

The Phoney Island of the Mind

Texts for Nothing II

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Volume 2

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roger connah

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MALADIES OF THE ARCHITECTURAL SOUL

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those who lack imagination

cannot imagine what is lacking ¹

In practice, apart from changes through historical development and geographic variation, there are also many errors, omissions, smudged definitions, conflicts and fragmentations, discontinuities, failures of building programme and failures of building performance, disturbances of the supposed stable pattern. The orthodox framework of stability treats such anomalies as problems to be overcome or eliminated.

Steven Groak (1992) ²

Modern building is now so universally conditioned by optimized technology that the possibility of creating significant urban form has become extremely limited....
.Today the practice of architecture seems to be increasingly polarised between, on the one hand, a so-called 'high-tech' approach predicated exclusively upon production and, on the other, the provision of a 'compensatory facade' to cover up the harsh realities or this universal system.

Kenneth Frampton (1982) ³

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or

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Maladies of the Architectural Soul

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Why Architecture Can't Just be Happy

coda

Text for Nothing II

In The Air Tonight

The Cadbury's chocolate Gorilla ad goes something like this.

Tight shot, man in gorilla suit, camera catches electronic reaction, nostrils flare, brilliantly staged. The slow agonizing strains of Phil Collins *In the Air Tonight* begins. We think we know the rest. Slowly, no drama yet in the song, the camera pans out of the local shot and goes wider, not yet universal.

45 seconds in, the camera has pulled out to a shot of the gorilla sitting at a drum set, and suddenly the heavy pounding drum section takes over. The gorilla is in global heaven, the

global song is pounding our brains, the local momentarily lost. Cadbury's slogan comes on, closes the minute with a caption, a glass and a *half-full* film production. And we glimpse oscillations that will always be dreamt of between the poetic and the local, the universal and the global. The remix is of course not far behind; and the metaphor is ours usefully. Bonnie Tyler's *Eclipse of the Heart* serves well, and the gorilla hardly changes an electronic twitch, a local muscle. A glass and a half full of passion and joy, or romance and nostalgia?

A defence mechanism often sets in within architectural circles, both academic and professional. Cabals and discourse spirals re-configure intentionality and professional context. The avant-garde is re-invoked, new references marshalled, critically re-mixed and then reversed. I am not exactly sure how these two texts started but somewhere along the way the first ended up as an essay submitted to the Journal of Architectural Education under a theme around *Vernacularism* and *Globalism*

and the second, written around the same time, was published in a Canadian Journal called *Architecture and Ideas*.

At that time in my local hometown Ruthin, in North Wales, an aging, rather rustic craft centre from the late 1970s was being removed and a new one, designed by the London architects' practice Sergison & Bates, was nearing completion. These texts became a collision between these two buildings, these two events. The first essay was rejected without any inevitable silence or any lament. Any dialogue on a new building appeared problematic for both parties. For the journal, it clearly didn't fit the peer-reviewed structure of Scholarship of Design or the more architectural Design as Scholarship. I suspect the Cadbury's Gorilla in the introduction and the closing section on Van Morrison's re-mix of *Astral Weeks* didn't quite help. They didn't follow set editorial and academic rules. For the clients, discussing decisions about architecture already made appeared redundant.

I had long gone off message about all this and considered the maladies within the architectural soul did not emanate from the practitioners only. But how could a debate be instigated? Could a simple question be asked: did the siting of the new craft centre turn its back on the town and the traffic roundabout that was originally the old railway turntable? Was this relevant to anyone but architects? What reasons there might be for no further dialogue I could not determine, but the building was after all, almost finished. What use any further discussion? Why not use what the architects claimed and say some appropriate things about the crafted walls, the designed internal courtyard and the way the rolling folded roof echoed the nearby Clywdian range of hills?

In no way did I wish to dent any success the building deserved but in wanting to avoid the accepted conventions and uncritical clichés I was left with a text for nothing. In a way, like a bad snooker shot I was screwed from both directions, yet

I still believed that an individual building, if inventively and rigorously analysed might hint at the possibility of, to use a phrase, a performative critique. There had to be a new way to write and approach a crafted craft centre.

The new vernacular re-scripts a critical regionalism, and the glass is either half full or half empty. History and truth become twists of languages that root themselves in the clichés of nation and citizen, property and space. Meanwhile the soil of the past, whilst being abandoned, is exposed again and again to global shock. How to become Modern (Modernism 2.0) all over again and return to sources doesn't seem such a shock anymore. Revival like memory takes part in the local whilst it pounds out the universal. Our pessimism surely should be re-configured as much as our glib convictions. ⁴ We split - half full - and there's architecture. Half empty, and there follows a lament on science-based measurements and the need for new accuracy, somewhere, anywhere.

The influence on our different languages of the phenomenal, the conceptual and the technical, influences an ambiguous system we can set up and can still call architecture. Inside it, yet outside at the same time, insights have to be repeated and re-vindicated, often by lesser, more immature but no less engaged minds. Yet these are the minds we all dwell inside. Is such protectionism admirable? We might learn as much by re-designing buildings just built, as we do from assessing the favored, canonic or anti-canonical versions that the architectural world comes to accept as its revised and revising histories. The nonsense we can speak matches the pull of our re-vindication strategies.

Games Architects Play

or

Vernacularism and Globalization – a critical re-mix

1

Setting the Moving Goalposts

Writing on demand or preparing for a conference, journal, invited lecture, a symposium or another presentation always asks from the architectural community a series of swerves. The notes we came up with here serve to introduce ourselves to the eventual paper submitted to respond to the theme: “Vernacular Architectures in an Age of Globalization”.⁵ Yet, and admittedly

I speak for myself here, we are usually immediately involved in a prejudice project; we write either to confirm some of the ideas we already hold or, if we are prepared for some risk, to escape the patterns imposed on us. “We should be capable of conceptualizing our experience to the point where it becomes new experience,” Andrej Codrescu writes. “The borders of the Outside are our immune system: its work is to defend the individual and give it shape at the points of contact.”⁶

There is already a repressive tolerance in the two words we are asked to contemplate here: vernacular & globalization. When put together in a single context this, through its weak and openly ambiguous pairing, can already offer us a devilish discourse of seductive generalizations. We however might proceed differently by recognizing in the weakness the ambiguity which may be strengthened by an ingenuity and invention. Should we state from the outset where we are coming from, and from where (or from whom) we have learnt?

How are we to explore the impact of vernacular(s) in architecture in an age of globalization when the terms interchange, turn in and redefine themselves? If reading architecture, the moves towards the ever-emerging new canon, the analog/digital oscillations, and the conceptual to phenomenal runarounds are to provide us with new order of the locality in relation to 'sensed readings', are these today placed against the universal? Or do these oscillations from the vernacular to the global offer us a useful but bewildering source for increased narrowness, just as materials, motives and biomorphic shifts converge on a competent but all together lost spectral value in contemporary architecture?

To re-conceptualize such terms as these, to insert into them the thrill of constant unsteadiness in architectural interpretations and operations might have become one of our most demanding critical actions. It might lead to actions that can pass beyond the autonomous idiosyncrasies of brilliant

critical writing, historical conjectures, new scientific brio and the contextualism of brave but accepted ideas about the counterintuitive. In this local example of a weak and low urbanism, a craft centre placed in the reading (semiotic-semantic?) condition of voided space, we set out to explore the matrix and clash of this process, and the claims for authentic vernacular coding used within the debates on globalization.

From the games architects and others play onto the vernacular transformation of a 'removed/fatigued' craft centre in Ruthin, North Wales we glimpse but little of the funding process of the project which implied the transformation and retention of certain aspects of the existing rural craft centre (built 1982).

What conditions necessitated a poetic license toward the retention of siting, grounding and re-orientation of what existed before? What invites echoes to what had become a tired, possibly insignificant tired building, considered somewhat shabbily rustic and dull-domestic? The new Craft

Centre in Ruthin North Wales (2010) is considered by some to be a refined application of applied 'vernacular codes', a cleverly resonating and 'grandfathered' tectonic-transformation.

According to the architects,⁷ a young practice aiming for a European-vernacular, this can be seen as a real, modest and appropriate indigenous architectural response to both context and brief.

The various codes, normative assumptions and strategies employed in the building recall or echo an alleged 'authentic' vernacularism used to dialectically challenge a frustrated mainstream architecture. Or so it reads. This is highlighted in statements one can pick up on the Internet, from this and many other young practices, and can be interpreted as a 'rage' against the work of star-architects.

Asked which building in the town residents might like to detonate, demolish (by controlled explosion as a spectacle) it is

not at all certain that locals in Ruthin would have asked for the demolition of the mildewed and moss-covered existing rustic craft centre. That is not to say it deserved conserving. But the very silence of the citizenry might pose the obvious question: where does the 'outside' of landscape and environment meet its own immunity?

That previous building – a rural, rustic assemblage of vernacular echoes, when architects still drew trees on their drawings in more 'realistic' ways with Rotring pens or they pressed Letraset transfers onto the drawings - lasted only 25 years before it was removed. One wonders how long this 'new vernacular' response will survive in an age of globalization which looks as if it demands changing codes every two decades or possibly less.

Architecture is in a clash with itself, a clash with moral reach. The new building has since been feted by selected journals,

spun by the crafts people and visual arts community, ignored or questioned by the public (user), re-spun by the award winning architects, re-spun by the Welsh Arts Council and will probably soon, after 5 or 10 years, be undergoing a renovation.⁸

*

So how do we set our essay up? Should we attempt to retrieve the notion of vernacular from globalization, and thereby try and use it as a withstanding force? Or should we seek within it a new contract along the lines Kenneth Frampton achieved when he collapsed the ‘critical regional’ thinking inspired by architects like Utzon and Aalto with the generated authenticity of a Modern architecture in need of refreshing. A little Ricoeur might not even go amiss today. But it’s a difficult contract. For the vernacular itself plays off globalization in so many ways that it can begin to reverse the actions we tend to attribute as

differences. The technological transfer, the speed of capital and the market, all aid the vernacular emphasis by switching codes. We then notice how easy it is to re-script what appeared to be lost in an international idiom as a refined local idiom. The dialectical challenge smothers different architectural establishments; it always does as distinction between greater and lesser languages of the “people” produce different tribes of *vernaculari*.

