

**Lebbeus Woods**

## **THOUGHTS ON ARCHITECTURE OF RESISTANCE**

The idea of resistance, whether political, cultural, or architectural, can only exist where there is an entrenched regime of some kind to be fought against, to be resisted. The aim of resistance is seldom to overturn the entrenched regime, but rather to provide a place, so to speak, where all who are dissatisfied can operate more freely, relieved of the necessity to conform.

The idea of resistance, whether political, cultural, or architectural, can only exist where there is an established order. The aim of resistance is seldom to overturn this order, but to provide a place, so to speak, where all who are dissatisfied with it can operate more freely, relieved of a necessity to conform.

There is no such thing as a universal architecture of resistance. It is always particular, responding to the specifics of a place and time. To write about it, to advocate it, and especially to create it, one must choose the precise point of its pressure on a given situation. For this reason, an architecture of resistance is transient, impermanent, even ephemeral, because situations change, and with them the very need for resistance.

There may well be memorials to those who have resisted. But there can be no such thing as a monument to resistance, except in the realm of absurdity.

There can be no permanent architecture of resistance.

Architecture of resistance is hit-and-run architecture. It is guerrilla architecture. Its goals are short-term, immediate. Its ambition is to become manifest, then fade away. When it is gone, the trace it leaves becomes part of the landscape.

There are two architectures of resistance. One takes its stand against some external situation, usually involving politics and money. The second is internal and struggles against the tendency to be too easily satisfied with one's own ideas.

Today, an architecture of resistance has as many points to apply itself as it has ever had. In spite of claims to global supremacy made by promoters of 'the free market,' the human world is increasingly fractured by disparities. Wherever a disparity exists, a point of resistance is inevitably formed.

Architecture of resistance is different from avant-garde architecture. The avant-garde is just that: the vanguard of the majority, scouts leading the way for most people—those already in agreement--to follow. The avant-garde is a projection of the main tendencies in society, the values, practices, the aspirations of the majority, and cannot separate itself from them. The avant-garde is the mainstream, a manifestation of where it wants to go.

Architecture of resistance is quite different. It does not believe in progress, that is, in the additive, cumulative, linear progression of history, or in the extension of a narrative of inevitability. Instead, it seeks to be effective in the present, for the sake of those who find themselves without a place to be themselves. This includes, among others, its architects, who resist received notions of what architecture is and does.

Architecture of resistance begins with an architect who resists.

The majority do not need architecture of resistance.

Architecture of resistance is minority architecture, on whatever basis minority exists. It is anathema to critics and historians, who are concerned with elaborating the interests of the majority. Minorities are left to look after themselves.

Yesterday, architecture was thought to be the salvation of humanity. The point of resistance was its narrow idea of humanity.

Yesterday, architecture was thought to be technological. The point of resistance was its lack of concern with culture.

Yesterday, architecture was thought to serve the interests of society. The point of resistance was its lack of individual expression.

## 2.

The idea of an architecture of resistance is novel and disquieting. It calls to mind a certain negativity of attitude, one based on being against, when we would generally prefer to be for. It also seems defensive. We resist when we feel an unpleasant or threatening pressure, but not before, and not after the pressure has been removed, or accommodated. The satisfaction we feel when we successfully resist is more like relief than joy, and, in the case of failure, more like resignation than defeat. There is a certain emotional flatness to resistance that lays no ground for the future, but only preserves, at best, things of the past that to an extent have already lost their potency. Resistance is not a very attractive or appealing stance, even when it is rendered in heroic images of defenders at the barricades. There is always the morning after.

The novel part is the joining together of resistance and architecture. By its very nature, which is assertive and constructive, architecture affirms something—ideas and beliefs that may be widely held in a society, or simply, the impulse to autonomy of the architect. While it is entirely possible for architecture to be defensive and reactionary—think of the advocates of the Beaux Arts tradition, or of Social Realism, resisting the onslaught of Modernism—such architecture has no posterity, because it does not inspire one. No one wants to live out an endgame equaling zero, for at the end of such resistance, the most that can be hoped for is to be at the place where we began.

The obvious counter to these hesitations is that architecture can resist by being for something. It can resist a prevailing trend by advocating a different and opposing one. The aim is not to hold existing ground, but to go in a different direction. The best defense, as they say, is a good offense. We must admit, however, that in so doing we are still being reactionary, because we have ceded the first move to that which is to be resisted. In so doing, we have empowered it immeasurably. As Peter Cook once said, “when we talk about the anti-house, we are still talking about the house.”

If architects really want to resist, then neither the idea nor the rhetoric of resistance has a place in their resistance. These architects must take—or rather, have taken--the initiative, beginning from a point of origin that precedes anything to be resisted, one deep within an idea of architecture itself. They can never think of

themselves as resisters, or join resistance movements, or preach resistance. Rather (and this is the hard part of resistance) they must create an independent idea of both architecture and the world. It is not something that can be improvised at the barricades. It takes time, and a kind of slow maturation, and a lot of trial and error. There are no shortcuts. This is only just, because the trends to be resisted have not come from nowhere. They have a history built over periods of time, a kind of seriousness and weight that makes them a threat to begin with. They can only be countered by ideas and actions of equivalent authority and momentum. One must respect one's enemy.

