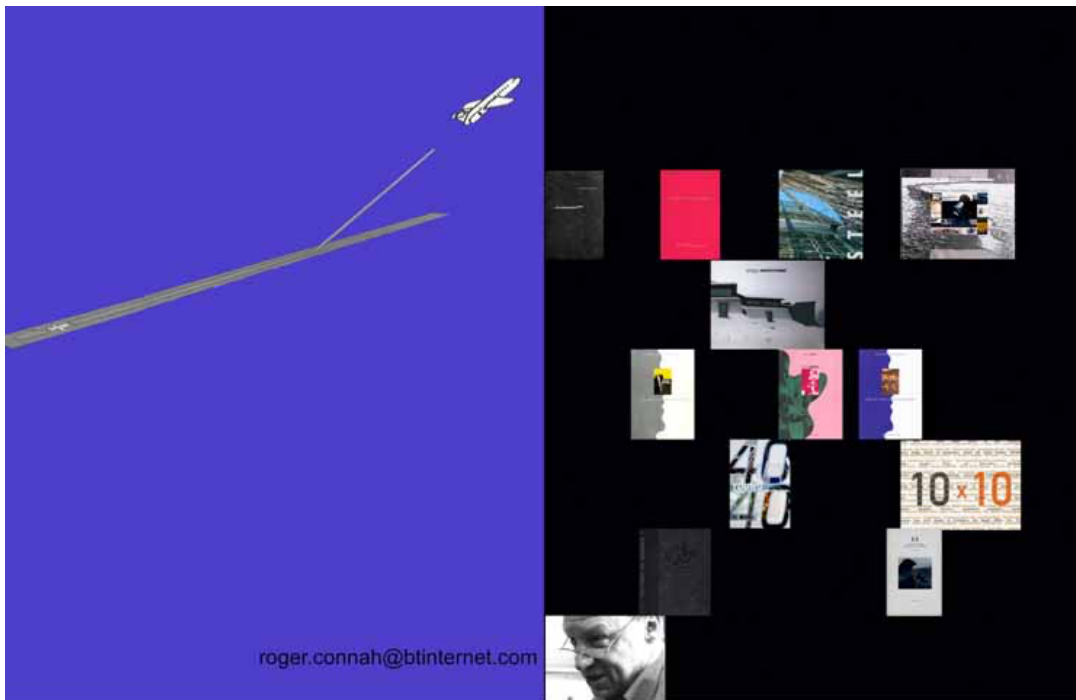


Trans Architectures ***Stars in their Eyes***

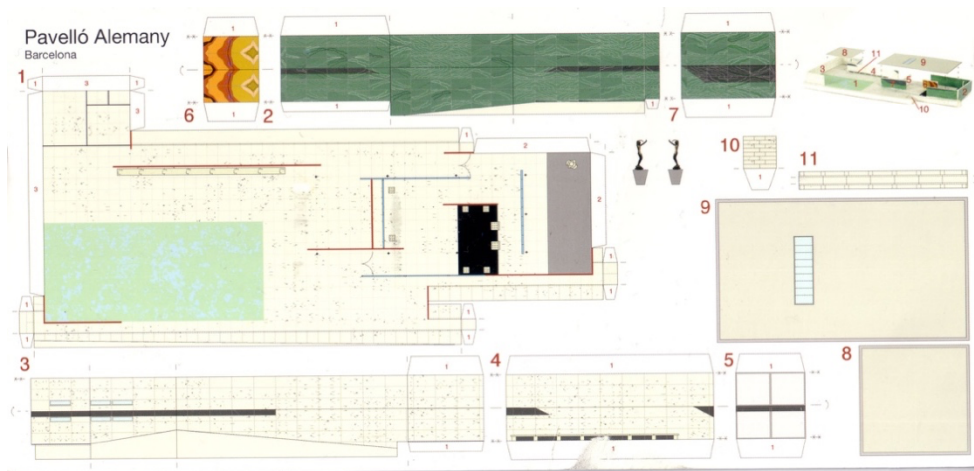
5 books on architecture and a film

Roger Connah 12.10.2010



Stars in their Eyes

an introduction



The introduction is a series of images of the famous and infamous of 1990s architecture: trans-architects we might say - in their own world taking a break between talking architecture until it is blind. The situation is Barcelona Pavilion in 1991. The game is to spot the ones with stars in their eyes and those promising architects who were about to become world-promising architects. Ms Hadid and Mr Gehry refused to attend (or were busy elsewhere!) Professor Vertigo was present because of a certain book he had published, given the International Critics of Architecture award in 1990: *Writing Architecture*.