2

Re-scripting and Re-harnessing Authenticity

The building recently completed in Ruthin is a re-scripting; it re-harnesses the craft of privilege and the privilege of craft until its authenticity begs for critical acceptance via the very language it must use in support. Here semiotics is confused not by vernacular clarity but by the ache of a globalization that begins and ends in a closed European mind. The bubble always

about to burst in anything popular and widespread creates another bubble in the rear-guard action that emerges. It is seductive at the same time for being the emperor's new clothes.

That said, where should we take our discussion if not to see it add to further glossing and go against the new series and seriousness that writing matters? Writing on architecture only matters when it matters least, or we can at least hold back our assertions and critical arrogance. The rest are more or less various stages of hoodwink. *Vernacularism* is not privileged nor is it left outside such hoodwink. *Globalization*, too, can help us unravel the pretence of the big picture, whilst vernacularism can narrow down the small picture until the fragments are lost in narrative games and fallacies.

The young girls who come into this North Wales market town on Fridays for their weekend alcohol-binges in the public houses off the Town Square are known colloquially as the

'vernaculari'. They dress with a lightness, frailty and skimpiness that respond not to conditions of the local climate or character but to the codes of an Ibiza night out, clubbing in Lisbon, hen parties in Krakow; they preen local and global, American idol or the X factor. They have learnt to scream at lot in affectation of something about to happen, a film star returning home, or the echo of lost hopes.

But this is not Dogtown. The planters are low, carefully designed with rounded edges. Art trails invite bewildering images of the past and architects can frame the industrial sheeting of any landscape form ready for the critic to see more 'there' than there actually is. But the screenwriter imagines a completely different use of these geometric boxed containers and semantic games. At a height of about a foot or so, the planters are attractive both as barrier and challenge. Robust, expressively zero, these little planters are hurdles in another game entirely whereby this edge becomes a vector, a series of

shoots and arrows. This is naturally an entertaining course only for those who see the potential of this edge.

Of course the barrier - to the architect - frames the end space, creates the narrow impossible walkway, prevents the car from entering a space near the building and generally signals a soft landscaping all but cute in the attention given. The gate is elegant prison concertina. If the architects were skateboarders they might have seen this too; if they knew the aerosol engineering that currently disfigures buildings like this in more urban zones, they might re-think the cautious knitting of texture and colour, and the refined palette that transfers the low vernacular pattern to pattern-recognition.

3

In the Middle of Someone Else's Skateboard

Writing in relation to architectural experience might be still

as immature as it always was which is one of our adventures. The planting too is immature as it is yet to allow more play and more transparency. That is not to say the site is bare; trees are carefully retained or then planted. The future landscape will eventually protect the building and hide the potential of both the planters and, perhaps, even the building behind. We are always in the middle of someone else's life, dream and skateboard. This is not a rural tradition inspiring an anti-academic, anti-historicist architecture. More topically, this architecture is an inspired modesty intended to signal unrest with the stars, unrest with the adventures in geometry and software, which have seen buildings become sculpture and sculpture become skate-parks.

But these are places of course that are locked at night.

Places that have no planters or edges with smooth concrete only sheeted zinc, cleverly jointed, seamlessly trimmed, as careful in reality as in the drawn. At present the wall is

vernacular industrial; echoes of the industrial warehouses and sheds further down the road appear to be one of the (not unreasonable?) semiotic invitations and threads the architects chose for their game of echoes. The rolling hills, the Clwydian small-mountain range provides the valley context for the town of Ruthin and the gentle changing surrounding contours.

Is this a European architecture, a modest even indigenous Europeanism, hinted at by the architects? Is this what makes this distinct from a more spectacular architecture?

Around the planters the *vernaculari*, the skateboarders, hang here as do the BMXers. These are the boys that have not yet left town; but will either leave and learn *parcours* in cities as exciting as nearby Manchester and Liverpool. Or then they will drift back into adult vernacular games usually ending up in big-screen multi-sport pubs called the The Park Place, The Feathers or The Boar's Head. But the lintel, the straight line, now there is the adventure of this building. The height

from riser to ground allows for the drag of wheel, for the leading wheel to catch. It allows for the play of skateboard with straight surface and then the flip at the edge. Most of the users of this edge of the building facing the car park are of course illicit. This is an illegal activity in a legal architecture.

No one is yet about to write out another discourse on linguistics and culture reassessing the empirical genius and vitality of the edge. The vocabulary the kids are more likely to respond to would be that of Tony Hawk rather than any vernacular echoes to the landscape of North Wales, the drab industrial park (hardly a park?) or the mediaeval market town where this delicious piece of designed non-space protects both car and pedestrian from, well... from what?

From the youth themselves! Regularly the security guards chase away these young dudes. It's their job though one wonders if they do it out of respect for their employer, out of respect for the new building, out of respect for the

architecture, or merely out of duty. Now the gates are simply locked, prison-safe to the outside. It is as if the barbarians are about to enter the building and take it for themselves. If one of their sons was actually 'rocking the edge' - to use the terminology - would security do the same and grass up their own family member?

But this is not Dogtown and these are not Z boys. To them this is their playground, this is their vernacular activity, their global world squeezed into an activity as trivial yet as demanding as skateboarding. At the moment in their life this is all, the town, the vernacular legacy and the building have to offer them. Craft for these dudes is the detailed knowledge of the skateboard parts or the BMX. This is not Dogtown, but it could be. ⁹

(Something) In the Air Tonight

How to explore the impact of vernaculars in architecture in an age of globalization when the terms interchange, turn in and redefine themselves? When the games architects play - and have played for years - on the public have already reached a zero degree, are we left with more internal cunning? In this case too, we might be passing beyond the autonomous idiosyncrasies of brilliant critical writing, historical conjectures and the refutations and contextualism of brave but accepted ideas within the counterintuitive. We have more or less voiced this and informed the Journal of Architectural Education that this is what we would be writing about.

All buildings are prototypes as John Groak indicates in a little known but significant text, *The Idea of Building*. ¹⁰ Surely we can agree too that buildings exist, in spite of the universal lie

that progress defaults to the forward direction, to allow us to learn from them. Yet we usually have to wait until a respected period has passed and we can apply a critique known only to the privileged. In other words to weed out the uncertainty and eventual turbulence in the building as a system we often re-think a little too late; we have no real *performative* critique to assess interpretive validity and intentional structure from the architects and others. Nor have we progressed to a critique that could understand error, insight, conflict, fragmentation, discontinuities, in fact the failures and successes of building performance discussed by John Groak. What do we really have that exists outside the disturbances and often received ideas offered by the architects of these buildings themselves?

The loss of an engaged, modern sensibility, which many architects and critical commentators directly or indirectly speak of, is not always quite the loss that students of architecture experience. Every act in the student's adventure is

no re-reading, it is a 'whatever' reaction to the critical fictions Modernists and Revivalists now make up, in a century that is no longer theirs, from a century no longer remembered with any clarity. But for the vigilant revivalists and the magic realists and re-interpreters, every act in this loss is an act of re-reading. Our pedagogical adventures keep us informed of the changing codes yet we know little of why and how a decision by an architect, client, or investor turns this or that way, alters the whole performance of the building, satisfies programs invented to be satisfied and can fail programs unrevealed.

Architecture is a manipulation of language. Without language, it doesn't exist. A clever line? Well, not quite. Building might exist, constructed worlds and enigmas of the hearty trowel and tower cranes may exist, but without language there is only a creative and welcome emotional blindness to what we see in front of us. No comparison is available to the ill-defined but not un-formed landscape out there beyond us,

where the stream wends its way to lake, and the lake sitting beneath mountains still exists to seduce us. No consensus, no movements, no histories, no theories, no discourse; just existence, just experience and then possibly, with a shudder of the pen that writes it, the essence, merely things. All landscape, all environment, all space as local as it might be universal.

Perhaps this is where some students get it instinctively right; blink and you no longer miss anything any more. Without considering whether architecture could expand and do more than manage its own contents, it would quietly cease to matter. And if the cartoonists are right, in the near future architects may become like bankers, a type of species no longer talked about for a few decades.

There is some consensus, cleverly concealed within architectural circles, that the cognitive deceptions practiced by architects on architecture using language may keep an

emerging, expanded architecture well embedded in the last century by missing the critical and challenging opportunities, ephemerality and fluidities of this century.

When the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz announced that the 'language of literature in the twentieth century has been steeped in unbelief' we need not take a giant leap to see this as architecture's fate too. Making use of that language, Milosz continues (*Unattainable Earth*, 1986): 'I was able to show only a small bit of my believing temperament.' This is a problem too that has clearly been faced by the architectural community. The result to go by the looseness of language around indicates that the believing temperament in architecture – professionally and pedagogically - has now shrunk drastically; advocacy has interfered with analysis. Irrefutably?

Architecture holds little critical reason for us to believe in when the power relations and organizational directives

have been exposed so mercilessly by market forces, misspent pedagogies and other self-interested and genteel misdemeanors passing for collaboration.¹¹ More accurately, advocacy has become analysis; *let's get critical* (critical) is a dance-floor hit rather than a serious call. And this is the *dead good architecture* which coincides too with the literature that Milosz speaks about; 'for we had crossed a certain borderline separating us from another literature, somewhat old-fashioned, deserving respect but artistically inferior.'¹²

5

Let's get Critical, Critical!

How much contemporary work, contemporary building deserves respect? How do we set up a measure of such respect? Who cares who wins the prizes orchestrated for photo opportunities and charity moments? Which buildings would we like to demolish; who decides? How much are buildings

and architecture talked up in order to occupy positions in the market, culture and society that may prove untenable, using codes that remain – for the most part – beyond the public's understanding (not to mention acceptance) and safely within the realm of the architectural profession and the control of interpreting and practicing cabals? Though the last 30 years may have opened up architectural appreciation and an accompanying rhetoric of success, it may - like dead aid - have delinquently hindered the critical process itself.

Double talk, triple talk even, is everywhere, and certainly not a privilege of the architecture profession. It is very possible that we need a form of new writing about architecture and its potential that seriously shifts from instant journalism, ego flattery, self-defining aims and objectives, and academic speak. It could be a writing and thinking using immediacy more cleverly than so far achieved. It could be a writing that neither speeds up the acceptance of chance moves and drifting

ideologies, nor pokes the eye out of interfering collaborators. Could we even suggest an analysis that could go some way to address if not overhaul the power relations and organization structures that stretch now well beyond the architect and its profession, whilst the profession still hosts the dinners and award ceremonies necessary for perpetuating its illusion?

Is this what we might call a *performative critique*? And if so, could this help us recognize the games still played by architects – brilliantly or otherwise – games which are so often answered by the public's understanding (or, according to many architects, misunderstanding) of architecture, with grim bewilderment and often a well-deserved glib dismissal.

