



Extreme Poetry

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Lindy Roy's breathtaking designs have a minimal but dramatic impact on the landscape.

IN THIS ERA OF ARCHITECTURE INSPIRED BY THE SHAPES of animals and birds Lindy Roy's Okavango Delta Spa looks like an aquatic plant. The resort, in a vast river delta surrounded by the Kalahari Desert, is a series of thatch-covered pods that float in the water and connect to a glass-shielded common area by paths that are illuminated by solar-powered fibre-optic strands.

The precise location of the pods varies with the wind and the current. Roy created a 'pool' in the delta water in one structure. Swimmers can dive into an enclosure of mesh designed with one goal in mind – to be stronger than the jaws of the crocodiles which swim in the same water. If this isn't immersion, what is?

Roy, a South African who stands six feet tall, designed the spa for friends in the eco-tourism business. She figured that if you were going after the 'real' experience you might as well get tactile, as close as you can. The idea was more than simply having a minimal impact on the landscape; she wanted the plan to work with nature, following the ebb and flow of wind and water. The stationary parts of the spa were sited on old termite mounds. An airstrip on a patch of land reachable by boat was the travellers' link to 'civilisation'.

Is this 'extreme' architecture an approach crafted to meet the demand for the ever-new frisson from the urbanites who have experienced everything? The circumstances are extreme, yet appropriate or harmonious might be a better description for the architecture. If there's also a minimalism to Roy's work, it is the minimalism of the stem and buds of a plant which are meant to be no more visible over the horizon than any of the other local vegetation. There's a practicality to the Okavango Delta Spa design, too, that comes from a tight budget and an agreement that the entire construction could be removed from the site if necessary. This is not about colonising another territory. On paper, the art parallels stare you in the face, and they're not necessarily

sculptural. You think of an amphibious Calder mobile or a Miró constellation.

So far, the project has gone no further than its 1997 design. The resort is still not built, although Roy hopes it will be constructed on another site some day. Why can't an architect dream? At forty, Roy has distinguished herself as a teacher and designer, an academic who entered the commercial world with her firm, ROY, after years in the classroom. Yet the only one of her projects to be built so far is the renovation of the Vitra furniture showroom in the meatpacking district near her office on the rapidly gentrifying western edge of Manhattan's Greenwich Village. It's not that her designs haven't been buildable; she just hasn't had the right builders, despite having been pursued by developers since her dreamy designs beguiled her architectural peers in the late 1990s. But that is now changing: Roy has a hotel and a ten-storey residential building going up now in Manhattan, one in midtown, the other in Chelsea.

It's tempting to try to assign a style to Roy. Based on her adaptability to a whole range of demands and places, her work has been called algorithmic by Joe Rosa, the curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art who organised a small retrospective of her career last spring and summer, the first exhibition in a new series at SFMoMA devoted to design. The *New York Times*' architecture critic put her work in the character of 'GRRRL architecture' for its determination. But let's not forget the old cliché that, for architects, life begins at sixty. So far, much of Roy's designing seems to have come from a mixed bag of problems thrown at her by projects that haven't lent a consistent look to their solutions. Just give her time.

Roy risked being typecast by another eco-tourism design, an Alaskan ski lodge that she was asked to plan by an admirer of her Okavango Delta scheme. Fortunately for her, you can't take a plan designed for a river in Botswana and drop it onto a site in Alaska. Not yet, at least.



(Top)
Lindy Roy, 2001.
Photo: Karen Sead
Baigrie. Courtesy of the
photographer/ROY

But the aquatic parallels are there. Her cruciform Wind River Lodge, in glass and concrete, is like an aircraft carrier locked into the ice – or like a tanker, as others have pointed out. Its crossbar is the space for two helicopter pads, so that skiers can be taken to the tops of peaks nearby. Unlike the

languorous Okavango, this is a building for the hally alpha-male competitors of extreme sports, but as a design it's remarkably benign, despite the military look. Transportation and lodging are on the one site, and each room has a floor-to-ceiling view across the landscape.

ROY, Okavango Delta Spa project, 1997

Like Okavango, the Wind River Lodge is another unbuilt project, although not because it is all that hard to build. Roy envisages its construction, military-style, in prefabricated units that could be airlifted to the site.

