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Reviewed by Wouter Vanstiphout

## You Are Here

The Jerde Partnership International

by Frances Anderton with Ray Bradbury, Margaret Crawford, Norman M. Klein, and Craig Hodgetts

London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999

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WE WERE THERE—in Los Angeles, I mean. And amid the trashy splendor, one phenomenon stood out, making us realize how much work we had to do to become part of the culture spreading out from this city. Everywhere we went we were surrounded by flyers, advertisements, billboards, and radio jingles promoting Dr. Matlock's Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Center for the Enhancement of Sexual Gratification, located on Sunset Boulevard. On Dr. Matlock's website we found carefully rendered perspectives and lucid diagrams explaining a procedure aimed at women who want to improve their sex lives: through laser stimuli the muscles of the perineum are strengthened, the grip of the vagina tightened. The result is readable on Masters and Johnson's graphs of the female orgasm, which records excitement and duration, ripples and peaks. (Yes, it does look like a datascape.) Rejuvenated women have improved (sex) lives, feel more secure, become more beautiful, achieve more. And apparently Dr. Matlock is no sleazy charlatan, but a respected member of venerable medical and gynecological societies and institutions, who regularly lectures and publishes.

During the same trip we visited the office of the Jerde Partnership on Ocean Front Walk in Venice. There we saw endless artists' impressions and photographs of projects all around the world: commercial building blocks whose in-

sides billow and fold, whose outsides are covered with soft greenery, whose spaces feature streams of water and visitors eddying through swirling canals and congregating in great egg-like domes from where they can watch engaging moments of urban collectivity happening on a lower level. Vertical elements such as towers or slabs are either shrouded or barely rendered. Aerial views are nocturnal, suggesting that the giant malls, entertainment centers, mixed-use projects, casinos, and town centers are illuminated by spotlights suspended from the sky. The insides of the buildings seem in places to burst through their skins, creating huge apertures that channel movement and radiate light.

We were there, too. We once lived in one of the vertical elements that sprouted from Beursplein, a multiuse development in the center of Rotterdam designed by the Jerde Partnership. From our living room on the thirteenth floor we could see shoppers flowing through the retail canyon below; we could see how the cut stone surfaces, slippery with water gushing from fountains, guided people toward the mysterious commercial cave where the shopping area connects to the tube station. Even on Sunday, we couldn't leave our apartment without being swept up by the droves of shoppers who seemed guided by some strange collective impulse, like the zombies staggering around the mall in George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*.

And now we have *You Are Here*, the long-awaited book on the Jerde Partnership, describing and beautifully illustrating twenty-five projects worldwide, including our very own Beursplein. "Hired by developers and city managers around the world to transform sites inside and outside of urban environments,

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the Jerde Partnership International is brought in to analyze what could improve the life of a designated area, street, neighborhood or city. The firm devises site-specific, large-scale strategies for ‘place-making,’ weaving together ‘objects’ in the modern urban landscape, in order to stimulate social and economic regeneration, encouraging new vitality and interaction.” That is how the blurb on the dust jacket describes the work. And indeed, after leafing through the book and seeing all the folds, all the “sensuous curves,” the “slightly tilted mounds” that open to reveal “verdant canyons,” all the eggs tucked away in the developments’ deepest recesses, it finally hit me: what we are experiencing is Dr. Jerde’s Urban Rejuvenation Center. Here are three quotes from the doctor: “Our curves are not formal but perceptual; they are used to draw people in.” “We are like psychoanalysts, uncovering the dreams of our clients and making them come true.” “We are trying to build the metaphor for the earth.” Jerde is the opposite of most international architects whose projects are intended to regenerate cities. While the prevailing paradigm is the free-standing object whose size, form, and skin attract and impress visitors and so jolt the city back into action, Jerde focuses upon the insides, the viscera of the buildings, the phantasmagoric interiors that invite the crowds that will make the city throb with new life. And so one might say—to use the metaphor one last time—that to compare the usual product of global architects with the work of Jerde is to compare penile enlargement with vaginal rejuvenation as a model of urban therapy.

