

# The Information Isn't Frozen, You Are!

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roger connah

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For Mark Tracy  
Bookseller and Booklover Extraordinary  
AllBooks, Ottawa

# The Information Isn't Frozen, You Are!

Architecture? Too wide, too rich, too thin, too  
shallow, too important, to be left in the hands of  
professors and architects.

- Sev Panic *The Curse of the Cerebral*

Our subject is the present waste of human resources.

Yet this waste is nothing new.

- Paul Goodman *Growing up Absurd*

The Phoney Island of the Mind  
(texts for nothing)

Volume 1:

# The Information Isn't Frozen, You Are!

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Time and information, rock and roll,  
life itself, the information isn't frozen, you are.

- Michael Herr *Dispatches* (1977)

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Intelligence, in any absolute sense, is not a major factor in the production of distinguished architecture. Arrogance coupled with a sense of competition and a pleasure in the fashionable and exotic, are much more important.

- A. Balfour <sup>i</sup>

# A Phoney Island of the Mind

It was when I came across the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of Laurence Ferlinghetti's book of poems from 1958 called *The Coney Island of the Mind* that the title of this collection offered itself. In a deliciously chaotic bookstore called 'All Books' on Rideau Street in Ottawa, I joked with the owner about possible titles for books. As I said, it felt about the right time and he and I played instantly with new titles. From Coney to Phoney! This phrase immediately tripped off into other areas, reminding me that writing in architecture and about architecture could be constantly held back by the very errors and insights that are consistently part of architecture's flawed but brilliant excitement. Coney Island also suddenly took me to a Van Morrison song, and then on to a sequence in Woody Allen's film: *Annie Hall*. There, under the funfair and the

house-shaking roller coaster, little Woody slaps his hand to his forehead after his uncle Joey had shown him his trick with a nickel... such a jerk! the kid says. Or to that effect.

The rest came quickly: J D Salinger and *The Catcher in the Rye*. The use of the word *phoney* just about laces the pages together in a world left so challengingly and untidily creative for us, even today some 50 years after it was written. And finally this took me and the architectural world I write about to Jack Kerouac, the 'it' of it all: the jazz, scat and bang bang boom-a-ling of all talk and writing on architecture. Finally once again it comes to rest and someone shouts: enough, enough of these phoney islands of the mind!

Generally over the years, writing in between the lines of pedagogical fraudulence, critical pretence and desired and undesired fame, architecture has always been about a passion. In all its irregularity it has offered a passionate life of knowledge, and a life of imagination, ignorance and delusion. Though there are still those amongst us who deny this and navigate architecture with a beatific attitude believing intuitions and instincts can remain sovereign, even unchallenged, there is that malign sadness that can no longer be excused. Architecture can no longer be written out by re-tooling the words of scientists,

anthropologists, physicists or semioticians who deliver floating signifiers for the next generation to re-invent. Profound self-questioning has never been more urgent. The question is more real, but more virtual at every minute.

What do we do when digital orphans wish to study the more recent dead as if, in spite of being warned off them, the sense of burning flesh and insights are still so strong? Who are we - educators, professors, architects, practitioners, monks and poets - to deny the errors of our own past as reasons to prevent the new past experimenting once more? As privileged witnesses we can become agents, but how? The return to safer, weightier times has long invited us to question the phoney island of our minds as architecture once more progresses. It can do this by considering its new responsibility, yet at the same time we often wishes to relive and relieve ourselves of this seduction. Architecture redundant is then paid off, given a gold watch or the signed cheque in the post. Perhaps architecture will finally succeed to reach the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Is this madness, suspecting such a liberating role for architecture if it continues to prove itself redundant to the public, yet self-serving to the political, cultural, institutional and social forces that control and shape our

environment? This was the promise that used to attract us to the errors of the major thinkers through the thinking of the commentators, especially in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. But no longer! Architecture has stuttered along like this for the last forty years, if not more. We need speak only of those wonderful critical fictions made out of linguistic-philosophic applications of 'theory': French, East Coast American or London Zen and Now. Are we to ask whether vulnerability has finally assumed the role it should have? The invisible world of invisible architecture became clear, already in the early 1980s. A set of "invisible" theories demanded from architecture, its discipline, profession and education, a special swerve and deflection. A subtle avoidance of the obvious, a delicious experiment with ambiguity and indeterminacy, both opened the gate for a spate of natural looking theories of little relation to architecture itself.