1 The Cover of Writing Architecture

a series of images and an explanation of the frontispiece of the book *Writing Architecture* via Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

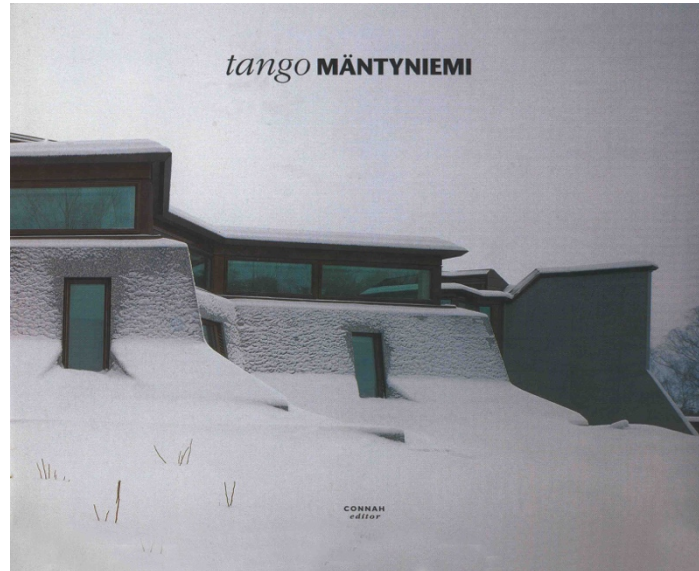


1989 *WRITING ARCHITECTURE - Fantomas, Fragments, Fictions* This is an architectural Journey through the Twentieth Century using the work of the Finnish architect Reima Pietila as a narrative structure (MIT Press & Rakennustieto, Helsinki 1989). A book written in India, researched mostly in Finland and Europe (1974-1986), designed and completed in a single summer, with the immense help of an architectural student assistant, Mikko Metsahonkkala and a Xerox machine. This is also the manuscript sent 'cold' by the Finnish publisher to the American editor of MIT press Roger Conover (without any acknowledgment slip within) - upon which the editor had flung the whole 800-page A4 volume into the garbage bin.

Upon arrival in Boston, summer 1988, on a round-the-world trip from India, the author called up the editor to see if the Ms had arrived only to hear the words, "Hold on I threw a large set of papers into the garbage bin yesterday!" The book was rescued, then recommended for publication by John Hejduk and emerged in 1989.

The latest anecdote is interesting: upon request by the author for a possible cheaper paperback re-print of the book, which has long been out-of-print, and receiving a negative answer (20 years later) the author suggested pirating his own volume in Pakistan. It would be possible to 'photocopy' the book near Anarkali Market in Lahore and produce from the colour original a passable paperback version for students to use in Asia, a request by one of the professors of architecture in Lahore. To which the publishers said; we don't think we could allow that! Hello! The book was a smuggling operation from start to finish and that action seems to continue.

2 Tango Mäntyniemi



This followed after the death of the Finnish architect Reima Pietila in 1993, 4 years after the book *Writing Architecture* had virtually disappeared without a trace. The question was: how to bring a book out on a single building – not often done- and persuade a publisher to do it. One of the keys to this was those architects with stars in their eyes and those architects met along the way. So it became an issue of how to invite and work with texts from people as diverse as Daniel Libeskind, John Hejduk (Dean of Cooper Union, New York), Dennis Sharp (from *Documoma*), Christian Norberg-Schulz Bruno Zevi and a few others.

Working in both languages (Finnish and English) this resulted in an unusual and frankly unmarketable book. The first edition sold out, and after persuading the publishers that an interview with the Finnish President could help a second edition – a total ruse of course - after an afternoon spent discussing Yeltsin and Clinton with the Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, the second volume was published in 1997. An unusual experiment, rare and unlikely to be repeated. Best moment: when a photographer got a Finnish footballer to strip to enter the space before it was finished and shoot the footballer juggling with the ball in the reinvented forest space of Mantyniemi, which was the name the building was given after the part of Helsinki it was situated in. The book was called *Tango Mantyniemi* for two reasons: the binary play in Pietilä's work and the special interpretation of the Argentinian tango in Finland as a spiky melancholy affair where dancing fades into triumphant self-pity and what we have to call *love in a cold climate!*

Love in s Cold Climate A Rapid lecture on the Finnish Tango and Architecture.

