

“Las Vegas, Laeken: A History of Architectural Drag”

Buenos Tiempos, Int. – Alberto García del Castillo and Marnie Slater – April, 2015

The Chinese Pavilion and the Japanese Tower sit at the north end of Avenue Van Praetlaan in Brussels. This is a mayor axis within the design for Laeken, a project initiated by King Leopold II (1865–1910) with the aim to build an ideal town to materialise his own ‘metropolis’ views on urbanism, and funded with the resources that the Fondation de la Couronne would rip from the king’s personal colony in the Congo. The picturesque oriental style of the pavilion and tower and their proximity to the life-size reproduction of the fountain of Neptune by Giovanni da Bologna (1904), indicate their intended function as didactic cultural artefacts. Would this spot have later included other attractions, the complex may have become an open-air amusement park that would have demonstrated an ethnocentric and politically loaded picture of the world outside. These attractions would have lined one long avenue, accentuating the sequential experience of the whole, underlining a narrative structure, and, by consequence, a discourse, as opposed to an architecture of space. In the existing park, however, the relation between these three architectures is more symbolic than formal. This reading establishes a parallel with Venturi, Brown and Izenour’s writings on the Strip in Las Vegas, which calls to mind that Brussels’ Mini-Europe (1989), a miniature park which hosts models of various monuments from the European Union, later opened very near the pavilion and tower.

The authenticity of the Chinese Pavilion and the Japanese Tower is a recurrent subject of discussion. The press at the time of their construction would sometimes claim them as original constructions brought from East Asia, others would explain that the two buildings in Laeken were reproductions designed for European international exhibitions. Although it is currently agreed that Leopold II commissioned the Chinese Pavilion and the Japanese Tower from Alexandre Marcel after admiring the *Tour du Monde* complex he conceived for the 1900 international exhibition in Paris for the French passenger steamship line Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes. The complex sat at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, near the area that would later host the Pont de l’Alma tunnel, the fated spot where Lady Diana was to die on 31 August 1997. “A few days before Dodi Fayed died,” explains Edward Said, “I read through the English press and it was full of racist clichés of Orientalist discourse. *The Sunday Times*, one of the leading newspapers in England, had a headline to a fifteen-thousand-word story entitled ‘A Match Made in Mecca’; and the idea of Muslim conspiracies trying to infect, you know? The taking over of this white woman by this dark people, by Mohamed. The Prophet Mohamed, who’s a historical person from the 7th century, somehow stage-managing the whole thing. That’s the power of discourse, you see? If you are thinking about people and Islam and about that part of the world, those are the words you will constantly use” (Jhally, 1998). Marcel’s *Tour du Monde* complex was a sort of amalgam of the European imaginary of the exotic: four towers would recreate European desires for the Japanese, the Indian, the Islamic and the Portuguese styles; while the façades would be given a mix of Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and Moorish treatments. Built much later in Las Vegas, but sharing its spirit, “The Aladdin Hotel and Casino is Moorish in front and Tudor behind” (Venturi, Brown and Izenour, 1972, p. 34).

From the initial architectural sketches, we know that the project in Laeken was to include the two buildings. The Chinese Pavilion was conceived as a luxury restaurant, as Marcel's original plans refer to a "Restaurant Chinois". The Chinese-style, flamboyant exterior of the building performs as a billboard or, more precisely, like the front buildings of the casinos in Las Vegas: a certain evolution of signage that led the buildings to become signs themselves. Once inside the pavilion, the visitor would be welcomed into an amalgamated collection of colonial views on the exotic that would transport her to a Chinese dreamland – akin to today's experience of Disneyland. An overall eighteenth-century atmosphere in the ground floor, Rococo for the main lounge and Chinese- influenced European ceramics and some Enlightenment-era artistic fancy for the two drawing rooms. The first floor itself is divided into the Louis XV or Directoire room, the pseudo-Louis XVI or Empire décor room, two drawing rooms furnished in Chinese style, two drawing rooms decorated in 'Hindu' style and one large Japanese-style drawing room. The Japanese Tower itself is also an example of the architecture of communication: narrating a Nikko-inspired fantasy. The tower did not correspond to any Asiatic architectural prototype of the period, and a highlight of this dissemblance is the semi-external stairway that provides access to all of its levels, a feature that would contribute to the tower becoming a sort of funfair attraction when first open to the public in 1910—both buildings came to be known as "the permanent Far Eastern commercial exhibition". However, the tower's most amusing experiences were reserved for the upper floors: the first storey's main feature was carved wooden panelling illustrating Japanese tradition Folklore with some European references; the second flaunted a luminescent ceiling with two hundred light bulbs; the third, a figure of a goddess on a gold background painted on the ceiling; and the fifth floor provided a *grand finale* panoramic view over Laeken and Brussels.