The only questions then that keep on appearing, and should keep on appearing, even if they scratches the eyes out are: What is architecture? What does it mean? How does it mean what it means? If architecture has stopped meaning for some of us, it has never truly, madly, deeply stopped meaning. It swerves, it will always swerve! And perhaps our driven, internal, often closed self-questioning asking whether it has ever meant will pass into oblivion.

Are architects beginning to acknowledge their fallibility?  
What is this fallible self?



And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami  
 trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his  
 country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to  
 infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet  
 pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority  
 burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank  
 of America, and high and very far away he saw the  
 spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his  
 reach.

And somewhere he was laughing, in a  
 white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck,  
 tears of release streaking his face.

- William Gibson ii

# Deradicalism!

or

## *The Retreat of/to Theory*

So much of what we write is nonsense. So much of what has been written about architecture is nonsense. I too have added to this over the years, and am still, for the moment, probably adding to it. Thomas Bernhard is correct: everything we say is nonsense, no matter what we say, it is nonsense and our entire life is a catalogue of this nonsense. Envisage then, if you will, an entire tome written in one speaking but unspoken voice, a tome all about architecture, with no divisions, no paragraphs, no easy reading breaks, and only the chance pause, a sign or two which would allow us occasionally to come up for air. Or to be more optimistic, would allow us to read those little signs and translate them into relevant systems and fictions for ourselves. Systems that are not always languages but fictions that make of our own nonsense the relevance

of a lost century of Modernism and the new century of Spectacle. Are these not the intimate systems we turn into private relevance, the critical fictions that we make out of our creative grief? Or is this the untimely relevance of a life barely half-lived?

Contrary to what some may think, this slim but unending volume on architecture would not increase the public misunderstanding about contemporary architecture. It would in fact serve to indicate how much of our lives has been spent in the necessity of misrepresentations and misreading, and in the necessary abuse of theory and the creative misunderstandings that follow. Take the retreat from or to theory, which we have witnessed now and then in architectural discourse for a good three decades now. Is this merely the ego of un-philosophical souls shouting from the rooftops or an indifference to the procedural irrelevance and fictions inevitably brought about by language's hold on architecture? Or as Adorno puts it, "that which in terms of its form seems to fly above its correlative, thereby establishing itself as something higher."

Let us return to the essay *The Protestant Mystics* from W.H.Auden: the "Curse of Babel is not the diversity of tongues – diversity is essential to life – but the pride of each of us which makes us think that those who make

different verbal noises from our own are incapable of human speech so that discourse with the is out of the question..." As we retreat and reform our agony, it is this *something higher* that Adorno speaks of which is always on its way down. And if we continue along this way, Adorno would agree with Bernhard: all this architectural nonsense is "heir of the disinterested strictness of the system. In fact, like a worthless construction, it is forever falling off its stilts and stumbling around in nonsense."

Pride which turns us back onto our phoney islands of the mind, "a pride which" Auden says, "since the speech of no two persons is identical – language is not algebra – must inevitably lead to the conclusion that the gift of human speech is reserved for oneself alone. It is due to this curse that, as Sir William Osler said, 'half of us are blind, few of us feel, and we are all deaf.'" <sup>iii</sup>

The nonsense spoken and written about architecture has become a pataphysics all its own. Yet clearly, it is from this nonsense that so many careers have been made and dashed, so many egos inflated and bruised, so many jet planes taken into forbidden lands, so many cities raped by thin lines and so many claims made for architecture.<sup>iv</sup> In the phoney island of the mind, all architecture is about all other architecture. All architecture is derivative of every

other architecture even if we pretend otherwise. There was nothing more original in the early 1900s that was not original in the 1800s or 1700s. Eminence merely asks of us to think more highly of our inventions and our presences *now* rather than then. As Gombrowicz puts it, “plus c’est intelligent, plus c’est stupide.”