3 *Welcome to the Hotel Architecture*



'You can check out any time you like but you can never leave.' This was the dilemma presented to the stars-in-their-eyes trans-architects, by The Eagles no less, at the end of the 20th century. Due to the award for *Writing Architecture* as the CICA International Critics Prize in 1990 the author was invited – for a brief period - to various carnivals, circles and conferences around the world. Eventually existential nausea and anguish overwhelmed – as it always would - any appearance at these events. They became fraught with immense stage-fright and melancholia.

Back to Robert Burton! Instead of lecturing or making claims about architecture in front of those with stars in their eyes the author opted for a return to his favourite pastime, poetry. These invitations to open his mouth were handled by a series of poetic texts rather than the delivery of any lecture. This resulted in one moment when, due to be seated next to Jacques Derrida, with Rem Koolhaas on the right, Jacques Herzog on the left, Liz Diller in between, the high moment was reached when Rafael Moneo had forgotten his hero's name – everyone existed in first name territory and clubbery.

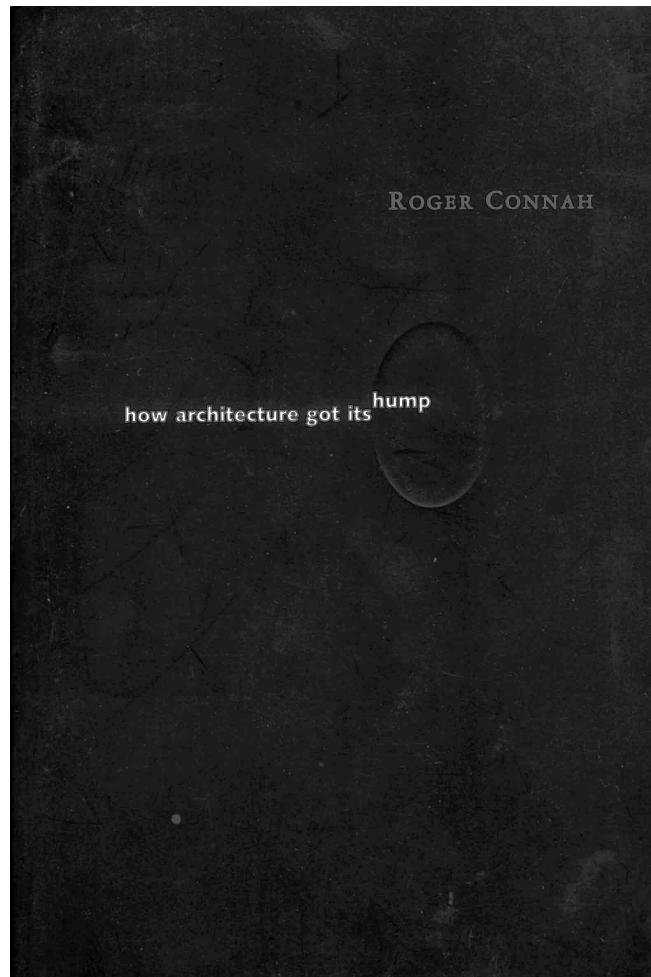
"After that remarkable poem delivered to us by errhhh...(Moneo searched for my name) Robert, we will move onto Rem (Koolhaas)." It seemed appropriate: Roger Burton or Robert Connah. At the end of the session Peter Eisenman approached Robert Connah, or was it Roger Burton and said, leaning over in his white pumps and preppy dress style, "I think we'll be hearing from you again, yes?" It wasn't a question. And, you may have guessed, he didn't hear from the author again.

The book *Welcome to the Hotel Architecture* became that collection of poems about architecture and philosophy and emerged from the various conferences attended between 1990-1995 including those ANY – *Architecture New York* - conferences coordinated by Peter Eisenman and Ignasi Sola de Morales. The narrative in the epic poem is about all these stars with stars in their eyes attending a conference called *Ditto* at the hotel architecture. The rules were clear. These trans-architects could not leave the conference before they discovered the single all-powerful idea.

