that, the project was pervaded by an asceticism, a lack of gestures, determined to prevent the architect's persona from showing, as well as to avoid any assertion of the project's "object self" that would undermine the *cupio dissolvi* of the new towers within the memory of the former ones. Ironically, due to their kinship with Eisenman's language of pure sign, the Tic-Tac-Towers stood as semiotic ghosts (a personal favorite among Gibson's constructs) of their past selves, so, unlike their twin ancestors, they were signifiers with a very specific meaning, and certain representational requirements.

Therefore, certain moves, natural developments of the design as such, had to be inevitably scrapped for the sake of referential clarity. There is, for instance, an explicit renounce to extend the system on the ground plane, completing a hollow trihedral that would have tied together the structures in a single object, possibly making for a formally more attractive design, but excising the project from the power of its raw forms and referential soundness. It might have construed a more interesting architectural project, for the price of undermining the intellectual project. Thus, the towers encountered the ground as the original ones, in an unsophisticated way that was made more evident by the repetition. The design of this new WTC was an exercise on meditated roughness where the superfloors extended past the standing towers but were located at different heights so as not to collide, and the location of the structures in the tight available quadrant left by the footprints of the original

towers imposed the asymmetrical final shape, while the narrowness of the horizontal slabs led to a somewhat weak volumetry. All this raw straightforwardness worked, however, in favor of the project, constructing a network of connections that linked the present and its built past, and depicted a unbalanced unfinished-ness that allowed the viewer to picture an endless (ultimate) extension of the tower system across New York's infinite grid.

This achieving of subtlety through a mixture of formal roughness and relational sophistication did not always work out so well: the solution given to the memorial on the ground plane, where different pavements, runnels of water, lights, linear rows of shade trees, and finally two floating piers that moored in the Hudson River delineated the final shadows cast by each twin before their final collapse, appeared as a rather alien gesture, which tried to compensate for the loss of the base of the trihedron by adding a second index. The result looked naively disconnected instead of purposefully colliding, to the point of appearing slightly parodic, an endemic malaise that seems to haunt Eisenman's pet projects, and resounds with echoes of past Ohio's scuff-foldings. As is the resort to the symbolism of numbers (the new towers were to be 1,111 feet tall, in a new twisting of the 1/1 relation of the original) that retook Eisenman's past obsessive searches for exactitude in places such as the *Casa del Fascio*. All those cosmetic references introduced another, self-referential readability that undermined the successful anonymity of the project with embarrassing sub-readings, such as the (improbable) egotistic trip of designing five towers for a team of five (actually, *Five*) architects.

But still.

In the shadow of this proposal, itself reveling in the shadow of the WTC Twin Towers, the underwhelming banality of the finally constructed Freedom Tower becomes doubly (inevitable, wasn't it?) disheartening, both for its imposingly dull presence and because of the absence it implies. At its 1776 feet-height, One World Trade Center walks back to the pre-WTC, pre-Baudrillardian scenario of vertical competition, and even further back to the Statue of Liberty, to mimesis and the symbolic. In *Simulacres et Simulation*, Baudrillard also found a compelling example of the simulacrum of the model in the perfection of a menage-a-trois with identical twins. For all their onanistic absurdity, the masturbatory excesses of some of the other proposals were still preferable to the *coitus interruptus* of the final built form of Libeskind's proposal. A compromise on top of a compromise (...on top of a compromise), the single tower at Ground Zero works as a perfect statement of architectural inanity. Bringing the original towers into an incestuous mix of two rotated parallelepipeds, it works as a representation of an age where politicians rediscovered the propagandistic power of architecture, prompting the production of architectural fireworks, of alleged icons that focused on the most folkloric (superficial) aspects of architecture. And it also works as a testament to this age of optimism, disfigured by corporate forces in a construction that takes place after the mirage of the bubble vanished.

Or perhaps, on a second thought, it is really successful, then.

KLAUS was born somewhere in Western Europe at some point within last century. For many years, he suffered from a syndrome called architecture, from which he is still struggling to recover. Showing an early passion for drawing, he was introduced to comic books at a very early age by his family and educators, to their later deepest regret.