Soon after opening, "the permanent Far Eastern commercial exhibition" revealed itself ineffective in promoting financial exchanges between Belgium and Asia. Closed during World War I and World War II, the Chinese Pavilion and the Japanese Tower have been expropriated of their initial role of sponsoring cultural imperialism and proliferating a Eurocentric and exotic view of other cultures. When speaking about Las Vegas, Venturi, Brown and Izenour attribute to symbolic architecture the same fast rate of obsolescence as that of an automobile, due to the communicational rivalry with its environment. This might explain why the Chinese Pavilion and the Japanese Tower performed various random uses in the successive years: for example, the Chinese Pavilion hosted a compendium of Far Eastern porcelain private collections and the Japanese Tower remained closed until its renovation to serve as an attraction during the Europalia-Japan festival in 1989. Both buildings are today a part of the Belgian Royal Museums of Art and History as the venues of the Museums of the Far East. At the time of filming of *A Walk with Dorothee Dupuis and Jessica Gysel Around the Chinese Pavilion and the Japanese Tower in Brussels* (19 December 2014) they remained close for safety reasons.

Bibliography and Filmography:

Clericuzio, Peter, “The Shifting Meanings and Uses of the Japanese Tower at Laeken”, presented at *The Object and Beyond*, 3rd Annual Graduate Conference of the Pennsylvania State University Graduate Student Association for Visual Culture, University Park, PA, 2011.

Kozyreff, Chantal, *The Oriental Dream: Leopold II's Japanese Tower and Chinese Pavilion at Laeken (Brussels)* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2001).

Venturi, Robert, Brown, Denise Scott and Izenour, Steven, *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).

Jhally, Sut, prod. and dir., *Edward Said: On Orientalism*, prod. Media Education Foundation, 1998.

“A Walk with Dorothee Dupuis and Jessica Gysel Around the Chinese Pavilion and the Japanese Tower in Brussels”, 2015

Produced by: Buenos Tiempos, Int. | Starring: Dorothee Dupuis and Jessica Gysel | Voice-over: Jennifer Teets | Directors: Alberto García del Castillo and Marnie Slater | Writers: Alberto García del Castillo and Marnie Slater | Director of photography: Hans Bruch jr. | Editors: Rosa Galguera, Alberto García del Castillo and Marnie Slater | Colourist: Hans Bruch jr. | Soundtrack: Shana Moulton | Stylist: James Bush | Makeup artist and hair stylist: Rachida Ait-Ali | Production assistants: Laurie Charles and Clare Noonan

“A Walk with Dorothee Dupuis and Jessica Gysel Around the Chinese Pavilion and the Japanese Tower in Brussels” introduces two editors of feminist art magazines – Dupuis (“Petunia”) and Gysel (“Girls Like Us”) – chatting and strolling around Laeken Park in Brussels. The park hosts two very significant constructions designed by the French architect Alexandre Marcel and erected under the kingdom of Leopold III. The Japanese Tower (1905) and the Chinese Pavilion (1910) are illustrations of the fin-de-siècle Orientalism and cultural imperialism. “A Walk with Dorothee Dupuis and Jessica Gysel” continues in the thread of Buenos Tiempos, Int.’s debut production, “The Ages of Beatrix Ruf: A History of Power Transvestism” (2014): a fashion editorial on drag performativity commissioned for the sixth issue of “Petunia” magazine. For the film premiere at La Loge, Bear Bones, Lay Low – Ernesto González’s solo project – will perform an introductory concert.



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(Video, HD, colour, sound, 16:9, 6 min. approx.)