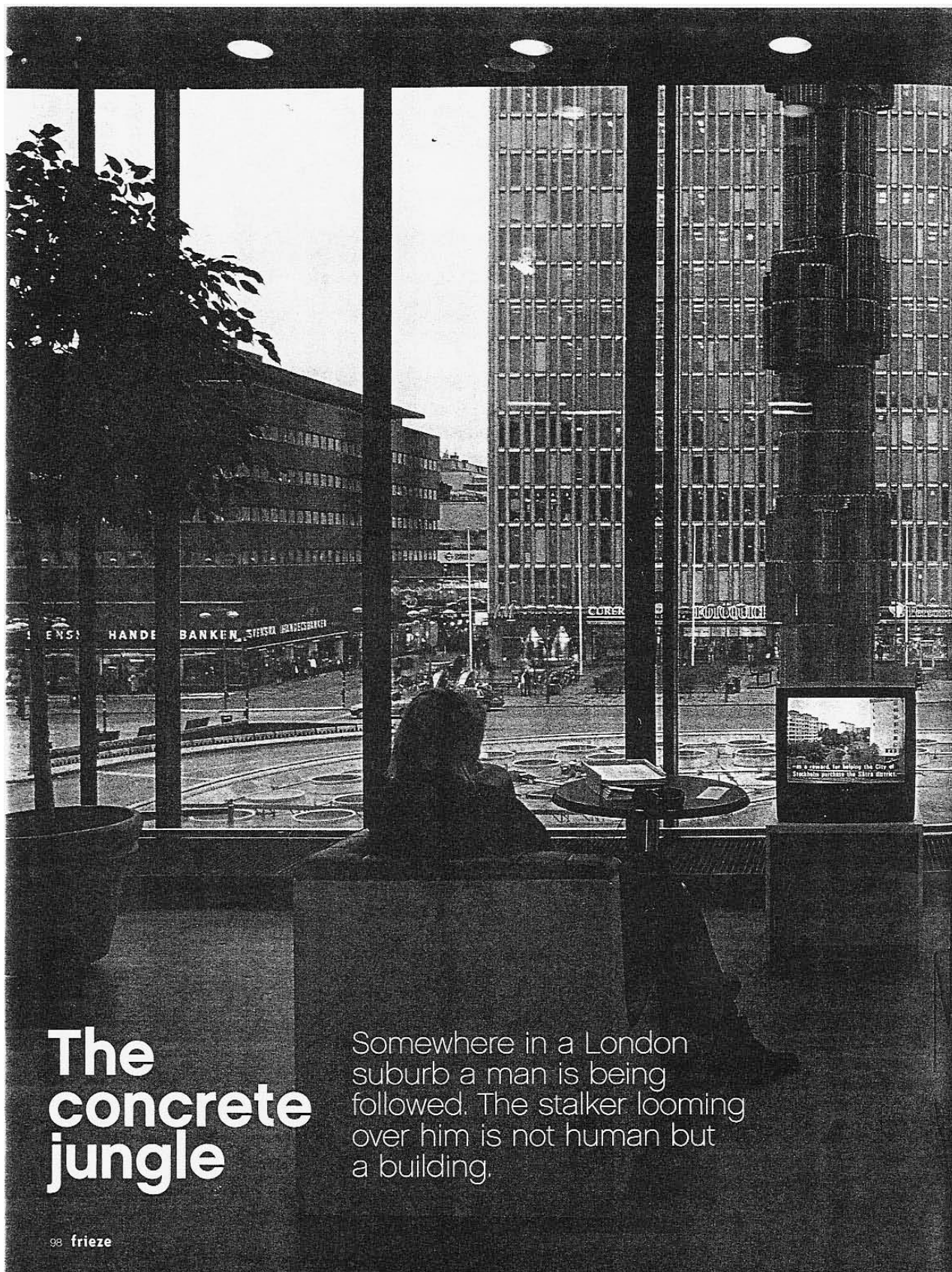


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"The Concrete Jungle" by Lars Bang Larsen



The concrete jungle

Somewhere in a London suburb a man is being followed. The stalker looming over him is not human but a building.



Lars Bang Larsen
on Pia Rönicke

It's a black, brooding monolith that appears from nowhere and lays siege to the man's house for months, gradually driving him to insanity and eventually death.