There is a danger that what is perilously played with and even trivialized by being called *star* architecture, *bling* architecture, *holy* architecture, *real* architecture or *deadly* architecture leads to increased generalizations in magazine and journal.

It is possible to kill for generalizations. Looseness appears to produce protective strategies and misguided retreats where the past is once again trawled to revitalize the present. There is really nothing startling about this. We may just be facing the inevitable counter-cycle that tempts architectural innovation and something - real architecture, authentic architecture, re-branded architecture of the post-critical, phenomenological and/or critical-regional type (call it what you will) – which looks as if it may threaten us with careful, sophisticated, critically re-mixed but internal moves that are basically beyond use. Deserving respect at selected, well-constructed times but critically inferior in terms of looking forwards.

6

Vernacular Architectures in an Age of Globalization

We might identify a repressive tolerance in architectural criticality and writing that has long asked us to confirm

methodologies, peer patterns and conventions that invite but small swerves in known interpretations. Never more urgent the need for the contrarian, the 'but' that does not disclaim, the 'but' that does not forbid negation, but the 'but' that excites us with new language, new writing, new error and new adventures.¹³ The aim of this response – a text for nothing - is a new, unsteady but not ill-formed writing. These two notions – *vernacular* and *globalization* – now offer us the promise of more weak statements, which may only be strengthened by our scholastic cunning and ingenuity. In this local example of camouflaged low-urbanism, we can begin to set out the matrix and clash of this process, and explore the claims for authentic vernacular coding used within current debates on globalization.

Can we maximize serendipity as we set out to re-write an exploration of this clash? By so doing we can ask whether any discussion of vernacular architectures today implies a more

refined public understanding of architecture. Or are we still proposing a ritualized act that calls upon codes of region and locality embedded in the architects' intentions, a serious of conjectures and refutations which re-tell and re-script lost connections and fables only architects read?

It is quite possible that just as science, performance and technological measurement and building systems may have become too reductionist for the architectural profession to take seriously, the way architects and others seek explanations and reasons for their work has also continued to become more and more reductionist. Formally profound, George Steiner said of chess, but socially trivial. Ruthin Craft Centre, according to one wag, is a four and a half million quid shed! Should we take this kind of throwaway jest as a barbaric, uninformed comment, a piece of flippancy, seriously or not? Is there a general willingness to ignore this and other outrageous interventions and acts, treating these adventures as the wilder

fortunes of tricky souls who ensure that we blind ourselves to ideas and a discourse – a profession – beyond our control?

Why does this willingness to delude ourselves continue in a privileged world like architecture, one in which the academic discourses are too often framed and neatly squared to support and confirm everything about themselves? Perhaps something in the scale, ego and achievement of large spectacles and a wanton supply of imagery in 21st century architecture has created a repertoire, an eternal return from tragedy to farce and back again, a global vernacular. What critical mask has to be tolerated to allow this its suspicious progress? Is this worth a new resistance, a critical resistance to the heroic falsehood, a resistance that at times has been supplied by inter-connected discourses that go under the name Vernacularism?

But hold on, we say to ourselves. Is there any reason for our outrage today, any more than previously? There are codes and

conventions, there are limits and we know how to keep them surely. Are we to continue our cultured ignorance into a useful and headily concocted critical disavowal whilst we know the Barbarians will arrive? Does this allow us to continue believing in the heroic despite the behavior, spin, exaggeration and what comes down to a series of monumental hoodwinks? Will the bubble burst and if so which bubble? ¹⁴

7

Play of Resemblances

In any vernacular act, the play of resemblances is real indeed but as we chart the ritualized architectural actions taken on behalf of the public, architects as re-interpreters begin to reflect the social structure of longing, and attempt dramatic recapitulation of localities. The adversarial and the outcast are re-worked, industry becomes gain, landscape becomes ritualized metaphor and the body is mimetically squeezed

where it doesn't always belong. More fashionable but elegant architectural nonsense supports the myth of such conditions until we die of localities that dream of nothing more than extending their localities (*of getting the hell outta there!*).

Making sense of the past with a troubled meaning, this is when a vernacular act succeeds. If we see these local acts redefining the global empire of signs, then we can do so at best with constant apprehension. Did Marshall McLuhan, forgotten as he is, get it right in *From Cliché to Archetype*: "The archetype is a retrieved awareness or consciousness. It is consequently a retrieved cliché – an old cliché retrieved by a new cliché. Since a cliché is a unit extension of man, an archetype is a quoted extension, medium, technology, or environment.¹⁵ Insert our favoured world within: "architecture as a cliché probe that scraps older environments in order to retrieve other clichés that have become tossed aside earlier."¹⁶

The vernacular appears to wish to carry out a vendetta. It can take on the lost contemporary until the re-reading of landscape, materiality and the recent past offers a new adjustment as it re-works the existing conditions.¹⁷ Recapturing the lost 'soul' remains local but at times approaches a compensatory even costume (camouflaged) architecture, just as if it engaged the tattoo artist and body artist with artifacts emerging from public stories tossed aside in earlier, more meaningful times. The architects' language – their literal speech and conceptual transfer – is then brilliantly open and closed at the same time; built into the sophisticated codes are the erratic devices which come from insight. A careful architecture that controls space whereupon each space – separate but linked – leads to a material discourse and a single entity. The building is seen to merge with the sky, its difficult geometry holds a closed interior and offers itself as a representational character of the town itself.

More than mere craft, the applied devices can update tradition and evoke intimacies and nuances of place-making, inextricably linking the imagined quiet undulated and angled form to the surrounding landscape of the Clwyd valley, a softer tension and less dramatic than the 'real' mountains of North Wales in Snowdonia. Reading between the lines of the architects we re-read; another building emerges from the language - not quite the one we may see in images or the one we visit.

8

Cloistered Space

We can go on being as fair as we can to the architects' language and the conceptual weight it attempts to transfer to the built space and form. A screen of reticence offers a cloistered space, a cranked plan, and hints at a refined engagement; reminds some perhaps of an architecture from continental Europe

(Switzerland and Austria) where materiality, edge conditions and polished qualities turn the ordinary atmosphere a tad heroic, and then transfers the heroic into details. Perhaps, as the architects work within the space of the existing but removed building, a ghostly transformation seen through the trees is achieved echoing Louisiana Art Gallery at Humelbaek in the private language of the architects themselves. Or is this more an updating of the critically regional and careful Modernism all but lost in today's icons? ¹⁸ Unfair it may be to put sentences together without the nuance of the architects' delivery during a presentation in a series called "Real Architecture" (Tate Modern London), but the sense of the codes, the sophisticated attention to detail and careful design clearly attempts to take this architectural expression, avowedly local and vernacular, to a higher level.

The argument we suggest here is this. The 'vernacular' may appear to be a re-coded, critical condition, which resorts to

an essentialism, thinly re-writing a weak critical regionalism whilst falling back on the purposeful and exaggerated claims of the phenomenological. But does this inevitably repeat the deceptions we warned against by resorting to a closed, critical over-reach in order to hold within projects that can hint – by tacit code – at a moral response to the wayward market architecture of the last 20 or so years? This position ensures a fight or resistance for a ‘real architecture’ against alleged wider disseminated and disaffected global architecture. But this *resistance* itself is also a fluid critical term that has been reversed by recent critical theories and histories. This has led to the repertoire of (world) architectural images, in many ways a wayward use of the *iconic* interchanged by the *global* (European, North American, Pacific Rim) *architect*. The global is vernacular and the vernacular act is a form of the global underpinned by positioning itself as an understudy of moral concerns. The repertoire of the architectural theatre lies before us, in memory and hard drive.

Sometimes architects speak in their cloistered spaces; they present, explain to each other and build up a case for the solution achieved. This often works as evidence but can, by being variously structured as a debate or disclaimer, remain unchallenged. When the work (architecture/building) is finished, time, money and lives committed often raise the achieved building beyond serious critical review. Post-occupancy is agonising and often silent. There are of course various texts (including the selected and staged photograph) which waiver between the press release and the explanations given by those involved in the process. The selected critic or assessor speaks and one finds the words extracted and re-cited as evidence of the building’s worth, merit and critical validation. The weak process begins to build up strong generalisations. Is this still useful for the critical process? Is this serious in the architectural sense, or are these necessary dislocations to ensure little further critical communication? Is it even wise when critical foreplay can already protect the

codes that must pass for this or that evidence in the architects' repertoire?

9

Real Architecture

Consider the use of the phrase 'Real Architecture' in the series of presentations at Tate Modern in London. The gatherings, usually architects, artists and the like invite themselves to a supposedly real lecture, real presentation and real talk. Here 'real' operates as the winning antidote to what is considered the 'throw-away' disposable world of the marketable icon and fashionable building.¹⁹ Phrases like *the big boys* and jokes about software are still made, albeit embarrassing and anachronistic. Such reasoning in the following extract, for example, demonstrates critical support when the work is set against a wider agenda. Here the work (we are still marginally talking of the Ruthin Craft Centre) sits in for the welcome

antidote or resistant project. By so framing the building in this way, the analysis uses the 'modest' purposefulness of the building (scale, siting, materiality, detail, tectonics and funding) to denounce projects of apparently less merit and more immediacy. None of this really concerns the architecture itself but becomes a system of validation that can be turned back on the small but worthy craft centre. To quote:

"If the 4.4million Ruthin Craft centre proves anything it's that the UK is finally mature enough to appreciate art – whether it's applied or not – for it's own sake. Until recently this simply wasn't the case. Before the turn of the millennium, during the National Lottery madness, museums and galleries were designed as 'experiences' and supposed to be responsible for regenerating a slew of post-industrial towns and cities. It's why the Earth Centre was built outside Doncaster and the National Centre for Popular Music was dumped in Sheffield. Aping the success of the Bilbao Guggenheim, their mission was to

transform the fortunes of these previously down-at-heel areas, effectively making them fit for a new generation of tourists and business. Trouble is, of course, it didn't quite pan out that way. The visitors never came and the white elephants duly closed.”²⁰

This is an accepted journalistic way of seeing architecture develop through the columns of accepted prose. Projects didn't necessarily *ape* the success of Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim Museum, but administrative bodies, funding bodies along with architects were caught up in a process that mirrored the celebration of market architecture with all its urban potential and immediacy. This produces a dislocated critique, with a fervor and material excitement that sometimes grabs the public's interest. The language is uneven: buildings are mocked for being 'experiences' or are 'dumped' in certain places; they may even 'ape' the success of others, and become 'white elephants duly closed'. All of this might be true of certain buildings in the last two or three decades but this

offers no serious critical assessment of what has happened in architecture recently, whether it was a global repertoire that was 'dumped' in local towns, or 'experiences' which could not be joined with local narratives.