In a fast-moving world such as the present one, however, there is not the time for slow maturation, for a steady, measured evolution of ideas. Quite the opposite. It is the pace of contemporary life, which outstrips any period before it and may be prelude to even more rapidly self-transforming cultures to come, that defeats the idea of resistance. Battling trends with newer trends, proposing ever more novel forms, techniques and materials as an antidote to ever more novel forms, techniques and materials is not resistance at all, but joining in the game. Contemporary culture has, in fact, modeled itself on ideas of resistance, but in the competitive terms of the "free market." Hobbes' idea of the war of all against all is given the most complete form it ever had in the marketplace—whether of products or of ideas that are as neatly and seductively packaged as products--where sellers compete for the attention of continuously roving buyers looking for the best deal at the moment. In the marketplace, everyone is 'resisting' everyone else, in a ruthless, but highly efficacious, game of shopping. The old master, who has spent years experimenting, refining, perfecting ideas and techniques, competes on a level field with young upstarts clever enough to produce overnight sensations. What counts now is getting, not even holding for longer than it takes to buy, the shopper's attention. Resistance, in the sense of innovation, of difference, of competitiveness, is now ubiquitous, the norm. It is the very thing to be resisted.

The present is a kind of vortex into which—like Poe's *maelstrom*—everything, especially the contradictory and the contentious, is being pulled down together to unknown depths. An architecture of resistance in such a dizzy panorama is all but lost.

### 3.

*"If they give you ruled paper, write the other way."*

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

The world is so filled with injustices and oppressions, with absurdities made up to look like self-evident truths, with bad ideas that will so clearly lead to disaster but are institutionalized as good policies, with aggressions against human dignity, and insults to common sense, that, as one school of thought would have it, human existence is nothing but a sustained form resistance to all that would overwhelm it. Of course, most of us do not see it that way. The mental processes called denial are palliative to anxiety produced by feelings of having to resist. The entertainment industry enough distractions and fetishes to insure that these processes are both widespread and continuously refreshed, leaving few gaps for existential angst to seep in. Once the reality of experience has been

replaced by the fantasy of existence, the world begins to seem like a quite reasonable place. No need to resist at all.

4.

Until now, I have not thought much about architecture of resistance. Although many people might judge that my work in architecture has been nothing if not a form of resistance, I have never considered it as such. To say that you are resisting something means that you have to spend a lot of time and energy saying what that something is, in order for your resistance to make sense. Too much energy flows in the wrong direction, and you usually end up only strengthening the thing you want to resist.

Certainly, there are things going on in the world and in the field of architecture that I deplore. And just as certainly, they are things already well established and radiant with power and authority. Nietzsche said, “I never attack people, but only ideas—only *successful* ideas.” That got him in a lot of trouble. It did, however, leave us with a fine literature of resistance.

5.

The work in this publication gives us a fine example of what resistance is and what it can do when the right people are rallied in defense of a clear and strong idea. At the same time, it makes us aware that resistance can be a form of affirmation, where it is more commonly a type of negation, an action against something unwanted. While there is an implicit rejection of the previously proposed project for the site adjacent to the Schindler House, the spirit of the works submitted by the invited architects has to do with envisioning something better, without ever mentioning that which is being resisted. It seems there is a moral lesson here, but also a danger.

The moral lesson is that resistance, in architecture or any other aspect of life, is best when it takes the high road of creative thinking, rejecting not so much this or that alternative, but any acquiescence to conventional thinking that yields a convenient mediocrity. Even though it is true that every society needs its conventions and routines, it does not follow that these must lead to an accommodation with mediocrity. To the contrary, if a society is to remain vital and growing, it must continually raise the standards its conventions, laws, and customs are meant to serve. The works of the architects who have participated in this example of resistance do indeed heighten our expectations of what could happen on this particular site, but also our idea of what architecture as a creative force can bring to civic life. In that sense, the resistance has already succeeded.

The danger is a little more complex. Of course, our heightened expectations will be disappointed if the original proposal for the site is built in a way that ignores all the ideas presented here. But that is not the most serious problem, even though the goal of this resistance is to effect a change in what is built. One can lose the battle, but still win the war. Rather, the problem is to be found in the very virtue that rescues this collective effort from niggling negativity. Taking the creative high road has omitted any critical

analysis of the situation that would help us understand why the original proposal should be resisted in the first place. To put it another way, it turns the whole process of resistance into a kind of beauty contest, where the more conventional project is made to compete in interest with dazzling architectural concepts and designs. It cannot win, in terms of interest, but only by being built, which it can do—if at all--by falling back on arguments about functional efficiency, costs, building codes, and other quotidian realities, or simply by ignoring this whole effort and going ahead as planned.

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