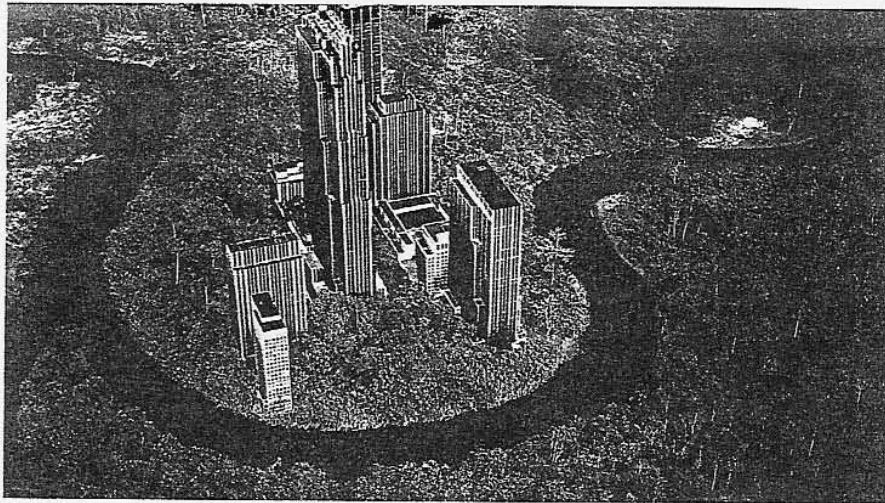
Like the deadpan architectural paranoia of John Smith's short film *The Black Tower* (1987), Pia Rönicke's work investigates buildings as the products of human imagination

and endeavour, and looks at how aspects of our humanity and our daily lives are in turn affected by the edifices that surround us. When those buildings accumulate in one place to form a collective urban fabric, is the result reality or fantasy? Do we really have to believe in cities if we don't want to?

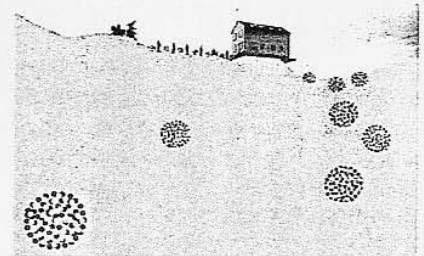
In her visually lavish animated films

and montages Rönicke is sensitive both to the physical reality of the built environment itself and to the other realities that lie beyond it, or concealed within it. Her works are digital tapestries that interweave architectural imagery with an intoxicating mix of documentary, fiction and fantasy. In conventional film language montage has a

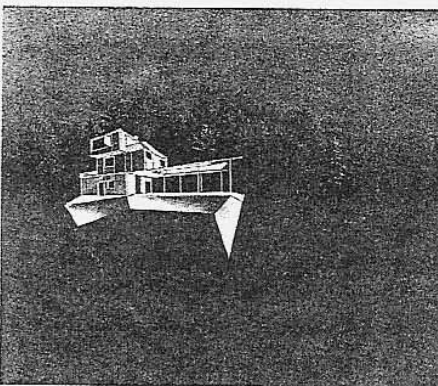
• A Place Like Any Other 2001 Installation view



• Outside the Living Room 2000 Video still



• Camouflaging History 2001 Video still



• Somewhere Out There 1998 Video still

Architecture only really comes to life when the immaculate conceptions of the drawing board confront the chaotic, empirical realities of life.

jagged quality that usually connotes spatial anarchy, but Rönicke's work has a seductiveness that makes you realize it is not just 'about' space; these are buildings seen in terms of the pictorial imagination. This isn't Eisenstein's 'montage of shocks' but one of drifts and flow. In *Somewhere Out There* (1998) it is as if the illustrious builders of Modernism's brave new urban metropolis have been wrenched out of their historical and geographical context and caught up in a living collage. Architecture appears as a backdrop against which we see a stream of boats and cars, celestial bodies and flying furniture. Some individual buildings have walk-on roles in a drama that transforms the Bauhaus headquarters in Dessau, for example, into a purely aesthetic object – a visual caprice on a par with one of Marie Antoinette's functionless follies at Versailles.