Dr. Jerde’s urban therapy, however, seems to have started out as cosmetic accessorizing; this becomes clear from the first project documented: the transformation of Los Angeles into a festive public arena for the 1984 Olympic Games. For a ludicrous \$10 million, this cheapest of all Olympic Games hired Jerde to dress up the city using confetti, folded paper, cardboard, fabric—the budget didn’t allow for bricks and mortar. Working with a team of graphic de-

signers, Jerde concocted a kit of parts with which to create the tents and banners that would decorate stadiums and swimming pools and assorted festival areas. The kit of parts was used for small and big interventions around the city, functioning not only as decoration but also as a routing system. The language consisted of gaudy colors, symbols, signs, lettering, and flowers. No other project that I know of—except maybe the Groningen Museum, built in the 1990s and designed by Alessandro Mendini—so perfectly captures the spirit of the 1980s. Its most impressive and provocative quality is that this low-budget, temporary intervention was a wildly successful work of urban planning; for two weeks it succeeded in the impossible task of making Los Angeles a whole city. The project was a one-off, however; it was never followed up by Jerde, and, more worryingly, never produced a school or a wave or even a momentary hype in the magazines or the schools, let alone in practice. Still, using confetti and folded paper instead of bricks and mortar to transform a city is such a beautiful move that I am optimistic that soon we will look again at this project and copy it to death. Why? Because it’s archaic, popular, cheap, and global—go to wedding parties in India or saints’ days in Mexico and you will see colored-paper urbanism in practice—and because it challenges so many of the received ideas of urban planning.

One year after the Olympics the Jerde Partnership completed another project: Horton Plaza in San Diego. Since this development provided the impetus for Jerde to leave the retail architecture firm of Charles Kober and start his own office, it can be seen as his real debut. And a devastatingly assured debut it was; this project laid down the law for all Jerde projects to come, and effectively reduced the L.A. Olympics to a minor incident. The saga of Horton Plaza reads like a screenplay for a corny made-for-TV movie. The mayor of San Diego persuades the hard-nosed developer Ernest Hahn to build a shopping center in the city’s blighted downtown. Hahn asks the semiretired mall designer Jerde

to take on “one more mission,” offering him the chance to realize all the ideas he had thus far been unable to build. Jerde goes for broke and decides to create a total experience, in which six abandoned building blocks would feature a wholly absorbing allegory of “the urban experience,” not to mention dozens of shops. To convince the developers, Jerde stages a sort of Punch and Judy show: a team of “experience makers” collage a fantasy street scene from fragments of Latin American, Italian, Moorish, and Spanish piazzas, theatres, fountains, sculptures, etc.; the architects erect scaffolding; puppeteers in black turtlenecks and balaclavas play out the street scene, as the developers gasp, wipe away their tears, and take out their checkbooks. The actual construction scenario wasn’t much different; the street collages—the interior decor of the canyon that runs through the six blocks in San Diego—were made of cheap stucco systems. The canyon is a configuration of straight and curved facades, circular domed spaces, and jutting triangular volumes. A total loss of orientation and a blissful feeling of immersion keep the people, and their money, flowing into the project. In its first year Horton Plaza attracted 25 million visitors; its popularity spurred the reconstruction of the nearby waterfront and the historic district. In her introductory essay, Frances Anderton efficiently wraps up the plot: “San Diego’s downtown had returned from the dead, and Jon Jerde and his office, The Jerde Partnership International, were launched” (9).

The next project, New Port City, located in northern New Jersey across the Hudson River from Lower Manhattan, was never realized; but it showed that the apparently site-specific solution for Horton Plaza was in fact a fragment of an obsessively detailed fantasy world, a micro-universe of spiraling roads and canals, tilted planes, pastiched street scenes, a world of darkness, color, and mirrors illuminated by disorienting spotlights. In plan, the 400-acre, 90-million-square-foot, multiuse urban scheme looks like a coiled serpent with dangerous fangs ready to strike at the heart of the “real” city on the other bank of the

Hudson. In section, the project turns out to be what Jerde calls, in a title scribble on a drawing, “a great tilted sun disk city!!” (59), a city tilting toward Manhattan and deflecting the sun on its downtown with what are described as “Egyptian sunlight manipulations” (58). And more: water from the Hudson is fed into cisterns and flows back through spiral-shaped canals, creating a gravity-based energy source for the project. The wind is harnessed too, not only to

raling roads and canals; here, however, the spiral does not culminate in a central climax but rather, like the axial works of Louis XIV and Baron Haussmann, suggests an endless extension. This 6,000-acre disk is not tilted; it is a “spheroid plane,” the surface of an imaginary sphere. “This was to be a city as a metaphor for the earth,” is how Jerde put it (62). In plan the project looks like a pristine version of Paris, with grand boulevards, building blocks with interior