They never do. They can check out of architecture, but they can never leave. A footnote: the book is introduced by Lebbeus Woods and is a generous interpretation of the trans-architectural role. Second footnote: the book is now being turned into an opera called *The Hotel Architecture*. The composer is Johan Skold, an avant garde Swedish electronic composer fond of the choral. The libretto is emerging- the premiere will be in an abandoned nuclear factory outside Stockholm in 2012. Which leads me onto....

reading of WHA to All Along the Watchtower (Dave Matthews) & Hotel California (The Eagles).

4 how architecture got its hump



This book was the result of a series of reluctant lectures delivered at Cornell University entitled the *Preston Thomas Memorial* lectures. The author followed Daniel Libeskind as the recipient of this rather well-paid gig which he needed because by now was directing small films in Finland for Lintas an advertising company and had no money whatsoever. Living in Stockholm, teaching also at the Royal School there, life was still in search of the adventure to end all adventures. This would come the following year on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the city of Peshawar.

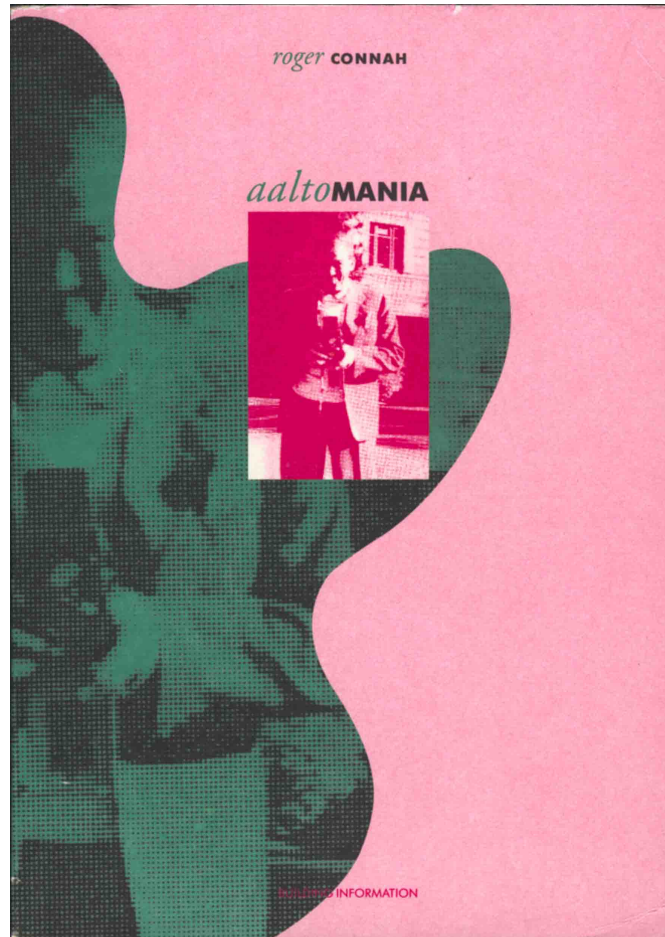
The book emerged from those reluctant lectures where no clear images of buildings were shown, all eye candy as they began to call it; images trimmed or then copied from photo-copies – edges were ripped, diagrams were unsharp and an attempt was made to defer the default of the time to the spectacular buildings which were being produced by the stars with stars in their eyes.

Suddenly architecture seemed to be carrying its own *hump* like the camel, and the title of the book emerged from the story by Rudyard Kipling – *How the Camel got its Hump*. You can read the rest in the Introduction. The lectures became major essays on architecture and the related disciplines or what is called useful and sometimes admissible interferences: architecture and film, architecture and photography, architecture and drawing, and architecture and philosophy (language).

The final chapter called Archobabble emerged out of the endless verbiage used about architecture during those years especially the 1990s, when the author was in the company of those stars with stars in their eyes. Fiction merged with non-fiction and architecture began following the fallen form of language and began to excuse itself using philosophical alibis. The godfather of this book however was someone you may not have heard of: Laurence Sterne, the author of *Tristram Shandy*. Clergyman and a fellow member of Jesus College (Cambridge). In the book, a line from Sterne which is actually a line drawn not a line of text...

Reading from *Hump* /Sterne – and from this point onwards we proceed thus...

