

Visionary Architecture – Alive and well in Amereida

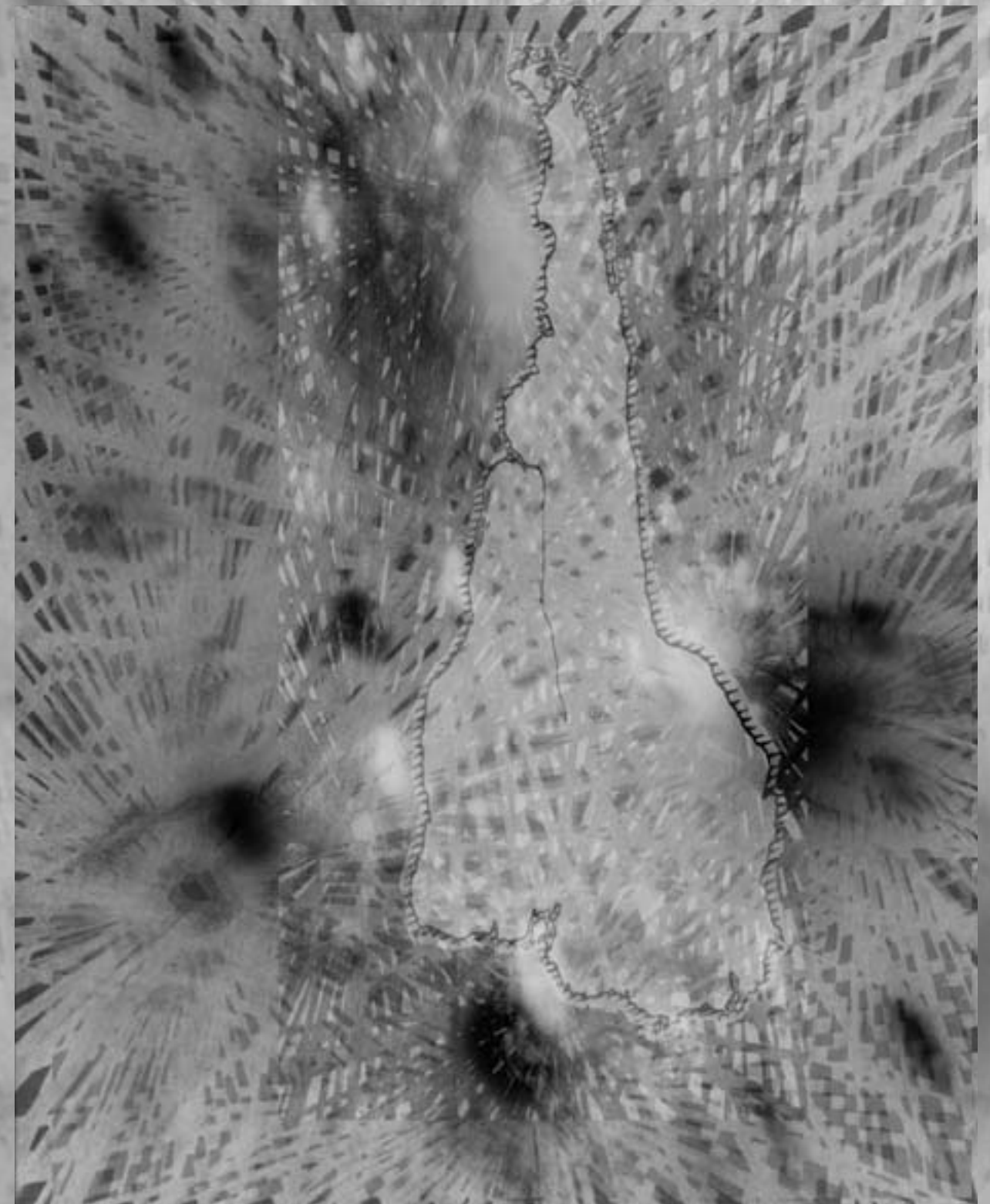
Buildings as inhabited poetry. This is the dream of Ritoque's world-renowned school of architecture, half way up Chile, where students learn from the realm of gesture and experience, not computer modelling.

