THE TIMES

Fantasy kingdom

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Imagine a giant tower over Selfridges or Heathrow on stilts. One look at such visions and you'll never complain about the London Gherkin again

In 1848 the eminent architect Sir Charles Cockerell had a dream. He dreamt an architect's wildest fantasy, of a city in which the Florentine Duomo sat beside St Peter's, just down the road from the Pyramids, and jostled by St Paul's and every fabulous ancient temple and magnificent building from history.

Cockerell drew this astonishing place — in pencil lines so fine that they look like angel's hair — and unveiled it to gasps at the Royal Academy. *The Professor's Dream*, as he called it, is a glorious vision of somewhere that never existed and could never exist; a testament to the power of architecture over two millennia. But it is also terrifying. Imagine living in such a city. All that architecture — it would be like drowning in foie gras, truffles and caviar. A glorious death, indeed, but death all the same.

Cockerell's splendid drawing is one of hundreds of rich, fruity visions in *Fantasy Architecture 1500-2036* at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art in Sunderland. Most have been plucked from the Royal Institute of British Architects' rarely seen collection of architectural drawings, models and paintings, a Pandora's box containing an alternative universe — both magnificent and terrifying — as it might have been and might yet be, if architects called the shots and there were no irritating planning committees to get in the way. It is, write the co-curators Claire Carolin and Rob Wilson in their accompanying essay, an "intangible world that coexists with the one you know", a world of endless "could've beens".

Heathrow could've been on stilts — runway included — if Marshall and Tweedy had their way in 1935. The Clifton Suspension Bridge could've been decked in absurd classical arches instead of rational metal threads had W. Bridges won the design competition instead of Brunel. Hyde Park Corner could've been lit up by a gargantuan Art Deco music hall, courtesy of the architects of Radio City Music Hall in New York. Liverpool could've been towered over by Sir Edwin Lutyens's masterwork, his Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, instead of Frederick Gibberd's flimsy Paddy's Wigwam.

"We call it 'architecture interruptus'," says Neil Bingham, co-curator and for 18 years one of the guardians of the RIBA's collection of visions. "Something somehow always gets in the way of the visions coming true."

He pulls out a drawing by Charles Holden showing his vision for Senate House, London University's Bloomsbury headquarters and allegedly the inspiration for the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*. "Now that's what I call a Ministry of Truth." The design shows a vast, stripped classical, vaguely Fascist mountain range riding across London as far as Euston. Be grateful someone looked at the balance sheet, or Holden would have kept on building until he reached Scotland.

Usually it is dull old practicalities such as money running out, wars and, hmm, actually we haven't got a clue how to build this thing, that act as architectural prophylactics. Good job, too. We don't want all these fantasies coming true, thanks very much — especially anything to do with Albert Speer and Hitler.

What is more amazing, though, is how many actually have come true, given that to build architecture of any quality requires an alignment of circumstances — money, patron, public approval, adequate technology — that is rarer than a solar eclipse. Sometimes architects' visions are realised when technology catches up, as in the case of the Channel Tunnel. Or maybe they come true, but not quite in the form the architect intended. The Marxist dreamer Constant Nieuwenhuys came up with New Babylon in the Sixties — the last Utopia, a metaphorical imagining of a post-revolutionary society of endless fun, leisure and decadence, just like the one we live in today, though I'm sure Constant had greater hopes for its sublime heights than *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!*

The exhibition also contains a few "could never have beens", such as the brobdingnagian tower over Selfridges in Oxford Street, London — a bit of fun imagined by Philip Armstrong Tilden, who was retained by Gordon Selfridge to come up with whimsies and ideas. Some examples that look like "could never have beens" are, in fact being built, such as Greg Lynn's Ark of the World biodiversity museum, a hideous, kitsch pod dreamt up in cyberspace but expected to be delivered to Costa Rica's real space in 2006.

What is most intriguing are the different roles that fantasy plays in architects' minds. To some the fantastic simply allows them to try out ideas, back-of-the-envelope style, or to experiment on "impressions". Many architects, such as Will Alsop or Zaha Hadid, paint or sculpt impressions which they later try to render in built form.

Other images, particularly those from the 19th century, are created to sell a potential idea to investors: architects pull out all the stops in glowing drawings such as Joseph Paxton's exquisite interpretation of his Great Victorian Way, a ten-mile

iron-and-glass arcade in the style of Crystal Palace, with roads, elevated railways and shops peopled by genteel ladies, one of many plans in the exhibition to "sort out London", and one which, in a manner, has come true in our shopping malls and endless expressways.

