Watch this space

Architecture | Once the preserve of hotel lobbies and departure lounges, atriums are now the public realms of the modern age. By Edwin Heathcote

With the death at the very end of last year of the architect and developer John Portman, we lost the greatest artist of the atrium. Portman’s buildings simultaneously and paradoxically represented both the high and the low points of late modernism. The interior of his 1976 Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles was even credited by philosopher Fredric Jameson as the catalyst for an epiphany about the nature and characteristics of post-modern space. Portman bridged the avant-garde of the 20th century, from the visionary utopias of Soviet constructivism to the fragmented disorientation of the post-modern, late-capitalist condition.

You could compare the Bonaventure and Portman’s other interiors of hyper-modernity to the fantasies of Yakov Chernikhov, or to the sets conceived by László Moholy-Nagy for the 1956 version of HG Wells’s Things to Come. The hotel became a permanent fixture for Hollywood, the filmic cipher for downtown and the modern metropolis. Andreas Gursky became obsessed with it as a metaphor for the infinite interior. Yet here was the paradox of Portman’s work — it was utterly anti-urban. His buildings, and those of many of his contemporaries, disdained the city and instead created an interiorised urbanity, central spaces with glass pod lifts, endless banks of balconies, hanging gardens, huge glass skylights, shops, cafés and an infinite layering of glimpses and views that produced a complexity every bit as compelling as a city centre — but always carefully controlled.

Portman, who was, unusually, both architect and developer, arrived on the scene at a moment when downtowns were at their lowest ebb. White Flight had left city centres in the US and in Britain to the poor and the disenfranchised. The phrase “inner-city” was inevitably the prelude to something derogatory. At the same time, both the avant-garde and the populists were looking to the theme park for inspiration. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s Learning from Las Vegas (1972) and Charles Moore’s You Have to Pay for the Public Life (1966) looked to the casino, the modern vernacular streetscape and Disneyland for potential solutions to contemporary urban problems. City centres were suffering and the suburbs were booming — so the answer was the suburbanisation of the city centre.

Like the mega-malls which had emerged as a hybrid of shopping and entertainment and a “safe” substitute for a public realm, these grand atriums inherited a mash-up of industrial-age typologies which embraced the Parisian arcade, the department store, the Crystal Palace, the iron-and-glass palais-house and the airport. These were combined with futuristic visions of biomes, off-world settlements and Buckminster Fuller’s all-encompassing geodesic domes to create an intensely modern
As well as fear of crime and civil unrest, the streets of Washington DC and Watts in Los Angeles were still burnt out from the riots of the 1960s, this was an age of anxiety about environmental collapse, fuel shortages and the cold war. Portman’s buildings, like those of many late modernists, were conceived to be (or at least appear to be) self-sufficient and self-contained environments, palaces of paranoia that could survive the apocalypse. Look at the exterior of the Bonaventure: a stylised castle, its cylindrical towers in mirrored glass instead of stone, a building which reflects the remains of the city back at itself.

This was a strange reinvention of downtown not as a traditional urban centre but as a place of megastructures, joined often underground or through a tangle of concrete connective tissue. It was impossible to find the entrance and impossible to find your way once you were inside. They reduced the building user to a state of powerlessness, relying on signs, staff (often oddly absent) and serendipity. They were buildings which, acknowledging the threatening nature of the outside world, instead built a new one which proved almost impossible to escape. Jameson suggested that the Bonaventure’s post-modernity lay precisely in this complexity.

JG Ballard, who predicted so much of the unsettling techno-utopia of the contemporary world, chose as his favourite building the Hilton at Heathrow’s Terminal Four, designed by Michael Manser in 1990. “Sitting in its atrium,” he said in 1995, “one becomes, briefly, a more advanced kind of human being. Within this remarkable building one feels no emotions and could never fall in love, or need to.”

In recent years, the orthodoxy has passed from Portman to Jane Jacobs, the queen of the sidewalk ballet and the precursor to the gentrification of downtown neighbourhoods. Planners and architects now shy away from the atrium in favour of carefully controlled simulacra of civic space and “traditional” streets, often privately owned spaces designed to increase value rather than create genuine urbanity, with its concomitant risks and unpredictability. Despite its unshinability, the atrium has emerged as the authentic space of the modern age. The airport, the mall, the blockbuster museum (think Tate Modern or MoMA), the “hub” (Santiago Calatrava’s World Trade Center “Oculus” in New York), the hotel lobby — these are still the spaces of globalised modernity, multi-level voids of seductive spectacle in which the seduction is designed to lead, inexorably, to consumption.

The atrium has become, in effect, a cipher for the civic, much as a gothic tower or Greek temple front might once have been. Even government buildings (the Reichstag, the Welsh Assembly, London’s City Hall) now inevitably revolve around an atrium. The one realm in which the atrium has not emerged victorious, it seems, is the very place where it started — the home.

That isn’t quite true. One of the recurring motifs of contemporary domestic architecture is the central courtyard, too small to be a garden, too over-designed to call a light-well. There may be a single tree poking up through it (to denote that this is outside space) or a pebbly Zen garden. And there are a few exceptions, notable recent developments which have embraced the atrium to great effect, including a glassed-in one-time submarine base in Bordeaux converted into housing by Agence Nicolas Michelin & Associés.

More common is an emerging archetype that wants it both ways: the outdoor atrium. Having slightly (and probably prematurely) retreated from the apocalyptic fear of the 1970s, the contemporary orthodoxy is that outdoor space is a good thing, streets should be lined with brick houses and efforts should be made to avoid places looking like departure lounges or hotel lobbies. OMA’s Axel Springer Media Campus in Berlin and Zaha Hadid’s Leeza Soho in Beijing (which will feature the world’s tallest atrium at 190m) are both under construction and both revel in the slightly uneasy modernity of Ballard’s future. Battersea Power Station’s hollowed-out interior will soon also re-emerge as an atrium, but the finest recent addition to the genre is in the Gasholders development in King’s Cross, encased within the 19th-century ironwork frames of three gasometers. Their cylindrical atriums evoke Portman’s theatrical interiors. Meanwhile, Singapore’s just-opened Marina One (Ingenhoven Architects) with its wavy walls, pools and gardens is an extravagant example of an emerging archetype, the outdoor atrium.

The epic scale of these atriums (whether from the 1970s or from today) move us because they represent a kind of counterfactual, a what-if about a world that both came to pass (in every airport and hotel) and didn’t (the rest of the city). They are an escape from the reality of a city which was once seen as dirty and dangerous yet which has now in turn been sanitised. Perhaps now they represent an escape from exactly that sanitised and corporate city into the fantasy of an architecture that can provoke awe and revive our faith in modernity that can create visionary new worlds.