Fantasy Architecture: the seductive lure of the unbuilt.

For every building that is ever built, for every approved masterplan or feasibility study, for every competition win, there are dozens of other designs lurking in the shadows. The ones that should have been built but weren't. The hopeful contenders that never got to first base. And the ones that were only ever meant to exist on paper, or on-screen, or as models. Some of the best architecture is unbuilt. It is an alternative world, a parallel universe of fruitful possibilities. And you can find it in Sunderland.

I don't think for a moment that the organizers of "Fantasy Architecture" planned it this way, but there is something apposite in the opening venue for this Hayward Gallery touring exhibition. Sunderland, in north-east England, is one of those hard-hit industrial football cities (no more shipbuilding, no more
coal, team desperate to get back into the Premiership) that you can just imagine signing up a big-name architect to deliver a "strategic vision". A vision replete with sketches of happy people in a Geordie townscape somehow transformed into Sienna or Barcelona. But in fact, Sunderland is getting along just fine with its new university campus and its Nissan factory and its Stadium of Light and its various cultural venues, even if it is doomed forever to play second fiddle to mighty nearby Newcastle. So somehow it seems fitting that pragmatic Sunderland should play host to an exhibition of other people's architectural fantasies. And it is a good show.
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Although this is under the aegis of the Hayward, it draws upon the collections of the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Victoria and Albert Museum, plus other contemporary material gathered specially. You get everything from a designs for a Tudor tower house (dated around 1500) to the computer game Sim City, which must surely inspire a whole new generation of masterplanners just as Meccano spawned high-tech. You get album-cover fantasy architecture (an imagined house on a mesa in the Arizona desert by architects ORA-ITO) and pop video and film-set architecture. You get some ingenious juxtapositions, such as artist Claes Oldenburg's "London Knees" of 1966, next to Norman Foster's shortlisted Twin Towers entry to the World Trade Center rebuilding competition. In the light of Oldenburg's proposed monumental homage to the first miniskirt 'n' boots era - two giant sections of leg on the skyline - you cannot help but see Foster's design as essentially a knock-kneed skyscraper. As it happened, "London Knees" sold well as a limited-edition mini-sculpture in a suitcase, rather than as a monument. Perhaps Foster could do likewise.

Finally, you get the architecture that was drawn for architecture's sake. When Philip Armstrong Tilden designed a colossal tower in 1918 to rise from the Selfridges department store in London, he most certainly did not expect to see it built. Nor did he. Tilden was employed as house architect by the bombastic Gordon Selfridge, and had to keep churning out design ideas in order to justify his salary. The tower, based upon the ancient mausoleum at Halicarnassus, might or might not have been intended as a tomb for the megalomaniac retailer. Take away the department store at its base, and you have a noble exercise in neoclassicism. With the store, it is ludicrously out of proportion. But today, we can see it as a forerunner for the explosion of architectural experimentation at Selfridges that took place under its director Vittorio Radice in the 1990s.
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Some schemes are so very logical that they teeter on the edge of reason. Take the 2001 project "Pig City" by the highly-regarded Dutch architects MVRDV - who have been selected to design this year's Serpentine Gallery pavilion in London. The architects noticed that there are almost exactly as many pigs as humans in the Netherlands. Rather than reclaim yet more land from the sea to put them on, MVRDV suggested a high-rise Utopian metropolis of vertically-stacked pig farms, echoing Le Corbusier's plans of the 1930s. The towers would have lagoons at their base to breed fish for the pigs' protein feed. Each self-sufficient tower would contain its own slaughterhouse; each tower would be capped by a methane-collecting dome that would power the complex from pig manure. There are even projecting field-decks, high in the sky, to allow the pigs to roam in the open air. The whole concept is entirely brilliant and practicable. But it raises awkward questions: elevated in this way, are the pigs becoming more human? Are we becoming more like pigs? Are we just too close for comfort?

A number of the schemes presented play games with the viewer. Some are obviously done for a laugh, such as the "Good Old Days of Architecture" monument of 1951 by Thomas Greeves, complete with Tudorbethan helicopter: pure Festival of Britain whimsy. Others have a kernel of seriousness beneath the fun. I still don't really know how tongue-in-cheek were the giant shrimp-buildings proposed for...
Morecambe Bay by architects Birds Portchmouth Russum in 1991. The idea was that Morecambe would have landmarks to rival nearby Blackpool. The shrimp-buildings were assigned functions. The draughtsmanship, as with all BPR's work, is extraordinarily fine. Their later scheme to turn the multi-storey car parks of Croydon into a series of entertainment venues was lateral thinking of a high order, and was taken seriously by at least some of the local politicians of the time.
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Fantasy can, increasingly readily, become reality. Zaha Hadid, for instance, first came to prominence over 20 years ago with her competition-winning design for the Peak Club in Hong Kong. It was never built, but Hadid's series of gouache paintings of the scheme - one of which is in the show - introduced her jagged, splintery style and announced the arrival of a genuine talent. Could she build it? Yes she could: today, she is building all over the world. As is Will Alsop, whose buildings become ever more energetically outré. Why is his competition-winning "Fourth Grace" proposal for the Liverpool waterfront in the exhibition at all? It's a real-life ongoing building project, a bit early to classify it as dreamland. Maybe its inclusion reflects the fact that Alsop tends to start with a hopeful approximation of a building, which then gets progressively modified.

And this presents us, the lovers of the glorious unbuilt, with something of a problem. Today, it is possible to build almost anything, in almost any shape. A few decades ago, Frank Gehry's extraordinary billowing designs would have seemed bonkers. Were it not for the arrival of a particular computer program which allowed him to scan his junk models into buildable form, they would have remained the visual mutterings of an eccentric. But he was not the first to benefit from technology in this way. The "Fantasy Architecture" show has some soft-pencil sketches of the Sydney Opera House, dating from 1961. Architect Jorn Utzon's designs for those overlapping shells were absurdly over-ambitious for the time. These sketches are not by him, but by the great engineer Ove Arup, working out a way to make it stand up. As we see, he succeeded.
So today, what was recently fantasy architecture is built, routinely. This ought to spoil the game, since the everyday cannot, by definition, be fantastical. But it has always been thus. How impossible was the idea of a Gothic cathedral in the late 12th century? The fantasists will always trump the pragmatists because all they have to do is imagine something one or two steps beyond today's norm. And then sit back and wait for everyone else to catch up.

Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland: http://www.ngca.co.uk

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