By not being an 'experience', by not being dumped in Ruthin, by not aping Bilbao, by not becoming a white elephant, the 4.4m Ruthin Craft Centre is thereby framed for success. Is this an architectural success? Or is this merely the language and cant of critical foreplay and advocacy?²¹

10

The Iconic and the Readerly

What confuses us here is this constant search for a more recent term and critical downplay which can begin to act against the mainstream and/or the fashionable. This is often called a rallying term; in this case the mainstream may or may

not be fashionable. It might be star architecture, corporate compromise or then heavy civic structure. The introduction of this critical language isn't fast and loose but it builds on a carelessness that works in context with the architects' own control of its process; the codes become self-applied, formalistic and confirm the accepted aesthetic and received critical discourse seen in journals. Introductions can be loose and tacit; there is need to attack the ugly cute corporatism. Moods flatten lectures, public understanding dies and the works struggle even against the vocabulary the architects use themselves. The audience, the reader, not always as quick to condemn the fame academy as some architects would like, serve to snub the elite and the market but read buildings for what they are: billboards to the past, or untidy, unsafe pointers to the future.

The lightness – weakness²² - of the resistant position implied in the vernacular act might be its cunning escape. However,

the confused cross-play of advocacy rather than analysis often begins to stand in – critically - as the assumed, acceptable, responsible and even moral position for new architectural practices to take. For example, can we take this term *real architecture*, used in Tate Britain (2008) as part of a series of talks about Real Architecture, as one of the timely and recyclable critical ways a mainstream, a fatigue or a mannerism are altered? The debates narrow quickly however onto the antidote and how a building, suitably positioned in language and strategy, can imply a rejection of more contemporary *iconic* (and thereby possibly suspect) work in favour of what might be considered *real architecture*. Yet whilst this latter assertion may operate as a resistance, echoing (a weak critical re-mix?) Kenneth Frampton's well-framed *Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance* (1982)²³ it must also demand some use of the iconic and semiotic exercise to announce its responsibility.

This leads not to the authentic move of one vernacular against another, seized back and trimmed to regional materials, local poetics, hushed nuance and acceptable strategies. But this is a variation on the timeworn critical attributes of place making, site situating, form giving and materiality. This offers the necessary faith – a belief system - in actions that invite the adjectives: quiet, understated, careful even camouflaged or neo-artisanal. Without a serious critical understanding say, of icon-index-sign, the result can be refined into purposeful architectural strategies of the sort we see in Ruthin but supported with thin, semiotic evidence.²⁴ Left out of the equation: an unexplored if not unimaginative wider critical, expanded architectural and regional response. If the client, development agency, director, and architect trimmed vision to local consensus and funded form, we need to set up a performative criticism to know why and how these processes damage or re-frame the architecture imagined.

Ruthin Craft Centre might present us with a confusing rejection of one iconic in favour of another. Modest moves, thorough and at times stubbornly architectural, sometimes raise an alleged quiet architecture to levels it cannot necessarily achieve. The architects recall Peter and Alison Smithson and the useful language that codes, for all those in the modernist-known, the shift from the heroic to the ordinary and - as it was secretly hoped - back again. There might also be a recall to Semper and other fugitive critical devices that help frame the purposeful lining of, for example, crafted interiors. Thereby allowing the work to justify its own vernacular moves that become as immediate and iconic as the trends it fights against. The difficulty in this argument, of fitting the quiet moves against the dominant establishment, implies all (iconic = readerly?) fashionable architecture is guilty of insignificance.

This is an exaggeration suiting architecture's own internal games. It is just as obvious that not all, quiet or real

architecture is an antidote to this. There is also something called competent, sensitive but also rather uninspiring architecture; an architecture that tries too hard to demonstrate its goodness. The critical re-mix isn't always what it sets out to be.

11

The Unfashionable Discourse

We might concern ourselves less with trying to counter this or that statement, or if we can determine or take a view whether the architects got it right from their own logic of departure, transformation and implementation (in this case the architects probably did get it right if kept strictly to their critical framing), and more with whether this is further evidence of architects playing narrower and narrower games within their own profession. Architects are surely not alone in cognitively deceiving themselves to favour a *real architecture* where

materials, association and locality testify to the anticipated narrative? It may matter less to ascertain a *real architecture* standing up to the 'fashionable' if we cannot set up a wider systematic and intelligent challenge and turn our critical eye on unsuspecting narratives, missed opportunities, even the gentle but careful loss in real experience.

Take away the robust concrete-framed planters in the inner space, drop the trees and landscaping down to earth level with the eye, ramp a through-route and risk more skateboarders, fill the inner courtyard with a light compacted shale (think: Place des Vosges, Paris), extend the drainpipes at the zinc edge to catch the impressive torrents that fall in this region of North Wales, thereby creating a random but wonderful covered cloistered way along which visitors can amble under the softest, warmest, gentle rain there is, and what do you have?

Magic! Or Magic Realism?

Would it not be timely to explore the games architects still play in order to escape backwards? Once more we must take a swing first at ourselves to realise that home is no longer consigned to one word, as if we can still see the local resolutions that so easily come to mind in our global conditions, hammered out in metal, stone or glass. Games architects will certainly continue to play may enchant the unwitting, earn a lasting name for an undeserved immortality. To tempt once more that need for order, rhythm and form is to know that even this century will not always be opposed to chaos, chance and fluidity. Surely it is this, the other side of nothingness that should interest us.

It might be that we are talking here about architecture and building that is part of a transformation, an upgrade, even a re-branding whilst at the same time there will always be a catalogue of missed opportunities. Can we shift a critique in architecture not to the purposeful, serious and significant

semiotics and aesthetics intended met by the architects' careful and self-confirming choices, but to these *performative* aspects of a project, any project? Not an internally controlled assessment of architecture re-defined by smaller and smaller groups of professionals, experts and critics who inevitably circle in on themselves to re-create groups of like-minded taste and expectations.

What if we could see the building, the environment, the architecture as a 'reading' and 'critical' machine, an organizational structure, a content-centre that could be steered this way or that depending on who gets to contribute and make decisions, who funds these decisions and whose intention holds sway over other intentions? Whether this then amounts to a series of missed opportunities in some buildings and a series of unusual gains in other buildings – architecture as a crime against humanity and not for humanity - will itself depend on how the performance of the architecture, the

system and the 'environment' are or even can be measured.

Is this already beyond the scope of an architectural criticism that leaves any retreat to a professional elite welcome and guarded? Not quantum physics, not neuroscience then, just the requirement for a more demanding critique.

12

The Other Side of Nothingness

This is no longer a critique that rewards the architect for stubbornly sticking to possible and impossible agendas, but a way to loosen the hubris and privilege that still see architects playing ego games and deciding to go through with parts of their ideas, works, details and pet-project thinking that may or may not be suitable for the project, the environment, the client or the society. Most experts, even non-experts, on cities or rural developments today would admit to the energy needed to understand the wider role such developments play

in our society, whether they recreate an urban lifestyle, aim for second-life MySpace or YouTube city, a Dubai safe-secure environment or a rural lifestyle of nostalgic bric-a-brac. Is such a critique possible in our naive insistence on resistance and challenge?

There are some too who think this market town's scenography is quaint, even backward. Others think the town turns *jeekyll and hyde* as it has always done on weekends when it becomes another binge-city to join the innumerable binge cities around Britain. In a town some think is international, others think is a sink-hole, it might be that this building – we are now certainly using it as a cipher - in its pocket-sized Clwyd Valley environment along with its industrial shed echoes, its deliberate conceptual weight and undulating zinc-roof form 'echoing' the Clwydian range, might turn out to be the most efficient way to use about 4.5 million 'quid.' It might be that this art-applied, crafted, vernacular retreat behind the

trees turns out to be the ideal response to the brief set out by the client(s), a brief clearly re-shaped by the architects transforming earlier ideas of their own practice into more recent ideas. The latter, a consistent strategy used by many architects who carry on residual ideas from previous projects and re-configure them for current projects.

This too might be the appropriate response to the vernacular 'transformation' demanded by the governing bodies (the Director of the Centre, the Welsh Arts Council and Lottery Fund, The Tesco Superstore next door)²⁵ whereby retaining certain parts of an older rustic-looking, past sell-by-date vernacular architecture project (footprint, orientation, trees) forms a 'dynamic zinc and cast stone centre of applied arts' entered via a car park. Is this anything like the very 'real', controlled and purposeful opening of an Alvar Aalto at a similarly scaled Säynätsalo Town Hall building?

A 4.5 million quid shed? Without re-thinking our critical position today on such works and others, we are left either debating the words of the architect and or client, or assessing the building from visits. What type of expanded critical analysis or re-mix can be applied to a project which identifies the mechanics and poetics of the organizational structure, the structure of brief and expectations, social rewards, place and people, and the power (agency) relations that allow some decisions to be made above others? No one, not even the public with their instant disclaimers and 'misreadings' can determine whether this is money well spent, whether there are opportunities missed, and what imagination has been included and what imagination has been left out.

The Critical Re-Mix

Can we talk of a holistic design under the fluidity of three or four clients, when the architects interact with clients, craftspeople and others, when the town is invited into the process or not? Is there any point holding up our hands and saying wait, this environment in the widest sense of the word could have been more inclusive, open to both passing international visitors and townspeople, a town destination as much as an-out-of-town destination, a departure, a crossing point, a park, an elderly promenade, a BMX route, or a psycho-geographer's aimless walk.

Instead, there is a cloistered form located internally with no real through access, and a series of near-perfect tectonic devices and material moves which a whole and holistic building might not always make. And a stunning aerial

photograph! Once again: how could we propose a critique that would demonstrate to us how decisions are made, what directions the brief for a new work can take this new architecture, what causes the building to take this or that approach and what chances are missed or created when the various bodies involved either collaborate or then use their positions to work for their own agendas against what might look in the end as a failed holistic design. Architects have long used their own ambiguous relations to the power structure and fallen back on language and professional codes when suiting them. Cleverness invites others to ignore the conditions for a higher architecture (careful, modest, engaged, reticent, ordinary or heroic) in order to escape forwards and accept a 'smart' retreat to the past as a way to ensure the present's vitality.