Outside the Living Room (2000) presents a rather different vision, of the garden as a substitute for a nature that has been irretrievably lost; a cultured hiatus within urbanism but also a disruptive force undermining it. Suddenly rice fields grow on top of Mies van der Rohe's Lake Shore Drive apartments, and

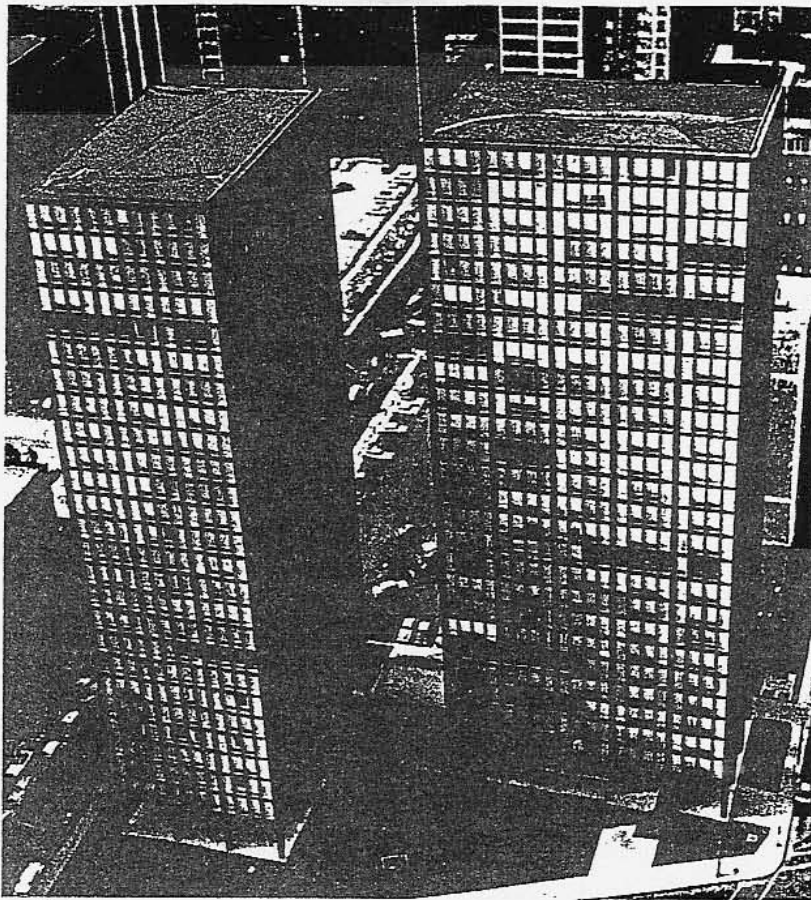
before the film pans lazily to an end over an assemblage of gardens ranging from 1600 to the 1960s, the Amazon rainforest has swallowed up a sizeable chunk of Manhattan. The stage is set for the drama of the Modernist urban project coming face to face with its own built reality, of constructed space moving from idea to material physicality. How does a society shape itself? What motivations and ideologies are concealed behind the camouflage of the urban master plan? Despite its feel-good character, Rönicke's work is a piece of architectural critique *avant la lettre*.

There are signs that Modernism is simply catching its breath and recovering some of its spent energy, or even that it has already risen again and is searching around for a new way to make real the great planetary fantasy that has always been its driving force. At the present time, what is arguably 20th-century Modernism's last building in progress, the 105-storey Ryugyong Hotel in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, remains unfinished ten years after work began. The hotel's pristine white outline soars optimistically into the sky, although the delays to the construction of the last dozen windswept storeys give it the melancholy appearance of a wedding cake after the bride has decided she can't go through with it.

Of course, North Korea is one of the last countries in the world devoted to the moribund communist tradition of state intervention and social engineering. But perhaps such grandiose ambitions differ only in degree

from those of city planners throughout the world. In this respect Postmodernism has gone one better than both socialism and Modernism by proving that an urban environment can grow out of nothing. In 1925 Le Corbusier proposed razing the centre of Paris to make way for his *Plan Voisin*, a housing scheme comprising serried ranks of tower blocks connected to the rest of the city by urban clearways. But the way the heart of the city had evolved as a functioning organic unity over the previous centuries threw up an insurmountable barrier to this ambitious and abstract piece of town planning, which was never executed. However, places such as Las Vegas or Dubai – built from scratch, with no awkward historical baggage to get in the way – are urban fantasies made real, visual ideas given physical form, little different from stage sets. They are the products of a purely abstract reasoning that dispenses with history, and, unlike Modernism, they are entirely self-contained, with no dreams or ideals beyond their own existence.