Bingham says that "only a few on display are 'pure' fantasy in the old-fashioned, 18th-century sense, designed simply to delight or provoke".

We live still in the shadow of the twin giants of 18th-century fantasy: Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Etienne-Louis Boullée. Piranesi's dark fantasies, such as his infamous, haunting *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons), with their vistas through dank, arched labyrinths, and Boullée's superhuman neoclassical monuments to the revolutionary French state — such as his gargantuan Metropolitan Cathedral, designed to be used just once a year to celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi on Montmartre, face each other as the yin and yang of the Enlightenment imagination, the one gloomy and dystopian, the other optimistic and Utopian.

Only in the Sixties did provocative fantasies materialise to rival these greats, fantasies such as Constant's or Archigram's that poke fun at our futile hopes for Utopia, or which satirise contemporary culture, such as Claes Oldenburg's *London Knees* — a knobbly skyscraper cast from a mannequin as a satire on masculine voyeurism and female objectification in the era of ogl ed miniskirts. Such fantasy is as vital in architecture as it is in art or literature, says Rob Wilson, to escape "the banalities of the built, of real life".

Each picture in the show is a little Utopia, packed with potential and possibilities. Like all Utopias, you might not want them actually to be realised, but they give us something to aim towards, to try to reach — even if they encourage us to reach too far. The show is littered by Icarus buildings, those where the ambition of architects rose just too far, literally in the case of buildings such as Beauvais Cathedral or William Beckford's Fonthill Abbey spire.

One of the most haunting images is Tom Mellor's 1981 painting of Le Corbusier's masterpiece, the chapel at Ronchamp, France, in ruins. The shock comes from seeing the modern as ruined as an Ancient Roman temple, the modern become ancient history. Which is exactly what it has become. Modernist buildings are in ruins, these days, literally in the case of the Tricorn shopping centre in Portsmouth — that brutalist carbuncle finally yielding to the demolition crew — and metaphorically in the case of the hopes and dreams their architects had. How distant and naive the Utopias dreamt up in the Fifties and Sixties seem today. And yet, how great.

After the sins of the Sixties, architects were rapped on the knuckles by the Prince of Wales and told never to dream again. That was, in a way, the last time architects truly fantasised. Until recently. Fantasy is back in fashion again, big time. And I mean big. The Ground Zero design competition displayed our need for monumental vision on a mega scale: the first schemes were thrown out by the public precisely because of their lack of vision.

Today most modern visions, though, are required for rather more banal reasons, such as our cities' theme-park local economics. The auteur's vision is in demand, and architects are the ones to supply it, girding their loins to build skyscrapers and spectacular icons across London and the land.

Every week the newspapers seem to report on the latest Gherkin wannabe in lurid colours and blobby, organic outline coming to save Barnsley/Liverpool/Nuneaton and every other makeover city from tourist obscurity. There is no building too absurd for local planners to consider in the hope of boosting ailing economies by "doing a Bilbao" — think of the futuristic Selfridges in Birmingham, the Sage Gateshead music hall. (A testicle on legs? Yes, please.) But these exercises are more outrageous than fantastic. It almost makes you yearn for Tilden's Selfridges tower.

Five fantasies that came true

Stourhead Gardens, Wiltshire In the 18th century, the well-to-do, such as Henry Hoare II at Stourhead, gave their country estates a makeover in the new, informal picturesque style, to become posh theme parks for the intellect.

Royal Pavilion, Brighton George, Prince of Wales, began souping up what was at first his rented farmhouse in the 1780s. But he left it to the master of the grand gesture, John Nash, to overegg the pudding in potty domes and minarets.

Tower Bridge, London Sir Horace Jones and Sir John Wolfe Barry's iron suspension bridge in drag, astonishingly the exact contemporary of the heroically naked Forth Road Bridge.

Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin saw the future of the city: a quaint English village. Their vision is becoming increasingly prescient.

Portmeirion, North Wales Clough Williams-Ellis's Italianate Amalfi wannabe became a public fantasy in the TV series *The Prisoner*.

Fantasy Architecture 1500-2036 *is at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland (0191-514 1235), until July 3. It tours to the Lowry, Salford (July 17-Sept 19); New Art Gallery, Walsall (Oct 1-Nov 21)*

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