The critical re-mix!

It may be good that I live near this building in Ruthin, North Wales or then it might not be that good. If the building, like many buildings, is based on a kind of public lie (in other words these buildings work better if one never actually sees them or experiences them – a crime against the community or humanity?) then living so close to this building could be a mistake. The building might never perform to what it purports to be. Yet it is now surely public property to some extent.

Vigilantly detailed, aerially dramatic, Ruthin Craft Centre is not a building you walk through or really stumble across. Through a maze of other activities one finds some peace and an open sanctuary but so little 'edge'. And even if the metal chairs were stacked up on a rainy day (instead of the carefully designed robust picnic set) and the concrete was not sodden but the delicate 'boules'playing shale absorbed soft drizzle, there might still be little thrill to sustain any wandering aimless spirit. Perhaps that is a feature of more psycho-geographic environments and desires. At one moment, full

summer, trees out, the long hidden zinc wall barely registers. Few would realize behind this piece of industrial siding lurked a centre of excellence. But might we just once treat it as a building one could chance upon?

14

The Psycho-Geographer

Taking the main street – what passes for a main street in such a small town - from the psycho-geographer's converted cottage, Hall Building, on Mill Street, you have to climb up Clwyd Street passed a predominance of cafés and hair salons. Van Morrison's re-working of *Astral Weeks* on the Nano. The 'international city' of Ruthin seems far away as, for years now, shop after shop appears closed, seeks new tenants or is merely run-down. After negotiating the Town Square with the distinctive mediaeval and post-mediaeval pastiche buildings, the genuinely old 15th century Courthouse rises and holds

some presence. Down Well Street the other side of town, passed the pharmacy and turn left onto what is called Station Walk. This was the cutting, where the trains used to pass through the town. Left lower where the train ran across the town, this walk takes us directly to the road across from which we see the latest supermarket (Tesco). Talk is that Tesco laid down some conditions for their new building in return for part funding of the centre. What could they be? Here all roads lead into the supermarket, the town planners making no attempt to set up a walking path, which could pass by. After buying the necessary provisions the psycho-geographer considers, as always, taking the other route, any other route, this time through Ruthin's Craft Centre of excellence, which as it so happens was near where the old Railway Station used to be. This isn't easy. Either the centre of excellence wishes not for those chance walkers to enter or then it considers that - if 93% of visitors to the centre arrive by road - the only real entrance is by the car. The trees - planted by the architects begin to

screen the 'ugly' and 'unacceptable' Tesco supermarket - are, as yet, not mature. The walker is faced with the unlikely decision. To cross the road where there is no crossing or find another route through to the centre. This brings the walker across a planted, grassed area where a trampled path has already started and then on into the centre obliquely, from the car entrance, from the planters where the skateboarders and BMXers now hang, where the floor surface, levels and pathway are made no more inviting and no more easy on the eye. Once in, entering the courtyard across an elaborate set of robust folding gates (semiotics: prison, hospital, railway station - folding grille!) it is easy to be drawn to the one point like a pinball, the exit up out and right. The undulation of the roof from the low eye line does not register as exciting as it should. Unless water is pouring off the overhang, there is little drama; the cross between a home for the elderly and a monastery begin to appear somewhat unsuccessful.

Unkind?

Exiting the Applied Visual Arts Centre through a small path one meets the crossing and exits into another uneasy walking space in the town. For a town that could so easily survive on a wonderful thread of walkways and cycle paths and offer healthy routes for its townspeople, the planning is woefully inadequate. The building itself could also have contributed wider than a cloistered setting. The psycho-geographer is disappointed stumbling on almost nothing. The word 'international' can hardly be used about what appears to be little more than a suburban backwater stuck inside a market town. Then, deep in another soundtrack, Astral Weeks, he is reminded of this word *re-mix*. *Down Cypress Avenue...* in this case Van Morrison's re-mix might help us here with the language that is missing. Well it's not a re-mix as such. An album, one of the best, so local in its song (1968), so universal

in its nuance, its scatting, its jazz, the stuttering of Morrison's youth extending a line into form, teasing out meanings, as the semioticians say, into an 'architecture' all its own. And then 40 years on, Morrison wants to take back control and produce, like Glenn Gould, the definitive. His vision! *Live at the Hollywood Bowl* and the re-mix is on, the delicacy, even to the hint of phrasing that echoes the original album.²⁶

"Yeah, well, you see I don't know anybody who does what I do, because I do it all. Like, some of the people you mentioned there, they don't do it all. I do it all. You name it, I do it: jazz, blues, whatever. I can do everything. Because that's the background that I came out of." It's worth continuing Van Morrison's rant and make it fit this essay: "So I don't really fit into this mythology. I don't fit into the rock mythology, or the Zimmerman mythology or any of that shit. I don't fit into any of that. I'm not creating any image. I'm anti-mythology. I'm not really in the music business as such. I never bargained on

fame, you know? Never bargained on that. It's just something I've had to deal with that came along with doing the music.”²⁷

Morrison's re-mix is a formed revival, careful, precise, a transformation inextricably linked to the original landscape of song and sound, attempting possibly to raise it to higher level. The production and instrumentation, the purposeful detail succeeds to engage the full sound, but the discontinuities read backwards. We read spontaneity in the original and orchestration in this. We read the omissions in the new arrangements, even those smudged definitions caught perfectly in the original version of the songs, slightly pulled into new conflicts in this one. *Madame George* extends the tongue and scat unusually and the re-mix soars. In fact the re-mix is not a re-mix at all, it's an echo, the fragment of the known past, a disturbance in a well-orchestrated production. The cinema read into it differs. Jazz not rock but it was never rock. Stretched architecture, the instability of the first album's

performance – its instrumentation - has been stabilized in some way in the re-mix. Less trance-like, this re-addresses a musical vision, more hands-on approach supposedly more spontaneous not be-labored.

Like Tadeusz Kantor choreographing and conducting his actors in *The Dead Class*, Morrison turns his back to direct the show. It is space and landscape he works between music, practice and place. Eventually it is all about control (Morrison didn't own the master of the original recording) and his desire for a careful, purposeful architecture. But Hollywood Bowl: historical project, historic venue? We sometimes recall originals if but to erase them. Produced as the orthodox treatment, the anomalies can no longer really appear as Morrison tries to trip the tongue on the word 'tongue' just as he extended the geography and architecture of the word 'glove' in *to love to love to love the glove, the glove the glove*.

What kind of heroism exists for the young student of architecture today? Three options, there may be more: to sit out the apparent moratorium and dumb slide to abused (terminal) 24/7 Capital, sleep and hope it will all eventually go away. Thus students might wait to arrive at a safer condition of architecture they thought they entered some 5 or so years ago when they began. Secondly, to occupy this liminal zone, this 'tweening' (not glamping) world and rebound, not with the optimism of the past, or of the received ideas which prescribe progress but to be the first to expand into a serious and manageable instability. Or thirdly, to absorb the architectural fathers of fraudulence and the constructed lie and take on an expanded architecture without prescribed futures from the perspective of a dubious 20th century, informing them how dubious and uniform this new century will become. And when faced with such options, give or take the shifting emphasis of technology, performance systems, sustainability and globalization, where does the world come down in all its

oscillations? Local or global - between the liberal free world (free trade) and the stealthy protectionism now creeping into our thinking or another fashionable nonsense architects cannot talk themselves out of, by spreading their tolerance and opportunism to liberal and brokered architectures.

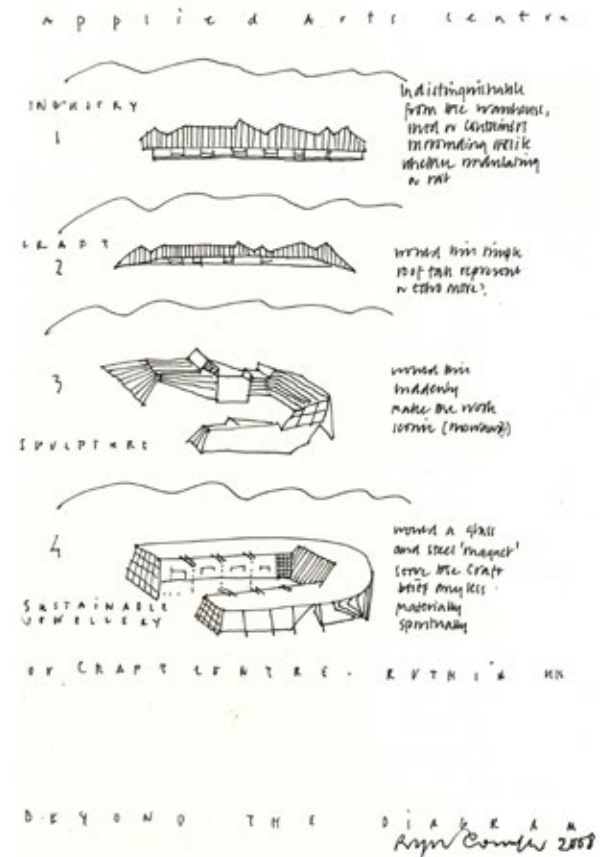
Is this a likely remixed future that ultimately take us back to (and even beyond) André Breton's automatic message: we should not be afraid to admit that the history of automatic writing in architecture has been one of continuous misfortune. Or is this like *Astral Weeks* re-mix, a sign of our times, an escape backwards; the rhythm is all there, even the nuance, the gentle balance between voice and instrument, between place and poetry but - overcome or eliminated - the re-vindication of a work that surely needed no real re-vindication. "So, the fame" Morrison continues "that was the price, and all this stuff, it's all got a price. Like in that song, 'Why Must I Always Explain: Have to pay the piper/Time and Time again.' It's like

I've got these scars, and why do I have to keep showing people the scars all the time? You know what I mean? It's in the songs, somewhere there. And I still have to turn myself inside out to do this. It's still got a price; it's not free. Everything's got a price. Doing these gigs – that's got a price. I have to act. I have to perform.”

It's the healing game, you see, not a long way from the games architects play too. The *unnamable*? Paying tribute to an architecture that's drying out or re-inventing its own healing game?

coda

Linguine and Black Pudding



‘What are we waiting for, gathered in the market-place?’ the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy wrote, ‘The barbarians are due here today.’ Buildings like this, the New Ruthin Crafts Centre, invariably get embroiled rather quickly and distastefully in a battle, an *us-versus-themism*. Debate passes over to rant or romance and the building becomes an arena for the practice of taste, cliché and hubris. Usually one side is considered cultivated, civilised, elitist guardians of the environment. And sophisticated! The other side, often the detractors – in this case predominantly locals - unfairly become the philistines, the Barbarians: linguine (anglicised linguini) or black pudding!