The intentions of architects to expand, fly near the sun, burn wings and crash, to war with material shards and splinters, to build this or that, to fold their own baroque worlds, to effect social change, to re-define political agency and organise mankind into public or private space, were always only as good and as promising as their word. Then, whenever *then* was, just as now, whenever *now* is, all architecture has participated yet tried to resist what we have come to call the ‘delirium of intentionality’. Our language is a meta-language, our poetry thick against the tarred window, and elastic sponge. Our language rescues architecture momentarily by grandiose, wayward interpretations made from the mere itch of stone, the fold of concrete or the tissue of steel. So why have architects been so often taken at their word? And why do some still yearn so competitively and insecurely for the proper use of language, the proper approach, the proper imagination and that proper architecture?

Admit it, all buildings can locate a critical fantasy from which ordinary and extraordinary spoken and written claims will be made for them. Even the garden shed, the guest room over the garage, the signage in the monastery, the grass roofed sanctuary, the black patio extension or the cast iron grotto will find fictions flown from impoverished and wilder minds. If we find architecture touching and humane, political or a-political, we are either accused of revisionism or then apologists for the ‘missing’ dialectic between the past and the present. Theory shudders as it re-groups, re-calibrates itself and shuts out the triumph of language, its ambiguity, its politics and its error. The stone must ‘read’ new, the drawn must breathe life, says the heroic architect in order to point up the reading of the old. If we find architecture lacking an authenticity, the gods of ancient Greece turn on us and into us. We are accused of nostalgia or then we must apologise for pioneers who shunned reality and substituted alerted poetry. If we find architecture interminable, liquid and restless, we are accused of folded pretence. Or then we have become surfers in our own lost world. If we speak of the narrative theories in architecture, instrumentality and intentionality, we are taking the Zen path to irrelevance, flaying out at body and soul. If we see the final reality in Surrealism and Dadaism, and cross this with then anecdotes of the political soul we are accused of jargon and obfuscation.

Rightly so? Critical agreement, of course, is still nowhere to be found nor has it really ever been the consensus invented for it. Mainly because critical fraudulence stealthily and unimaginatively remains unidentifiable and alarmingly creative. This catastrophe is not architecture's alone. The madness, even quirky theatricality, is not only one the death of vocabulary but the death of interpretations. Schoolchildren are taught to code their belongings to prevent theft. They mark their souls in the way to grade-heaven with white correcting-fluid bottles. When everything is private and code-able, including trainers, hoodies, belly-button piercings, earlobes and lips, body surface itself competes for meaning. No meaning where none intended: alright slip a ring through my tongue and connect it to the navel. There is nothing left but to quote the actual words of these men. Merton was speaking of Eichman, a sanity so disturbing as to be macabre, without parody or parallel. A pensioner struggling with the flat pack in my kitchen suddenly went down on his knees. "Rub me out and draw me again," he said. "That's what my mother used to say, whenever I got things wrong."



*So you want to be a rock and roll star.* It is obvious: the more modern we think we become, the further and further we drift away from the evidence of modern architecture itself. Or should we even be using the word 'modern' when the word 'contemporary' must forever lose its edge to survive, especially today as we are forced to reduce if not resist every movement? And then there's the critical sponge! Whether architects like the responsibility or not, whether architects care about architecture or not, 'episteme' is a word that cannot be tongued. Whilst the growing redundancy of the language used about architecture is accepted, the theory after the one before invites another thrilling impasse. Derrida will replace Chomsky, Deleuze will replace Derrida, and Zizek will replace Deleuze.

*Then listen now to what I say.* Whenever we challenge the investment made by architects in and through language, we expect some architecture to be held back to an architectural significance it does not have. That's only proper! Language only ever conforms, confirms and self-corrects the anxiety and membership of whichever group orchestrates this significance. Architects hijack and plagiarise to survive, always have done. Societies and eras may alter the significance but not the methodologies of classification. Detached and impassionate, acknowledging

growing redundancy, the politics of subversion and the legacy of unwanted theory and strategic nonsense remains the only option as architecture becomes redundant to the politicians who legislate for the environment, redundant to the layman who wants them to rub it out and draw it again, redundant to the user who fights the claims for modern architecture in a language still to reach them; and all this in a modern world that has already happened in their absence. Were we ever Modern? Of course we weren't. We didn't have a chance. And if they go on this way architecture will eventually become redundant to all those who would not wish to live or work in the very few (and getting fewer: 2%?) environments architects actually produce. And why should they argue on the top of match-head about the top of match-head, if they continue to have so little say, acontrol their own representation, their own institutions and their own redundant 'phoney' image?