But it isn't just Roy's refugees for the rich that go unbuilt. In 1999, when she was teaching at Rice University, Roy was one of sixteen architects in Houston to enter a competition to design single-family houses with the goal that they would be built cheaply on the city's East Side, a section known for its poverty and crime. The houses were required to be 'affordable' and designed to encourage security in the crime-ridden town. They also had to be coolable without air conditioning, which was beyond the budget of many of Houston's poor.

Roy produced a plan for a shotgun house. No, the name is not a pun on a site where drive-by shootings might occur. It in fact derives from the centre hallway which runs the length of the house, through which the wind could pass to ventilate it - no small job in Houston, where people routinely die of heat in the brutal summers. Roy designed the houses with high-peaked ceilings and ceiling fans, and a long prow of an overhang above a front porch. The materials were sheet metal, a wood frame and a particle-board interior wall. The plan was nothing if not cheap. The jury awarded Roy a prize for her house design, which qualified it to be built under the auspices of a programme that assisted families who wanted to buy homes. It was the American dream, after all. But there was a catch: the land planned for the houses was bought cheaply because it had no water system, and it still doesn't. And the programme providing houses for those poor families lacked the funds to put a system in. So the much-needed houses were never built. Architects grow accus-

tomed to seeing a favourite project go unconstructed. These days that project is usually not a \$75,000 house. Yet the design caught on as a design. Other cities desperate for housing contacted Roy, and friends considered building the shotgun house as the ideal cheap, airy and unornamented summer home. Roy's design fits into a tradition explored by some of America's finest architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright whose Usonian houses were designed for mass production in the late 1930s. Roy denies that he's been an inspiration for her but she does acknowledge the influence of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes, developed before the Second World War, which multiplied throughout the American landscape in the 1960s just as the new counter-culture was anointing Fuller as a guru. More recently, the pre-Bilbao

Frank Gehry crafted a Los Angeles street language with structures of chain link and plywood. He even redid the exterior of his house in those materials.

After the shotgun house failed to be built, should it be any surprise that Roy might drift into more conceptual work? One of my favourite projects of hers is Cancer Alley, an improbable land reclamation plan for a 150-mile stretch of the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the most polluted expanse of river in the United States - 'basically the chemical toilet of the country', says Roy, who, as a South African, couldn't miss noticing that almost all of the people living there were black. It reminded her of home.

The project began as a collaboration with the photographer Richard Misrach, who has been documenting the South for some time. Misrach approached Roy because he saw architecture figuring in his plan for the future of Cancer Alley - ecotourism. Nearly total immersion, if you can believe it. Tourism was just one element of Misrach's vision for an eventual reclamation of the toxic riverbanks that his photographs had documented. Louisiana's legendary political corruption formed another layer of toxicity. The plan was based on projections that the area's petroleum resources will be depleted in thirty-five years and that the land might be available to anyone who wants it, or to whomever is still there. Having taught in New Orleans and Houston, Roy knew Cancer Alley well.

Roy's futuristic design seized on those parts of the infrastructure that might still be useable thirty-five years on: the river and the barges that travel on it. She envisaged convoys of barges travelling in two directions, all working to reclaim the land that the petrochemical industry had ravaged. Those heading south from Baton Rouge would bring libraries, computer labs and sports

programmes to people on the shore. The northbound barges would be hotels, jazz clubs, casinos (in one version, a casino and a church shared the same space), solar barges with swimming pools, and film barges. The refinery buildings would eventually be turned into pro-forma museums, Bilbao-style.

Along with Roy's projects in Botswana and Alaska, Cancer Alley was featured in the exhibition, 'New Hotels for Global Nomads' at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York in spring 2002. But the Cancer Alley barges still haven't sailed which is hardly surprising given that the project was never funded. Roy's involvement in it was financed on a credit card. Her applications for grant money were turned down. If there is any future life to it, it will be as a book with her designs and Misrach's photographs.



ROY in collaboration with Richard Misrach, Cancer Alley project, 2001. Photographic material courtesy of Richard Misrach

Roy's designs have an undeniable drama to them which may be the problem. Reactions to the images at the Cooper-Hewitt show still concern her because those reactions were so positive. Somehow visitors found an allure in the dusky pictures with their eerie light. One response was that 'pollution never looked so good.' In spite of her best efforts, Roy was vogueed, aestheticised. To her chagrin, Cancer Alley was sexy at least in design circles.