However, today the picture is unclear. In a period of confused, often short-sighted and ambiguous management at local and central political levels (planning, funding and development) we are not so sure which side is which, or as Cavafy continues, what laws the senators can make now? To seek money, to spend money, to apply art and see it alienate the public might

not be such the civilised, inclusive and sustainable act as we think. We are accountable to whom, who is the citizenry, who has the legislative and remedial votes and where does the responsibility lie for decisions taken?

Any admirable qualities in the building and development (whether communicated by the clients, architects, arts council, funding bodies, local council leaders or bureaucrats) are marginalised by instant prejudice; these are the likes and dislikes that we all carry with us whether we go shopping at Tesco or see Gustav Klimt in Tate Liverpool, whether we question *superlambanana* on the nearby Moel Famau mountain or see the painted cows repeated in some welcome frivolity in Dallas or Ottawa. Not all our prejudices of course are irrelevant or wildly inaccurate; a prejudice is also a mental map, an image that ties us to locations and ties experience to our lives. A prejudice, strongly or weakly held, does not mean it is wrong.

Despite the inflations of this Craft Centre toward architectural excellence, material sensitivity, an avowed, mostly untenable resonance to the surrounding Clwydian Range ('range' sounds much better than hills) and its 'local' siting, there are two obvious consequences from this battle, which will be around for some time. It is a confused debate that will colour the success or failure of this project however much the building grows, ages and matures in its post-occupancy.

Firstly, the re-branding and gradual upgrading of the concept of Craft Centre to a Centre of the Applied Arts implies a wider agenda, politically and culturally linking it to the circles and 'prejudices' of the Welsh Arts Council, the Welsh development Agency, and the current leadership of the Craft Centre. Most decisions at this level are likely to occur without any resonance to the town of Ruthin. Secondly, the apparent 'turning away', the alienation of this project toward the town, is aggravated by its architectural siting. This is not merely a parochial sneer. The

sheer 'industrial' wall of zinc - however well crafted, slightly bowed and skilled, however enticing as a closed face and brilliantly lit at night - symbolically turns its back on the town. There are perhaps valid planning reasons for this choice, but there are equally valid reasons for the instant reactions and the feeling of alienation.

It works like this; the leadership – senators, mayors, architects, bureaucrats, directors - talk down to those who do not quite accept the talked-up building. The Barbarians rightly suspect the symbolic claims for what the building should resonate or echo but tend to be more visceral and direct. By so doing they consider the building for what – to them – it looks like. For the most part, it might just echo the hills around, but more likely it appears to resemble a side loading bay for a supermarket or an industrial concern; many of which are just down the road reminding the Barbarians of the low wages which support the high wages, but can never buy the applied art in the gallery of

the centre. Sometimes it is the paradoxes that go too far, not the architecture.

Secondly, if Ruthin Craft Centre turns out to be an arena of excellence²⁸ or the white elephant that some locals suspect, it is unfair to condemn it so prematurely without understanding the decisions made and by whom, the reasons why this and not that architect was chosen, the way the brief was formulated, why a transformation of an existing 'rustic' building past its sell-by date is deemed suitable for a re-build almost on the same footprint (as if this ensures continuity) and so on. It is with this in mind that the following questions might help before there is the usual chasm between the alleged elitist cultured bodies and the 'misreading' barbarians; a chasm that does nothing for intelligent exchange, and nothing for the town. Or architecture.

For example: 1 Why did the 'brief' decide to stay within the existing building shape, plan and orientation? (see sketch: industry-craft-sculpture-jewellery) 2 Does the closed façade facing the town entice people in or alienate? It may not effect those arriving by car, but do the 'open' courtyard, craft details, furniture and architectonic qualities compensate for the mute façade? What relationship should the building try to have or help create with the town? 3 Where are the sustainability issues within the project? (the use of locally sourced materials, rain water, sun, planting: the building as an ecological system). Was slate out of the question – a cliché or was zinc a favoured choice? 4 How inclusive is the project: for the elderly, the invalid, migrants, skateboarders, children etc. How important is the disability agenda important? 5 Consider the building as a promenade; what encourages its use? What opportunities are there to meander, linger, stroll, pass through the building - is the target merchandise and/or café? 6 How does the courtyard work: as a park, a walkway,

a Saturday market, a boules park (not as ridiculous as it may sound if compacted shale is used)? 7 What is the relationship between the 'internationalism' in the craft/applied arts agenda and the existing local craftspeople? (Who decides on 'craft overkill'?) 8 What might be the consequences of making the café exclusive; a Panini and espresso bias for travelling bistro fanciers or a picnic flask in the car park? 9 The building as an information-interactive system: wireless opportunities, touch screen learning environment; hands-on workshop courses? (What is the effect of the Zinc roof on wireless networks?) 10 Where would an enterprising kid or skilled artisan from Ruthin or the surrounding areas in North Wales hold his or her exhibition on skateboards, self-built micro-lights, radical costume jewellery, crafted memorial stones, hip-hop do-it-yourself fashion or 'wrecked' journals?

Today, how we use our ignorance is becoming more important than the knowledge we don't have. Let us all give more

considered thought to this project (in a holistic sense) before condemning it for what it might be - a centre for excellence and missed opportunities, or an internalised but elite centre for the applied arts. And let us take a step back before any of us can truly say without arrogance, we are not 'the' Barbarians.

Remember the graffiti in Paris all those years back: 'those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking.' It should not be linguine or black pudding but both. And it is!

Maladies of the Architectural Soul

Or

Why can't Architecture Just Be Happy?

But I can't put up with your dilly-dallying and the

dramatization of your care-worn grief-stricken

complaints that something is lacking from your

happiness. **Boethius** Consolation of Philosophy ³⁰

Let's face it, most architects are not only internally bound to their own soundtracks, but are self-deceivers, self-justifiers and self-correctors. Concerned with their own journeys, the notion that architecture could be happy doesn't really concern

When we have two explanations of something, caution advises us to keep the simpler one for ourselves; for the least clear explanation is, at times, more persuasive to an uninitiated mind, i.e., a mind still naively fond of so called profound thoughts.

O. Milosz ²⁹

them. Why should it, when self-definition all but controls the profession, the discipline and education? For many architects, to collaborate is often an alibi for the acceptable nightmare route to invention. It can become the acceptable thrill at participation without the hijack of the original ideas or any resulting consensus. Unable to exempt themselves from habit, familiarized to believe in the expected, albeit an avant-garde one, adaptation and uncertainty generally freeze architects. Transience pains most architects, whilst the death instinct makes most architecture about as happy as it can get. And if not happy, then ecstatic that it survives the minds that wish to hold onto them and promotes that grand deception that it communicates the agreed narrative. Why ask the question? Architecture can only be happy when it acknowledges how internal it has become and the ecstasy of no further communication it has created amongst its club of royal self-definers.

We could continue like this, a little cruel elegance and more or less inventive sentences, slipping into Darwin and Freud, the earthworms and the death instinct which Adam Phillips discusses in his two essays in *Darwin's Worms* (Faber 2000). And we might acknowledge all this self-definition and self-justification could serve to fool us into thinking architecture could be happy. We might even go as far as asking that question in the attractive negative: *can't architecture just be happy?* Thinking architects could be happy is certainly a stretch given the codes, ideologies, egos and hubris in the various agendas promoted, and the privileges that an architectural education usually support. But it is the word 'just' isn't it that bugs us?

Can't architects *just* be happy? There's a sense of panic about it, there's a sense of frustration, there's a sense of feeling that - if only the folds, fabrications, illuminated surfaces and facadism, the blobs and boxes would *just* (there's that word again) settle

themselves and not chase their own tale, architecture might (*just*) conceivably be happy. But that's out of the question usually. Delusional optimism can only go so far! The closet existentialist in many architects, the legacy of the beatnik, Gitanes and black polo neck sweaters, will make sure of the agony and pain even when the young students shout out: "no existentialism here, none of that nihilist stuff here. You see, it's there, there and there," the students continue. It might be difficult to make out the precision in this little rant and certainly we could make more of it than necessary but it seems within this opening statement about happiness there is another hint of panic.

In architecture, the schools of thought and education paths depend very much on which thought and which school. And any movement(s) of ideas depends of course on which movement and whether architecture does actually move at all. Anyone for (the) Modern Movement?

*

So if we are to pursue this theme and architecture could be considered happy, then surely we need to ask in a kind of reverse engineering manner, whether architects are worthy of happiness? And if so, is this happiness a condition implied through philosophy or then, if not quite happiness, is there a consolation from that activity that allows architects to oscillate between random metaphors for the unrealizable and the pragmatics of the impossible? In other words: *here, here* and *here*, not there, there and there? No, architects certainly have no prior call to feeling happy. As saints or sinners they can move discourses around like playing shuffleboard on the Titanic. And by moving discourse around, or even ignoring it, so cleverly and at times blindly, can end up posing such an implied but hidden question to themselves: *Can't architecture just be happy?*

Perhaps to be happy in the sense of a fulfilment, architecture must work and take on the consequences of such work. “I cannot face with comfort the idea of life without work” Freud wrote in a letter around 1900 to Oscar Pfister, “work and the free play of the imagination are for me the same things, I take no pleasure in anything else.” Architects, at least in the 20th century, took this to heart. But if we think this as a recipe for internal, long-lasting happiness we should also consider Freud’s next sentence: “(T)hat would be a recipe for happiness but for the appalling thought that productivity is entirely dependent on a sensitive disposition.” And what happens if we continue by leaving out Freud’s line after that? Can we freely invent the happiness we so desire and confirm its loss to architecture? But this would be editing of the sovereign kind, confirming what we wish to write. Like confirming what we imagine built and then seeing architecture imagined through the built. What we wish to imagine built might be very different.

“What would one do,” Freud asks crucially, “when ideas failed or words refused to come?”³¹ The shudder at the thought is one not shared with Freud; architects and architecture might *just* be relieved if ideas failed more and words refused to come.