5 aaltomania



Meanwhile as the stars with stars in their eyes were now building, they were also looking around for their own precedents and many found it in the unlikely person of Alvar Aalto, the Charlie Chaplin of Finnish Architecture, the humanist, the little man from the forest as he was unkindly called in Finland at the beginning of his career.

The world was going silly over rehabilitated masters of modern architecture, and suddenly little alvar, or *alvari* as his nickname was, became the architect for all seasons, the architects for all revision. Thereupon in Finland and abroad began a period of what could only be described as *aaltomania*. Architects who behaved appallingly badly in the 1960s and 1970s against Aalto with unspeakable rudeness suddenly supported him and re-sliced him into the quintessential modern anti-hero.

This all culminated in the MOMA catalogue of Aalto in 1998. Much of what was written in that catalogue about Aalto was fictional but passed for critical writing in architecture. *Aaltomania* wrote itself as it appeared more than appropriate. It began as a series of lectures, notes, newspaper articles given on Alvar Aalto and was connected to the exhibition called *Waving not Drowning*, opened in London in 1995, using Aalto's glass as parts of a giant gallery-space chess set.

Footnote: the book used only photocopies and blow ups of existing images on Aalto which didn't quite escape the copyright problem, but it did help to know the Director of the Aalto Archives and Museum in Jyvaskyla. Second footnote: Kari Jormakka, a respected scholar and roller blader uses the book as an anti-dote to Aalto studies in Harvard. There is hope yet that critical truths will be revealed for what they are: critical fictions. (RIP KJ)



So the stars with stars in their eyes continue and have produced fantastic spectacular and speculative trans-architectures. They have emerged from Barcelona Pavilion, changed their dress sense, their eye wear and even in some cases – their cowboy boots. Life goes on! Meanwhile the trans-architectures and the new experiments are already being done elsewhere.

These stars with stars in their eyes are already famous, established and plaques will appear on buildings they have already designed and replicated around the world. The cocktail circuit has since changed, and no one really gives a damn about them anymore. But that is not quite true. Everyone in the politics of architectural friendship wants to claim they have been someone's friend along the way. It's human to take sides, but it's also human to hold back at times. The talent is - how to know when to be part of something and when to hold back!



Waving not Drowning Finnish Institute London (1996)



In 1996 after the exhibition Waving not Drowning (London 1996), after producing and directing three films for the Finnish television on architecture and innocence, Robert Connah or was it Roger Burton was approached by the Finnish company who made the Aalto vase, Iittala. They wished him to make a film – low-budget – of course on the vase to commemorate the 60th anniversary of that vase. Remembering that many of the invited artists, guests and press in 1936 left the Iittala factory where the first Aalto vase had been made and given to them as a present. The story goes that many had no idea what this piece of unadorned, simple glass meant or how it could be used.

Many original vases were thrown out of the speeding train returning the journalists and other invitees to Helsinki. Such is life. The film was shot and directed using a Mini DV Sony camcorder – the other films were done using HI-8 and transferred to Betacam for editing and broadcasting. The film was supposed to have the music of the Shadows, the song Apache. But as anyone knows this process, you have to pay copyright for anything used more than a ridiculously small amount of film, say 1.2 seconds.

The holders of the Apache copyright were identified and located to Los Angeles. A request for use of the song received a polite 'no way'. Not even money could buy it. It was then that Robert Burton settled on a little known but once famous song that had stars in its eyes – McArthur Park. The singer is Richard Burton, or Roger Harris, or Robert Connah; actually, we are not sure who sang it anymore.

Aaltomania (6m) followed by McArthur Park by Richard Harris.



What the hell, one more footnote: in the exhibition Waving not Drowning, Ittala (Finland 1997) the home of the original vase, a copy of the book Writing Architecture was cut by laser into the shape of the vase and lay on the table in front of the chess set that anyone could play at the exhibition.

Robert Burton once thought of publishing the book Writing Architecture like this but you could imagine the publishers' reaction – no longer stars in their eyes, Writing Architecture was history to them. They were now busy publishing all the stars who also no longer had stars in their eyes but had become big-big stars themselves. They were also publishing everything they could find on Alvar Aalto, even his laundry and shopping lists. So it goes, as Kurt Vonnegut would have said. Thank you.



John Rachman Barcelona Pavilion (1991)

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