*Just get an electric guitar...* Of course as all this denial and retreat redeems moments from our amateurish and inaccessible lives, we must all dwell within some sort of architecture. Even anti-architecture or the built environment of inescapable realities becomes the architects' domain. As proved by each conference and symposium that passes that architects have less and less to say to each other, must we re-occupy architecture to adjust

its metrics to new language and slogan? Are we to train ourselves, become contemporary thinkers and theorists squatting in architecture with a language we constantly try to avoid using? We are in the world to hijack that which we find useful from everyone and everything that is not us. We are exiled in everything beyond us. Architects no better example of this exile.

*Then take some time, and learn how to play.* Has it ever really been any different? The insignificances and improprieties that were once our own have become everyone else's. Thus nothing is redundant anymore. In this, can we not take from those which we do not trust, and express once more the revolutionary situation? Still on the back burner, simmering away. Were we ever so mediocre and stupid, to think we could retreat from a theory or to theories that offered such rewarding insignificance, fraudulence, hope and improprieties? We are and have always been (actually) in a virtual world. Theories do not trip off our tongues they dribble out. They allow us to partake of critical soliloquies with the representations from all eras that we read as maps of our own future worlds. And in such phoney agendas of unrest there is likely to be nowhere else to go but into a continual state of linkage and itineraries. Unrest then becomes not so much any final product in architectural terms, but

the necessity to remain virtual; beyond language and communication and denying any possible hope of arrival. In some ways we continue to call this a retreat, or – in a more generous and alienated discourse: another form of de-radicalism.

*And with your hair swung right.* And your pants too tight. The imaginary aspect of this retreat to theory or deradicalism must always become real and then be edged off and out by that threatened reality. Theory, especially the French thinkers that have so occupied the last forty years will both be retreated from and abused; this treatment lies in the very discourse they propound. Only the French writer and thinker Georges Bataille, as others have indicated, took this inevitable reversal to the edge of mime, self-terror and madness in terms of the irresponsible self and – possibly - brought it back again. That is why we now label ourselves faster than the wish to remain in control of our lives. That which has become fame in architecture has become redundant in the world beyond communication.

*Then it's time to go downtown, where the agent man won't let you down.* In contemporary architecture this deradicalism is as much a game that situates itself, as it is one that is situated by and within a game station. Given

the altering rules and unruliness in architecture, anything can be reversed. Within such epistemic relativism, knowledge or what passes for knowledge becomes a set of options. The world is then menued and architecture follows. Thus a lecture, any lecture or sequence of images/ texts, will end with a request that architecture stay intelligent and undermining, in this ever-evolving digital culture. Tautologically, the assumption is then made that this very agenda proposed - deradicalism - is the smart way to stay ahead. Unfortunately, and here is the difficulty, there is no advance for architecture, if the very sovereignty and authenticity awarded these loaned philosophical notions is not challenged, if the versions made from these ideas are not questioned, and the inferences and implications suggested by the organised narrative and generalised linkage are not undermined.

*Sell your soul to the company who are waiting there to sell plastic ware.* In plainspeak, deradicalism is another architecture degree zero. It will end, like many calls for action and inaction, as a plea to stay ahead of the 'game'. And by appearing to take on the game of architecture, by appearing to offer strategies of undermining any arrival in architecture, by retreating from the crutches of endless names, authorities and metaphors from (mostly) French philosophers (like Deleuze and Guattari, more recently



Agamben, Badiou, Ranciere and Zizek) the intelligence of the lecture (any lecture?) which attempts to stay ahead begins to be undermined by its own confusion and critical density. Deradicalism is caught in itself; Deleuze and Guattari appropriated by architecture and Israeli Defence Forces as fast as the dazzling images are replicated.