As we said, it’s the ‘just’ that concerns us here. Would architecture be better off without the consolation of philosophy or without the hand reaching for the passing word ‘just’, whilst holding on with the other hand to the driftwood that sweetly allows the survivor to survive? *Can’t Architecture Just Be Happy?* What sort of question does this pose? Are we not doing what architects often do and enter the realm of consolation by framing our discourse in such a way? This soft-shoe shuffle turns us back to Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* when he speaks of a tacit dimension: is it not this tacit discipline that has made architecture into its own hermit crab, and allowed generations of supremely creative architects to enter the prison house of language with their own well-

deserved freedom and self-confirming dogmas? Or, might we reasonably call this attempt to get under the skin of architects, a sophisticated flippancy?

If so, how are we to continue this dialogue with Boethius if not possibly go to Francis Petrarch or Giovanni Leopardi? Or even better: to one of the best electric folk rock albums of the early 1970s entitled *Fully Qualified Survivor*, where Michael Chapman sang about the aviator. It is aviation of a very personal sort that will redeem habit, and also redeem us from unasked questions and tireless self-definition: "Desperation sits just like a friend upon the floor, my pictures are all torn around my feet, mister madness points his icy fingers from his chair, and an angry crowd is gathering in the street...to take my time away...to take my time away."³² No one is so completely happy, Boethius writes, that something somewhere does not clash with their condition.

*

What are the questions we can pose to philosophy, and how would we challenge the contribution of philosophy to architecture in the past, present or what is to come in the future? "When we have two explanations of something," Oscar Milosz writes, "caution advises us to keep the simpler one for ourselves; for the least clear explanation is, at times, more persuasive to an uninitiated mind, i.e., a mind still naively fond of so called profound thoughts."³³ There is some consensus, cleverly concealed within architectural circles, that the cognitive deceptions practiced by architects on architecture, using philosophy and language, are a big part of a concealing act which may well keep an emerging, singular and heroic architecture well embedded in the last century. Implied in this is the legacy of hijacking philosophy (French, East Coast, Yale or Zen) which is likely to mean missing the opportunities of

this century by re-capitulating to the last, or then repeating our favoured references.

When the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz announced that the 'language of literature in the twentieth century has been steeped in unbelief' we need not take a giant leap to see this as architecture's fate in the way philosophy has clamped onto the souls of worried and less-worried souls. Making use of that language, Milosz continues in his collection *Unattainable Earth* (1986): 'I was able to show only a small bit of my believing temperament.' The result, to go by the looseness of language around, indicates that the believing temperament within architecture this century (not the last) has now shrunk drastically. Is it worth repeating? Architecture holds little critical reason anymore for any of us to believe in, when the power relations and organizational directives have been exposed so mercilessly by market forces and other self-interested and genteel misdemeanours that still pass for

contribution and collaboration. As we noted, advocacy is so often confused with analysis. *Let's get critical* (critical) is a dance-floor hit rather than a serious call to debate. And all this has resulted in that *dead good* architecture which coincides with the literature that Milosz speaks about in the last century: 'for we had crossed a certain borderline separating us from another literature, somewhat old-fashioned, deserving respect but artistically inferior.' ³⁴

*

Let's temper this as if we too can play the air guitar. In architectural terms philosophy is literature, it is fiction, it is foreplay and it is making over. To recognize this, one needs only to note how many buildings and how much architecture is talked up in order to occupy untenable positions in the market, culture and society. This is achieved by using codes that remain – for the most part – beyond the public and

safely within the control of the architectural profession, its educational structure and the critical shenanigans of various interpreting and practicing cabals. Though the last 30 years may have opened up architectural appreciation towards wider and wider philosophical source, to eco-philosophies and sustainable theories, to agency, activism, spatial practice and anarchism, this may paradoxically have hindered the critical process itself.

For this reason, as we have seen previously, it is very possible we need a form of new writing about architecture. Double talk (triple talk?) is everywhere in architecture and of course 'happiness' is a double-edged Boethius-dialogue, certainly not only a privilege of the architectural profession. This might though allow us to suggest philosophy introduces us to an analysis that could go some way to address if not overhaul the power relations and organization structures that stretch now well beyond the architect and its profession. Is this

architectural criticism as self-portrait?

Our tolerance towards what we should know is often matched by our anxiety to have and to know, and constantly find ways to re-confirm this. Architects working under conditions of uncertainty today may meet this provisional condition with interpretations that wish for stronger, more solid times. Many of us have spent a lot of time - possibly most of our lives - thinking architecture has not been hoodwinked by its own experts, critical ring- leaders, practitioners, educators and peer-review scholars. Many of us wish to distance ourselves from those who write the texts that support the moves that end up validating and solidifying work or ideas already embedded in the work. Is it time to stop?

Will it matter to the education of architecture if we can elegantly crush the obscure, invade the language, and turn over to the anti-library? Perhaps it really is time to see things

differently, through another lens (if we can even trust our metaphors any longer). Whether this means, to some of us more than others, writing out a life, or architecture writing out its own life, it still seems worth taking on. The cat is, so to speak, out of the critical and consolatory bag! The world of the profession, the world of education, its societies, its small potato world of ego wars and therapeutic cabals are all open to chance. And today, - our biggest progress - is that randomness once more can invade these conditions.

*

All too far; all too clinical? Writing the edge of architecture by its own admission, taking the language to an extreme to bring out the extreme of its claims? Sometime it seems unnecessary to put off saying what has been said between the lines for so long. The re-emergence of new resistances serves to challenge the careerists, prevent them locking the anti-library. New

resistances also deliver the troubadour fresh evidence for critical narratives, interpretations and fables. Architecture has fooled itself for some time and enjoyed doing it but the time is up. It has taken the drinks before the dinner, taken the duck or lamb during the feast (the linguine or black pudding) and then opted for a postprandial colloquium in all niceties. Meanwhile the world is consoled in its new empire of signs. Perhaps this is what makes it so rich and, yes, offers us happiness: that architecture continues to get away with random processes, defying those experts who appear expert in areas agreed upon by the experts. And thereby defying ambitious intellectuals who post-theorize the appalling agony of lonely political and critical journeys!

Meanwhile the narratives are still rushed out into the (auto)-biographed volumes that invite us to accept the obvious; the more global we are the more local and pinched-nose dramatic do we now desire to become. Words that have nothing to

do with architecture and the built projects remain so often detached but then inspire punters to spin the world from insecure and untested conditions. If we don't take the field, architectural criticism may well end up as self-portraiture of the last century, fraught with anxiety? "It is the nature of human affairs to be fraught with anxiety," Boethius writes in the unsourced version we began with, "they never prosper perfectly and they never remain constant."

*

Can architectural theory and a renewed intellectual project make architects happier? The existential solution is to pit Joseph Beuys for example against OMA – for who amongst us in our cleverness and critical thinking pretends to abandon the dilly-dallying and the dramatization of our care-worn grief-stricken complaints? Of course there is always something lacking from our happiness but the issue is how we continue

to sneak up on these issues and whether philosophy and architecture serve only to rub the snail's traces in the carpet on the following day after a cold night in a 600-year old timber-framed Hall Building.

Sure, anxiety scripts architecture as much as the goal of happiness may ruin it. Our anecdotes can be turned into aphorisms and the selected audience will applaud. But the issue is even more crucial and flippant at the same time: what to do when the consolations of philosophy that emerged out of the critical fidgeting and fudging of French theory and Late Marxism actually began to build themselves out of trial and error, into the void? Where, if consolation is so desired by architects today, would they turn to re-establish their positions and exhausted codes? Do we turn to renewed seduction, the world of language (the word-worlds of young first year students or the word-worlds of Virilio and Badiou, or Harman and Meillassoux, the latest members of the Consolation

Club), or the renewed satire of skepticism, speculation and replication? The answer is not in architecture or momentarily in the jokes of Slavoj Žižek; if our enquiry is reduced to consolation, it is in the deformation of language used about architecture.

Could this not be where we start, erroneously: happily redundant and anxiously important at the same time? As the Manic Street Preachers, that joyfully anxious Welsh rock group put it: *we are all sometimes happy being sad*...If only architects would accept that!

*

To conclude imperfectly our sortie into the maladies of the architectural soul, it seemed important to identify the Boethius words we had been invited to use in the opening from *Consolation of Philosophy* in their new translation, as

if identifying this same extract would reinforce this journey. Or then a new translation might throw up new issues maybe re-opening our whole enquiry and re-address the argument based on Boethius' words so lightly structured into English. I only had page 62 to go on. I knew not the edition or volume. It seemed a useful exercise. Double talk is everywhere, not least in architecture. As if to emphasize this odd journey, it was a stretch to identify the words that opened this essay with the same words but in another translation, in this new volume of Boethius. What do we learn by this double talk?

I began to time myself – at first it seemed impossible to find this section in its new translation by P G Walsh.³⁵ Could some of the words used at the opening be found – how would we identify a similar phrase? *But I can't put up with your dilly-dallying and the dramatization of your care-worn grief-stricken complaints that something is lacking from your happiness.* After some time, (it took longer than I imagined – why?) it was

located. The difference in the new was shocking, rewarding, uncertain: *but I find your self indulgence hard to bear when you complain so mournfully and neurotically that something is lacking to your happiness....*

P.G.Walsh's translation goes on: *Does any individual enjoy such total blessedness that he does not find fault in some respect with the nature of his condition. Human welfare is a cause for worry, for it never wholly prospers, and it never remains constant.* So when we have two explanations of something, what is it that advises us to keep the simpler one for ourselves? Has the least clear explanation become more persuasive to the initiated mind?

We bear selected witness not history. We are the apocalyptic transformers, the guardian angels of critical tradition and the wardens in the prison house of language. We, the architects, educators, researchers, historians, critics are consoling and

consoled. We are the rhetoricians for war and revolution and must choose the comforting words of doubt over doubt itself. Our liaisons are dangerous if praxis thrashes teoria. Yet we are doomed too, if the unthoughtful invites unsophisticated speculation which passes for philosophy's continuing consolation of architecture.

Would philosophy be better off then without the consolation of architecture? That is far too delicate a question, but what is to come for architecture in the future if we attend to our new writing and critical resistance outside all discourses attempting to console.

“And meanwhile in the woods what are they doing to the trees, why must they make a spark ad them burn... it takes such a long long time for trees like that to grow, some people juts never ever learn...(and yet they take my time away).. There will be nothing left if this madness runs its course, except

the gleaming buildings to the sky..."³⁶ So architectural theory makes architects happier - certainly at times. But it also makes them solitary. Maybe it comes down to the graffiti scrawled on the walls in Paris in 1968 - *those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking*³⁷ and the words of the murderer-critic!