Unlike a counter-cultural outfit such as Archigram, which maintained the distinction between what was there to begin with and what they added to the world, Rönicke gently invites us to look at our architectural environment from a futuristic perspective. This is symbolized not just by the lone sputnik guiding us with space-age optimism through *Somewhere Out There*, but also by her works' consistent and dynamic engagement with the whole issue of time. Rather than leaning



• Outside the Living Room 2000 Video still

towards sci-fi or Utopianism, 'futurism' here signifies things' capacity for change and how they might have been prevented from changing in the past. Often in Rönicke's work, we view the future from the slightly anachronistic perspective of suggestions discarded at a certain point in time. Which architectural ideas, for example, might have looked like 'the future' in the 1950s? And how do we, in the present, allow ourselves to envisage the future of built space? A constant concern in Rönicke's work is the ethical considerations that arise from seeing architecture not as immutable but as a phenomenon exposed to various forces of transformation. In *Storyboard for a City* (2000), for example, sketchily animated housing systems sprawl between large expanses of white, as if the buildings are willing themselves to come together, re-configure and dissolve.

In other words, architecture only really comes to life, only really 'happens', when the immaculate conceptions of the drawing board confront the chaotic, empirical realities of life. A banal observation, admittedly, but one ignored time and again by decision-makers who slot their discrete architectural proj-

ects into cities perceived purely in terms of infrastructure, statistics and consumption, when the success or failure of these projects is actually determined at a microscopic level. Somewhere between the planners' decisions and the finished project, with its inevitable impact on human behaviour, the minutiae of quotidian life, our day-to-day needs and our ability to adapt to our ever-changing environment, lie trapped and struggling for air.

In the documentary two-screen video installation *A Place Like Any Other* (2001) a suburban housing scheme is shown locked in battle with conflicting ideas about beauty. Stockholm's Bredäng area is the result of Sweden's 'million-dwelling project', a phrase that sounds like it might have fallen from the lips of Chairman Mao. The scheme consisted of mass-produced residential blocks built between 1965 and 1974 in the beautiful landscape around the city. Thus was *folkhemmet* (the people's home), an all-encompassing metaphor for the Swedish welfare state, made concrete in the form of a housing scheme. Rönicke's work was originally shown in the library of Stockholm's Kulturhuset, where people come from the suburbs to read



• Storyboard for a City 2000 Video still

local and international newspapers. Image and soundtrack interact provocatively, with visual and aural gaps and collisions. One screen follows an architectural tour of Bredäng, discussing the area's aesthetic properties. The housing project was conceived as 'a sculpture park seen from above', with the concrete blocks creating a rough, structural beauty that harmonizes visually with the surrounding rocky hills and sprawling vegetation. On the other screen, over lingering shots of the white blocks reflecting the autumn light, are dubbed the disembodied voices of the residents of Bredäng, recounting their everyday experiences, discussing their neighbours, local politics, their hopes and fears for the environment.

A Place Like Any Other suggests the problems of new towns have more to do with urban planning, at a macroscopic level, than with the design of individual houses. In the latter, functionalism is allowed somewhat mournfully to retain its dignity provided it allows itself to be imbued with – or corrupted by – a hint of pleasure. Although this work by Rönicke is more straightforwardly documentary than earlier pieces, the dreamlike sequences give it a certain sense of being an investigation into time: what future awaits a housing scheme built from scratch as part of a comprehensive social vision? What perceptions of the place will in future be projected on to its white concrete surfaces?

They don't build housing schemes like Bredäng any more. The cost of constructing residential projects like this went through the roof decades ago, and the collectivist dream that supported it evaporated. The concrete suburb is a thing of the past, as is its austere and tormented beauty. It looks as though architecture, and we ourselves, will have to find something new to dream about – or reinvent what is already there.