the book, in which the sci-fi writer describes his friendship and collaboration with Jerde: “We threw conversational confetti to the air and ran under to see how much each of us caught. We blue-printed cities, malls and museums by the triple dozen, threw them on the floor, stepped on them, and birthed more with all three gabbing at once. I felt honored to be allowed in as an amateur Palladio with my meager experience but Futurist hopes” (6). Or this: “I sat with Jon when the Baltimore Power Plant people asked him to reconceive their waterfront property. With John DeCuir Jr. we came up with some wild Jules Verne, H.G. Wells twenty-first cum nineteenth-century concepts” (7).

Growing up in the 1970s, I could hardly wait for the time when I would be an adult living in the year 2000. Back in an era when television featured a show called *Space 1999*, I was sure that life in 2000 would look and feel like the future. The realization that this isn’t the case—that somehow the future will always feel like the present—has been a source of great disappointment and gloom. The expectation that the future would look like something planned by NASA—with giant pieces of Eames furniture floating in the atmosphere and people wearing high-tech pajamas—was gradually replaced by the understanding that the future would be an intensified version of the present combined with a hodge-podge of histories. Desert and jungle planets inhabited by people dressed like medieval monks and Chinese emperors, driving Roman chariots and Ferrari spacecraft, building Mayan temples and Indian huts in the Persian swamps, worshipping Egyptian gods while building androids, writing in Celtic runes and speaking in ultrasound dolphin squeaks—this sort of vision became the new way to imagine the future. Projecting the future was no longer about extrapolating the best of the present into an ideal, modernistic, and progressive future; instead it was about making a giant leap back into all the pasts and futures that have ever existed or been imagined, taking them apart and reconfiguring the pieces into endless

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“clean” the city but also to propel sailboats through the harbor. The heart of New Port City is the mysteriously named “celebratory space”: huge blocks with Manhattan-like skyscrapers from whose tops anti-aircraft light beams are aimed over New Jersey and New York. In the middle of the city is a giant upside-down dome, a place for spectacles to be played out to the masses in the stands. In one drawing, the spectacle seems to include a strangely collapsing Chrysler Building. What is being celebrated in the celebratory space? The feverish sketches and diagrams are accompanied by simple drawings of life in New Port City, which looks convincing and reassuring. The project can be viewed as what might happen if the calm template of the typical American small town were twisted and coiled to the point where the urban energy reaches an unbearable intensity before being trained at Manhattan and destroying it utterly.

After New Port City, Jerde went even further with Satellite New Town, near Paris, a 1985 project intended as an accompaniment to EuroDisney, then being planned. Again the urban tissue is spread out on a disk and cut through with spi-

courtyards, “passages couvertes” running perpendicular to the boulevards. In section it looks as if the tissue were not built up but cut into the mound of the sphere, creating strange inversions of familiar archetypes—for instance, a pyramid of glass sunk into the ground and penetrated by an aqueduct. In fact, the drawings suggest a planet covered with a Parisian sort of urban fabric out of which collective spaces are excavated. Although buried in the earth, the planet looks as if it could, when complete, detach itself and float off into orbit. Projects like New Port City or Satellite New Town seem to be a kind of motherlode—or simply mother—of a series of projects that actually were built. And in the heart of all these developments of incredible density lie verdant but vertiginous canyons. From Rokko Island in Kobe to Canal City Hakata in Fukuoka to Santa Fe Town Center or even to Beursplein, they seem part of an emerging, man-made, retail-based, nature-infused, geo-eco-psycho-urbanological crust that will gradually cover the entire surface of the earth.

If you think this interpretation of the aim of these projects is fanciful, consider this excerpt from Ray Bradbury’s essay in