*And in a week or two, if you make the charts the girls'll tear you apart.* De-radicalism represents a phoney endgame in architectural discourse where hubris, cleverness, banter and intelligence are defined as the necessary part of an agenda of resistance. We need however to reach the end of cleverness, but how? Resistance occupies a privileged position by appearing to refuse to build 'conventional' architecture relying on fatigued and confused notions about form, meaning and style. However in this retreat there is also a wilful air guitar confusion doing everything to conform to the academic forays into market unrest, ambiguity and formlessness. The result is excitingly trivial: an insipid neutral architecture in retreat must thereby redefine this deradicalism which it also must deny. Thus, at the same time as the schools of architecture educate those who succeed or rather fail to build, the 'regrettable' consumption and money spent on air guitar, fashionable architecture continues with no relation to education or the strategies to re-think architecture.

*The price you paid for your riches and fame.* That which is absent from the educational curriculum is the most valuable for an autonomous architecture approaching the zero. As Garry Stevens put it: "In modern society one of the main mechanisms is provided by the education system, which formally certifies individuals as competent to join certain occupations. But many groups, especially privileged ones, require not only this institutionalised form of cultural capital, but also other, tacit, forms of cultural capital. It is these unspoken requirements that, although absent from the formal occupational description, are nonetheless just as necessary to join the group as the diploma." ♥

*Was it all a strange game?* Of course there is a tendency to misunderstand the role fashion and taste have always played in architecture. And this is also the currently fashionable architecture as product design resulting from equally dominant theories that were once cutting edge; ideas about 'rupture' and 'fragmentation' and not 'fold' and 'rhizome'. Suddenly when this type of work is part of an agenda of architectural aesthetics in the form of abused resistance, talking up the 'spatial figures' of the French philosophers somehow appeared more authentic, more

accountable and more legitimate. But for a moment, for the length of the game, this is all now in question.

*You're a little insane.* Why? Is it because our fetish for theory and dazzling metaphor allow the practitioner to reach a short cut world where architectural thinking and knowledge are diluted and then by passed? Generalisations matter little whether they are accurate or can be supported. Phrases like 'delineating a virtual architecture' can be crushed with Joyce's 'thunderwords', inter-layered as they can be with McLuhan, Edward T. Hall or Levinas. The difference between a rational logic and an irrational logic has long disappeared allowing these terms to continue to blur any boundaries. The competition to be a rock and roll star goes on. And along with the general acceptance of 'blur' come non-sites and more anthropological 'reveries' about architecture as a desert or abyss, a spiral or a jetty. Starstruck, architectural relativism will continue unabated hiding the very relevance and novelty of all this 'commerce'.

*The money, the fame, and the public acclaim.* However those that wish to condemn this hijack of philosophy or theory and consider this as shallow thinking are wrong. The shallowness of the thinking, the abuse of metaphor or notions from other disciplines, weak as this may appear

does not always make for shallow architecture. That it might not make for deep architecture either does not help us understand all this commerce and gaming. Yet the obvious result of all these critical scaffolds, fidgeting, restless, virtual, elegant or not, are the alibis produced for architectural delusion. This devastatingly friendly aspect of any deradicalism allows thinkers, critics, architects and writers to bully the audience, using a form of tacit intimidation. It cajoles audiences - students and practitioners - into believing one can engage in architecture nearer the cutting edge, or then architecture on the edge of everything else. It may thus appear to be nearer the digital world and digested world and can only be abreast with fashion in order to keep architecture intelligent and smart.

*Don't forget who you are.* Yet why does this emerge as a persistent and neurotic desire to be so smart and clever? Where in all the consumption and mimicry of the knowledge of the 'other' is the joy of ignorance, indifference and boredom? Where is the grand ennui, the real degree zero that we have seen over the centuries that takes those never part of any fashion into unexplored areas? Where is the despair, the delay to ideas that then takes over other ideas? Where is the undermining in all this mimicry of knowledge? Where is the self-awareness of

the 'colonisation' of thought that the students complain of, that architects deny but which in fact has all but 'colonised' the whole subject of architecture with a bad poetry? And where is the hint of frivolity and its irresponsibility? Even the seduction of the word 'rhizome', pronounced 'wry-zome' in America, must always bring some self-ridicule to our minds: virtual, imaginary or real. And if the result is a grand strategy not to fix anything, then where are we wandering towards? And who is happy in such unrest, in such continual undoing of architecture if not the undoers undoing themselves?