Do we get the buildings our bodies deserve? As architecture becomes increasingly an out-of-body geometricised and Autocad experience, our built environments become increasingly the fruits of minds, synapse to neurotransmitter, rather than hand, touch, skin and bodily movement, let alone our emotions. What if architecture schools began from different first principles, putting aside the paradigm of geometrical space, the learning of mathematics and the augmentation of computer design, and nurtured the student body to do the learning, inspiring whole buildings for all our senses?

It sounds radical, and unlikely, but reassuringly there is a unique architecture school, which has been doing just this for over three decades. For Europeans there is only one hitch, it's on the other side of the planet. Half way down the vertebrae of Chile in fact, in a part of that long country called Ritoque. The Open City, in Ritoque, is a utopian venture, which has been growing since its opening in 1970, as an offshoot of a small group of visionary architects who were faculty at the University of Valparaiso. Situated amidst the dunes, near the coastline beaches, with Pacific breakers rolling in, a series of structures has grown in number to constitute this most experimental of schools. Its origins however, lie way back in the fifties in a star-crossed meeting between architecture and, strangely, poetry, in the guise of Chilean architect Alberto Cruz Covarrubia's encounter and subsequent intense dialogue with Argentinian poet, Godfredo Iommi. Iommi had travelled in Europe and was deeply affected by the modern French poetic spirit of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and the Surrealists, in particular André Breton. Together they prepared the notion of an architectural experience focused on the poetic word – unmediated by the norms of the profession. After it opened, it attracted a small but committed number of students, who have seen the value in what is generally perceived as a very intense, but undeniably enriching experience.

Today the school goes from strength to strength. Each year 120 students are enrolled, dividing into graphic and object design and architecture. The year is divided into two terms, with projects set, but uncompromisingly unusual ones. These could include the brief of turning a box into a light – magically – to making huge versions of platonic structures and racing inside them on the beach. At the end of the year there is a carnival with games created for a tournament. Common to all these is poetic enactment, be it physical or intangible, which cultivates the culture of the body. These enactments repeatedly return the onlooker to attending to the dimension of one's body in relation to the space of the built environment. Drawing is a critical way into this consciousness. Movement, posture and its relations to both the senses and to the dimensions are a central part of the curriculum. There is also considerable music, partially as a way into mathematics, partially for its own sake, uncovering architecture through sound. By soaking people in the senses, these senses are awakened to space. Such sensitisation to space appears in varied ways, in the gaps between words, or the spaces within the nearby city, Valparaiso, which in time takes up a term's project. After the first year of cultivating this spontaneous attention to the body's perception of space, more formal tuition, for instance the graft of mathematics, is introduced. Computer design as well. But it never out-balances the spontaneous and poetic dimension of Open City. Talking with two former students, the sense of the exuberant and inspiring fun of being at the college comes unreservedly across. 'It's packed with magic,' says one.

Students continue at Open City for five years. The centrepiece of their studenthood is a journey into the heart of South America. This is called the Amereida Travesa, based on a poem written by Iommi in 1965. Iommi's meditation explores the meaning of South America, caught between a past which sought to imitate its umbilical European inheritance, and the present unshackling of this, as part of a quest for what is its own. If Amereida – originally Apollinaire's conjoining of America with Aenid – is about this recovery, Travesa relates to a metaphorical inner sea of South America that the traveller journeys into. For the students this symbolic annual journey reflects the quest to uncover what is real about the Latin America they both live in and are part of. The poem looks to the sky and what is unique and distinctive to the southern skies beneath the equator – and finds, above, the Southern Cross. It is



the Southern Cross, marking out the continent's cardinal points, which protectively guides those embarked on the journey into the inner sea. At the same time and at other points in the student's year, Amereida is part of their daily lives. It will have been recited early on, and there will be any number of projects supplementing the journey.

In the main book about the Open City, *The Road That Is Not a Road*, the title points to how Ritoque itself is a Travesa, the school is embarked on a journey into its own unknown inner sea, enlightenment beckons down the road. For the student too, the search is of

uncovering hidden riches – insight, in a word – in the lands of the self, even if the outer journey is the learning curve of becoming architects. This is the realm of myth, bespeaking to the oracular poetic voice. Poetic vision may not be useful in a utilitarian culture, and in this part of the world anything like Ritoque is all but absent from higher education's horizons, let alone those of architecture. Knowledge of Ritoque's enduring life, however, encourages a path where the enactment of the poetic can bring vision to architecture, and potentially a transvaluation of what comprises our built environment values. OL