imaginary worlds. The future will look like the future because it will look like all the pasts and presents mixed together. Ray Bradbury describes the epiphany of this new history-soaked future to his friend Jon Jerde during a visit to the Disney studios: “If Jon Jerde’s hair did not stand on end, it bristled; if cold chills did not ripple his neck, I imagined them. . . . He moved faster than I could in this sublime territory. Time does not have to die, it all said. Fashions do not have to go out of fashion. Palladio only seems dead, sound his alarm clock. Goya and Klee gone? Still *here!* Sir John Soane’s Museum in London, with its Piranesi and Hogarths still alive alive-o? Turn left, then right in *Imagineering*” (7). This approach becomes abundantly clear at the Bellagio, the recently completed casino developed by Steve Wynn in Las Vegas. The Bellagio is a huge, flat building, with a gently curving Italianate hotel slab rising above it. From the casino one can move into a zone of villas clustered around a man-made lake modeled on Lake Como and look out on Paris with its Eiffel tower (part of another casino development across the street). The lakeside villas—a kind of crust around the casino—look convincing; so does the whole complex. The fact that cabs drive through it, that the dome of the Pantheon contains escalators, that you are wearing sneakers, that a villa on Lake Como has valet parking, that belle-époque Paris is nearing completion across the way, that you have a good view of a pyramid and the sphinx, that the Impressionist paintings on the wall near the Gucci boutique are real—all this makes for a close encounter with the future.

Most often, however, Jerde does not look to other centuries or other continents, but stays close, very close, to home, which can be even more disorienting. For Universal Studios in the Hollywood Hills, Jerde designed Universal Citywalk, a Horton Plaza-like “street” with stores and restaurants located within a collage of historical cityscapes that links the parking lots, the studios, the theme park, the amphitheater, and the cinema complex. But the

street is designed as a Hollywood version of Hollywood in Hollywood: a collage of ’30s and ’50s Hollywood architecture, with movie posters, models of King Kong dangling from Art Deco movie houses, palm trees, motels (never mind that this is a pedestrian street), hamburger drive-ins, etc. Even before the original Hollywood is entirely gone, it has been made into a themed version of itself, and just around the corner.

The mix of real and fake, past and future, copy and original becomes even more dense in The Fremont Street Experience, another project in Las Vegas. The makeover of Las Vegas from a magnet for gamblers and the mob to a family-oriented entertainment and residential capital has resulted in the gradual demise of the classic, sleazy Las Vegas, the Las Vegas Venturi learned from, the strip of decorated sheds that look like hell during the day and heaven at night. But now the disappearing Las Vegas of “glitter gulch” is the theme of a “linear, urban canopy of light, music and sound” (137) that is intended to reactivate the very same glitter gulch. The 600-meter-long project runs through six blocks and features a “celestial vault” with 2.1 million lights, a 540,000-watt sound system, and facades that recall the Strip architecture of the 1950s. Thus the Las Vegas that has disappeared is turned into a multimedia show, a kind of pedestrian roller coaster ride, with giant astrological signs flying overhead and twenty sunsets a day. The theme is not only Vegas, but “the street” in general. In this way Jerde not only pays homage to the Strip, much as he paid homage to Italian villas, but also consigns the original to a distant and romantic past—and he does all this in order that that this remixed and amplified version of the past can become futuristic.

Jon Jerde seems to us Europeans to be one of those populist American artist-inventor-businessmen, part of a line that includes P.T. Barnum, Henry Ford, Cecil B. DeMille, Buckminster Fuller, Howard Hughes, Walt Disney, L. Ron Hubbard, and John Portman. He belongs to a fraternity of haunted showmen who combine idiosyncratic, near-

autistic, personal belief systems with an extraordinary gift for mass communication, who combine the most esoteric and utopian of motivations with a relentless opportunism and a near perfect success rate. Their lack of irony, intensity of vision, and hyper-pragmatism have permitted such figures to create breakthroughs, paradigm shifts that changed forever their business or profession or field—and sometimes the world as well.

The Jon Jerde equivalent to the Ford Model T is an urban project that begins with a theme, works up a theatrical experience, builds the necessary stage sets, designs an architecture that can support the sets, and then searches for programs and activities to pay for and fill up and enhance the whole superstructure. The spatial inside-outness of his projects is no less than a metaphor for the inside-outness of the trajectory leading up to them. It is not their populism or nostalgia that makes his projects radical; rather it is the fact that they break with centuries of rationalist architectural thinking, the kind of thinking that holds that architectural authenticity results from the transparency of tectonic logic or analytical process. Jerde has not only turned this logic inside out; he has made it work in the real world, a feat that, unlike the European effort to shift paradigms through experimental design and theoretical debate, is the haunted showman’s way of getting his point across.