*You're a rock and roll star.* Of course happiness has nothing to do with all this undoing. As fast as our smart thinking undoes the convention and resists theory, it weaves new webs, new linkages in - allegedly - a part of a wider moment in contemporary culture. The immediate future (which is almost past) is critically - and spectacularly - in good hands. Or so we might imagine. Two decades ago, the Bilbao Guggenheim, The Jewish Museum Extension in Berlin, the V&A 'spiral' extension in London, and NL's black rubber cube Water Station were just some of the many dominant images that looked likely to take more than architecture beyond words. But these are liquidated so quickly. Common sense is recalled. A condition we hear called rather awkwardly *post-critical* is supposed to

attract us to the games of the workshop and the hands-on tinkering of smart architects and rapid prototypists. And yet, of course, we know this will never happen, just as the term 'post-analytic' or 'post-human' invite solidarity for the moments their critical consensus finds support. Still, the wonder, the magic, the sensuous role of architecture as entertainment looks likely to converge with the shopping mall, the engineered jeans and the fruit machine. From the public access of the museum to the Italianate piazza, we are converged in airport, mega-centre or off-shore.

So you want to be a rock 'n' roll star? Critically though, unless we award a more generous role to the instability of magic, hallucinatory theory and (in)difference, the phoney mysticism that writing and interpretations offer architecture will continue to divorce the public from its own understanding of architecture. Perhaps then, to be smart, architecture will ultimately only challenge a very few professionals, practitioners and educators in an endgame of limited but devastatingly exciting appeal. A diagram of everything, another degree zero? Don't forget who you are!

All modes of writing have in common the fact of being 'closed' and thus different from spoken language. Writing is in no way an instrument for communication. It is not an open route through which there passes only the intention to speak.

- Roland Barthes vi

# Another Death of the Architect

or

*the impossibility of plain speaking*

Should architects be listened to? Should they be taken seriously as thinkers, theoreticians, planners, strategists, urban reformers or transformers? Should students be taught to think this discipline has all been a mistake, the result of Frank's wild years or so? Is it payback time? Or blowback? The development of architecture since 1980 has been to many, and not only those within the discipline and profession very strange. Philosophy loaned and grafted onto architecture in delirious ways was constructed into distorted algorithms as advanced architecture predicted cities to come, and cities to be targeted in future wars. In this zero in which we float, in this meritless condition of fascination for the theory and theories that could guide us, have we allowed these enquiries to slip between the cracks of our own nostalgia for grand thinking and intuition?

And as we pass on, unable to re-light the future with gems of our past, as we begin to think that theory and theorists have had their day in architecture, we notice some heading back to the studio and workshop to discover the new toolbox. Which starts to resemble very much the old toolbox.

We make light of ideas beyond us to restrain thinking outside our own domain, yet take ideas beyond building, beyond architecture into the creative instability and uncertainty that now rules so effectively. But who is that figure we wish to make light of, and who is that thinker, philosopher or poet we turn to and blame for taking architecture into a redundancy with all the narrative poetry of a cultured but unnecessary language. Hate poetry, add architecture and lots of it, and we begin sending messages back to the zero we ourselves created.

What happens when nonsense is built, when the artifice of language is tied to the way we can deny ourselves in a profession unable to respond to the public (mis) understanding of architecture? Do we imagine that by re-routing the zero into the power of one we return the realist jargon and usurp the untidiness of language itself? Are we so sure that the institutionalised jargon that passes for policy and pedagogy in architecture does not *write out*

architecture for us, like a doctor writes out a prescription, before the icarus-fall scars our descent? Have we ever taken seriously the neutral mode - architecture without architects - or found new ways to explore that exciting but colourless written world resisting cliché and custom? We replace architecture that functions as sign for the architecture it would like to be as it draws attention to itself. What might mean to utter the phrase: end all this cleverness!