*

Once when walking through an exhibition on Scandinavian works called *Border Art* in London in the late 1980s, I found myself fighting the presence of Strindberg and his contemporary Carl Frederick Hill. Drawn to both as artists I wondered what it was I needed to understand Hill's apocalypse and Figurativism. How had I sustained such a learned ignorance up to this stage in my life, hijacked by the critical comforts of asides and useless witticism? The notion of border must surely contain flight. Line of flight even! But then when 'flight' reveals itself in the title of a painting it appears too easy.

Like Kjarval's *Yearning for Flight*. This was a painted bleakness encouraged by this nether region of the world.

To counter this I was pulled towards one of Strindberg's paintings, *The Shore*. I stared at it for some time. How, I found myself thinking, would these paintings be used in Scandinavia, in schools, in cultural institutions? For if *border* means anything today in this context of *painting out* a life, it must mean what it did then, life beyond the shore. It must also mean the unknown, eternity. It must mean death.

I can always do this. Ignorance is so powerful it ignores its own seduction. I begin to fight for my own theme in an exhibition. Why should I rely on a catalogue? I imagined this flight from Iceland might have taken so long, or then perhaps the artist achieved flight through the act of painting this canvas for 20 years. I was the murderer critic writing a thesis on Hegel from Magritte's holiday letting the music of chance take over yet again.

We map the culture onto the painting as if we can score
the bark from trees we never touch. Nature! We scan the
canvasses for thematic anxiety, for deconstructed anxiety, for
grunge anxiety or semiotic anxiety, from a solitude we cannot
communicate. We over-interpret the anxiety of five countries
we know so little of and blame a pagan attitude and a God for
never turning up. The therapy that enters us turns the street
into a forest we never had, and we career as in a reckless drive
into the clearing of a forest we no longer plant. Then we crash
at the traffic lights of culture.

I watched one of the regular critics circulate the gallery. In
and out, round in a matter of minutes. A note here and a
note there, it was like turning the pages of a book, this book,
finished and remaindered. I thought I heard the critic's
comment; "not essential viewing! Not essential reading! "

Text For Nothing II

It has long been felt that serious architectural criticism no longer exists. You can sense this when bemused faces search magazines and journals for signs of authenticity. Of course there is much scholarship that tops and tails academic issues which is often accepted the more obscurity is refined. Search the Journal of Architectural Education and the titles are engaging, the essays often brilliant but the index is exhausting. But something is disappearing in the dialogue architects and educators seem to continue to have with themselves. Dark

writes in *Humanity*, “Life is indeed tragic, but we need to learn to let the specific occasions of our distress recede securely, one after the other, into temporal distance. Or as Homer Simpson more succinctly puts it, ‘everything looks bad if you remember it.’”³⁹

Why invoke the unserious within the serious: Homer Simpson and architecture? It used to be said some years back that it wasn’t quite the time to panic but Gombrowicz would have understood this; it is time to panic, openly so, and to do this we are helped by understanding the maladies of the architectural soul.

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1. Wall graffiti, Paris, Mai 1968; see K. Knabb, *Situationist Anthology*, Bureau of Public Secrets, US, (2007)
 2. Steven Groak, *The Idea of Building – Thoughts and action in the design and production of buildings*, Spon, 1992
 3. Kenneth Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an Architecture of Resistance*, The Anti-Aesthetic, Bay Press, Ed H. Foster, 1982 – Frampton significantly qualifies this last sentence in his footnotes: ‘*The constructed fabric of this building (Portland City Annex-Michael graves 1982) bears no relation whatsoever to the ‘representative’ scenography that is applied to the building both inside and out.*’
 4. See Norman Weinstein on Ada Louis Huxtable and the future of architectural criticism: *Op-Ed: Life After Ada: Reassessing the Utility of Architectural Criticism* <http://www.archnewsnow.com/features/Feature278.htm>
 5. Call for papers - Journal of Architectural Education 63:1
 6. Andrej Codrescu, *The Disappearance of Outside*, a manifesto of escape, Addison-Wesley (1990), p.165
 7. Sergison & Bates, Architects, London, UK.
 8. In fact Some five years on and scaffolding has returned to the major facade (July-August 2014)
 9. See the film *Dogtown and Z Boys*, Stacey Peralta (2001). Some lines from the call JAE 63:1 (October 2009) : “A parallel interest in the industrial vernacular as a product of “anonymous” and rational engineering was advanced by socially-minded architects, urbanists, and historians such as Walter Gropius, Ernst May, Le Corbusier, and Sigfried Giedeon. These and others variously advocated a manner of building largely based on efficiency and optimal performance, informed by a vernacular and in opposition to bourgeoisie aesthetics. During the 1960s and 70s American architects such as Robert Venturi - Denise Scott Brown and Charles W. Moore exploited the exuberant commercial vernacular of American highways as a foil to a received modernism mired in sterile uniformity. Viewed in terms of the oppositional role they have historically played in cultural-political contestation, what role is there for vernaculars in contemporary practice? Do methods and processes drawn from

“outsider” (i.e. non- professional) sources affect contemporary design and discourse, or have they been supplanted by formulaic attitudes of architectural practice and production? Do vital contemporary vernaculars continue to inform and challenge contemporary architectural ideas, practice, and education?

10. op.cit Groak.
11. See *The Nightmare of Participation*, Markus Miessen, Sternberg Press (2011).
12. ibid., Milosz, Unattainable Earth.
13. see the discussion of this ‘but’ and the disclaimer in Craig Seligman, *Sontag & Kael - Opposites Attract Me*, Counterpoint 2004.
14. For the adventure of reading, misreading and over-reading on an architectural project, a memorial for Ground Zero, New York, see Amy Waldman’s fiction, *The Submission* (2011).
15. Marshal McLuhan with Wilfred Watson, *From Cliché to Archetype*, Viking, New York (1970) p. 21
16. McLuhan & Watson, p. 149
17. This is a paraphrase of the architects’ agenda and intention in Ruthin whereby an existing building is destroyed but traces of it are re-claimed (not re-cycled) as hints for the transformative process and architecture of the new building; it is as much a play on useful and useless memory as it is on an exhausted built form replaced by carefully registered volumetrics, controlled interior lining and details and genuinely fading concrete like old corduroy trousers. It is likely funding and investment controlled the way the building emerged as much as the careful deliberate architecture explored by the architects. An extension of this would explore the potential transformative embedded in investment first, insight second.
18. Most of these phrases are taken from the presentation by the architects and can be accessed via Tate Online Real Architecture series. 22 April 2008, Tate Modern, London
19. Tate online: “London-based Sergison Bates Architects presents the newly redesigned Centre for applied arts, Ruthin, Wales. The Centre’s workshops and restaurant open directly onto a courtyard with external seating areas and covered porticos, forming the internal focus of the

building. Also housing a tourist information centre and art galleries, the Centre acts as a dynamic and adaptable collection of spaces.” http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/real_architecture2008/sergison_bates/default.jsp

20. *Material Culture, Ruthin Craft Centre*, Grant Gibson, Craft, August 2008. The careful language, the deliberate architecture and the architects’ intentions are mostly re-scripted in this journalistic text that mixes advocacy with analysis. It announces a clever building, which it may be, but it is also a ‘clever’ text in the double-English sense of the word. It shows little wider understanding of the context of the building on site, in Ruthin, but appears to wish to support and advocate ultimately for the ‘extremely bright practice’. Probably written as it says as a sneak preview, this will become the familiar sound-byte source text re-cited by those bodies involved, though it is not really clear whether the writer actually went to the building or only visited the architects’ office in London. The architects and the architecture however deserve more. The text ends with a seductive but fake dualism: “The new Ruthin isn’t a glass box, it’s something much, much smarter.”
21. That said, the writer Grant Gibson does go into some detail of how the centre sustains its modest and careful architecture and within this opposition to the wider agenda, in spite of regurgitating the architects’ lines, some serious points are made.
22. For a further discussion of this weakness with a different conceptual weight see Ignasi Sola de Morales ‘Differences’: *Weak Architecture*. MIT Press. 1995
23. op cit. Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism*
24. see Peter Eisenman, *10 Canonical Buildings 1950-2000*, Rizzoli -Princeton, 2008.
25. The Ruthin Craft Centre website has links to the various bodies, press texts and information available on the centre. <http://www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk/>
26. *Astral Weeks* (1968) & *Astral Weeks Live at the Hollywood Bowl* (2008) - listen to Madame George and compare it to the 2008 version of Madame George. Then consult Glenn Gould’s two versions of *Bach’s Goldberg Variations* which he recorded twice; first in 1955 which made him, an

- international star and the second, 1981, which was the last recording he ever made. *Glenn Gould; State of Wonder*, Sony Classics. 2002.
 27. for an interview with Van Morrison and why he revisited the album see: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandjazzmusic/4806597/Van-Morrison-on-Astral-Weeks-why-I-had-to-go-back-to-my-soul-classic.html>
 28. see *Centre of Excellence*, Telegraph Magazine 9.8.08 or *Material Culture*, Craft, August 08
 29. O.Milosz, cited in Czeslaw Miloz, *Unattainable Earth*, Ecco Press, 1986, p. 136 Inscript
 30. This is a revised version of a text prepared and published in *Architecture & Ideas*, Toronto, Ed. K.Crossman. (2010) – the call began, as far as I remember, with an unsourced extract from Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy and the proposed title of invited texts: Why can't Architecture just be happy?*
 31. Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worms*, Perseus Books, London (2000) pp.103-105.
 32. Michael Chapman, Fully Qualified Survivor, 1970, recorded August 1969; first track side one - Aviator:
 33. Op cit. O Milosz.
 34. Op cit. *Unattainable Earth*.
 35. For this purpose we are using Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Oxford World Classics, translated by P.G.Walsh (2008). The original text was likely to be found in the Victor Watts, Penguin Classics translation, revised edition from 2003; there is also an edition from 2001 translated by Joel C Relihan,, Hackett, US; there are now two others that could continue this 'gaming' with the translation – Ignatius Press 2012 translated by Scott Goins and Barbara H Wyman & the edition by CreateSpace published in 2014 translated by M.A & H.R. James
 36. Op.cit. Chapman, Aviator.
 37. Wall graffiti, op.cit. K.Knabb *Situationist Anthology*,
 38. *Witold Gombrowicz, Diary*, vol, 3 Northwestern University Press, (1993) p.91
 39. Stuart Walton, *Humanity Atlantic*, London (2004), p.143, 7 p.160
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The Phoney Island of the Mind

Texts for Nothing

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