'Architecture is an unbelievably blunt tool for social critique,' Roy said, surrounded in her office by piles of research into the politics and engineering of Cancer Alley. It's expensive, it's slow, it's not immediate - especially in relation to photography, which is so immediate.'

Roy has so far failed to launch her barges on the Mississippi, yet she did design the interior for a museum on wheels, Mobile Graceland, in a fifty foot by eight foot truck. The vehicle, commissioned to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Elvis Presley's death in 2002, travelled to sites around the United States, largely to promote the record company that paid for it. More than promotion was at work, though, in Roy's design, a collaboration with the Canadian theorist and entrepreneur Brian Boigon of the firm ThinkThink. Elvis' likeness is in gold on the outer wall. In the black rubber shag carpet interior, display alcoves along the wall exhibited the boxing gloves that Elvis was given by Muhammad Ali (a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War), the singer's now-legendary Spectrum Suit and the badge given by Richard Nixon to deputise Elvis in the war on drugs (which Elvis is known to have accepted while high as a kite). It didn't matter that the inside jokes were lost on most Elvis fans.

Exhibition spaces may turn out to be a natural fit for Roy. Her Vitra showroom, commissioned by the architecture-friendly furniture manufacturer that hires Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid to design buildings, relies on subtle features - a glass façade, a three-storey atrium, a rise of three steps on entry, creating the feeling of a stage for the objects on display, an elevated rim for display along the wall which draws attention to anything that's on it.

Vitra is a short walk from RoyDesign's office, which you reach after climbing a creaky staircase in a building that is part

illuminates the pathways in the planned Okavango Delta Spa will be used 'structurally', forming sheets that work as partitions in the room. Roy calls the bar Noah - is it meant to save some flavour of the neighbourhood before the boutiques conquer it?

The construction of the bar could be imminent. Roy says the same thing about Poolhouse, a design that is part of a grand plan for the hamlet of Sagaponac, near East Hampton. Her selection as one of thirty architects asked to design relatively low-priced houses there, fulfilling the dream of a developer, is a sign of her stature. Roy's design is for affordable housing, Hamptons-style, but with a twist. Her plan is to build on a foundation of eight interlocking S-frames of steel, with glass walls on most sides. The pool that gives the house its name is fed by a wall of water, which also feeds a bathroom and steam room before it reaches ground level. The pool begins in the living room where the ribbon of water finishes its descent and extends outwards into the garden. Falling water? Who can miss the joke on Frank Lloyd Wright, intended or not? Here there's no waterfall, not even a hill. You can't get land any flatter than the plains of Sagaponac. With Roy, you get the house and the humour.

There is indeed wit in Roy's work. We didn't see much wit in the solemn official competition for the Ground Zero site in Lower Manhattan, but in an unofficial design collaboration organised by the *New York Times*, Roy designed a twenty-eight-storey apartment building with lane markings on its exterior to note the road that was sunk beneath it.

As Roy gets a well-deserved chance to build her designs, will the poetry survive? Without a doubt, but it's hard to tell



ROY, Okavango Delta Spa project, 1997

All images courtesy ROY

THE ART PARALLELS STARE YOU IN THE FACE: YOU THINK OF AN AMPHIBIOUS CALDER MOBILE OR A MIRO CONSTELLATION.

of the functioning area of what had been a much larger meat market (now in the process of metamorphosing into a cobblestone eating and drinking mall - New Orleans in New York). As the firm seeks larger quarters, ten architects work in a single room that is smaller than twenty by twenty. In this media-driven business the firm still has no paid publicist.

Roy may soon be building a bar nearby, in what was once a refrigerated meat locker. Chairs will hang from the ceiling-mounted steel tracks like the sides of beef that used to be brought in on those tracks. The same fibre-optic light that

because she won't discuss the two Manhattan buildings which are soon to begin construction. Henry Urbach, whose Chelsea gallery specialises in architecture, plans a new survey of her work in January. Perhaps some attention will finally be given to the designs of the last few years that still await a builder. ■

The exhibition *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture and the Politics of Representation*, designed by Lindy Roy, is on display at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, from 16 October 2003 to 11 January 2004.

Extreme, an exhibition of Lindy Roy's work, will be at Henry Urbach Architecture in New York, 8 January - 14 February 2004.