The theoretical implications of Jerde’s inversion are too large for current architectural discourse, which still favors an ethic and an aesthetic of production over an ethic and an aesthetic of consumption, and which is, of course, obsessed with good taste. The importance of Jerde’s work, however, is suggested by the fact that his projects have spurred innovations in economic theory. In recent publications on the “experience economy,” Joseph Pine II refers to Jerde projects to describe the shift from a service-based to an experience-based economy. Pine describes many examples of experience-based economic practices, including the Rainforest Café and the Geeksquad (computer repair people who come to your door dressed in “special

agent” uniforms); but he uses Jerde’s projects and the enormous investment they attract to show how experience is not merely an added value but also an economic dominant. Neither the quality nor the price nor the efficiency of the services is the decisive factor for success; the decisive factor is the memorable event that people come to experience.

So Jerde is a radical innovator, a revolutionary whose influence has yet to be fathomed by the current architecture and urbanism scene. Then why is this book so shy? Why are the fantastic photographs, the Richard Scarry-like artist’s impressions, the deeply disturbing sketches by Jerde himself, accompanied by three worthy essays by prominent members of the progressive architectural discourse community? Why didn’t the publisher ask Ray Bradbury to keep on going for twenty more pages? Why is the one text that can be read as Jerde’s manifesto not published in the book, but instead in the German theory magazine *Daidalos* (in a special issue about diagrams, for god’s sake), accompanied by Jerde’s most crazed metaphysical sketchings? Why is this text called “The Ten Amendments of Urban Revitalization”? Is Jerde Moses? Then who is God, and, more crucially, what is the golden calf we have started to worship while Jerde was up on the mountain? Is it too much to suspect that a wicked game is being played on us by the Jerde Partnership International—a game aimed at giving Jerde the academic credibility he has lacked for so long, but which might gain him access into the subconscious of the design community? Is this the reason for hiring the second-generation avant-garde firebrand Stephanie Smith, fresh from Rem Koolhaas’s Harvard Design School Project on the City, as a propagandist/stylist of the New? Her position in the office is intriguing: a representative of ’90s trash-pop culture pumped up with metropolitan theory, now on the inside of an office environment drenched in Disneyesque nostalgia. The contamination shows in the blurry photos of crowds of people moving through the garish urban interiors, looking more like vidcaps from MTV than stills from

Hollywood films. The general impression the book makes is ambiguous, however: touched by contemporary visual culture, academically respectable, and corny all at once. Given that the book was clearly initiated and paid for by the office, it is truly remarkable that the essays in *You Are Here* contain severe criticisms of Jerde’s work and especially of his ideas. Architectural historian Margaret Crawford, for instance, writes, “On the margins of an architectural discourse that privileges theoretical understanding, Jerde is notably unsuccessful. Even his own attempts to codify the principles behind his work are unconvincing: a mixture of leftover post-modern rhetoric, marketing slogans and autobiographical insights” (54).

It is as if Jerde knows that giving us his views, his images, and pictures of his built work all at once would be too much for the architectural community he clearly wants to address; it would be too dense, too scary. Reading the Ten Amendments and seeing that he actually gets them built and realizing that his crazy sketches are not just expressive outbursts but real working documents—these circumstances would alienate him from current architectural discourse. So instead of dropping a bombshell à la *S,M,L,XL*, Jerde opts for a discreet campaign of silent diplomacy, undercover operations, public contrition, and disguises. He elegantly bows to the protagonists of architectural discourse, acknowledges their intellectual finetunedness, flatters their discriminating tastes by paying them to criticize him; but in fact he gets them to take his work inside the discourse. The scary Jerde sketches—which in fact are fragments from endless sagas and alchemical formulae, sketches that form the basis for the projects—are reduced to sympathetic artistic doodlings that accompany the photos. Jerde’s “Masterplan,” as described by the *Daidalos* article, is offered separately from the official presentation and planted deep within the citadel of discourse. Thus the seeds have been sown—the cordon sanitaire that has separated corporate architects from the academic and the avant-garde has been

breached. This is the dawning of a new age, when architecture and its discourse will be swept aside by a wave of experiential design coming from inside the institutions of “progressive” architecture and urban planning. Jerde’s wild paradigms and the many proofs of their effectiveness will help unleash the urban and aesthetic obsessions of hundreds of thousands of still-adolescent designers. In schools and offices around the world, these designers will forget about architectural and theoretical models and turn to their movies, their books, music, games, private fantasies, and religions to create new and futuristic urban experiences for the Enhancement of Urban Gratification.

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