Would there be a way to explore the extent to which architects and planners monitor their own ego, development and knowledge? By researching the various strategies of self-critical awareness - the way knowledge in architecture develops personally and crosses prejudice with preconceptions - might we not learn more about the promises, the shifts, the ideological visions and even the fallacies that have (re-) structured the architect's own work; drawings, visions, texts. How can we take stock of the role of error and fallibility in the shaping of architecture's cumulative brief and is there a way to monitor that repellent honesty in relation to the ideas we hold, and the claims made for and about architecture through these ideas? Is this even necessary or part of the naivety that keeps discourse upon discourse, framed

paroles, controlling the inevitable errors that can be pitched as authentic architecture?

Re-assessing the notions of critical histories, notions of distortion, creative lying and other hallucinated 'realities' that architecture may have offered the 20<sup>th</sup> Century could help shift the balance away from the current critical endgames and frustration with (French?) theory and back to the messier implications of critical and personal 'moral acts'. Is this what is required; a re-calibration of those lost political acts; shifting the context from the beach under the paving stones to the scripts beneath the hacked sun? By so attempting to assess error and failure as much as disguising this for pragmatic professional gain, we may even put in contest some of the gradual but possibly ill-defined promises already appearing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For some reason, perhaps architects never have the time or make the time, architecture has survived without the 'truly' confessional. Rarely do we see architects or critics, historians or researchers expressing their dissatisfaction with their own work or offering us ways to understand their abandoned ideas, disenchantments, even failed projects. Trimming, swerving and modifying earlier ideas in a self-feeding spiral of knowledge and interest often shows in architects a desperate desire to avoid

acknowledging influence and intimacy. Symposium, colloquium, conference all generally attempt to demonstrate in coded silence the feeling that within all this esteemed and engaged work the world is moving towards something more mature. There is always the hint of a trajectory that aims towards a thinking which is more relevant, and which - in its contemporary moment - becomes a more mature architecture. How is it possible that a whole profession has ceased interrogating itself and come to measure its success by unapproachable criteria and validations of what is so often its own mediocrity?

Recently exiting a lecture on 'Hypermedia Architecture' full of interminable name-dropping, the over-application of French literary-critical philosophy, tropes and phrases repetitively drummed out as another example of epistemic relativism, I passed a Levi's jeans advert. The image of squared paper signifying 'science' and 'precision' had a pair of jeans laid out with a red twisted line. Engineered jeans! A little further on and another street billboard caught the eye. A pair of training shoes had been morphed into seamlessness. The image began to look like all those fashionable images of blobbed-out, folded back and onto life-science liquid architecture that were being produced from software programmes and re-mapped onto architectural representation. The lecture on *Hypermedia*



*Architecture* had ended with what had long become a litany in the architectural avant-garde. Meaning was now so unstable, information continually de-stabilised that only fluid operative strategies are allowed. Flow and exchange become actual content. All interpretation was suspect if not forbidden. At the same time as the architecture spoken about sought to differentiate itself from all other agendas of architecture past, this ever-new discourse of 'flow' and 'float' looked likely to reach the same critical saturation as the 'semiotic games' or the 'deconstruction' it replaced.

Is everyone really up for meta-history games? Is everyone really in agreement that Joyce's 'Finnegan's Wake' can be endlessly re-mapped, and re-embodied onto more recent hyper-media theory and ideas? *Score architecture*: Liebniz, Piranesi, Bergson, Dickens, Ruskin and others can all be re-inscribed into this operative mode. Replace Derrida by Deleuze, Deleuze by Žižek and spew immediacy, but by God do it well if you take this on and don't forget how much of this fashionable nonsense thrown around, that Alan Sokal got just about right. Yet in all this operative criticism, the liquid sand stream of the Mekong and Namkham in South-East Asia, a few constants are however appearing. Firstly, current thinking, often confusingly called 'state of the art' thinking, is expected to challenge, if not undermine, the practice of architecture. By this

we assume is meant the 'professional' production of architecture. Secondly, the misguided notion that architecture has nothing to do with style and taste seems to be an agreed, tacit condition. There is still a yearning for 'architecture degree zero', a neutral writing and the seduction of neutral inscription. Design services, whether expanded into agendas for architects to become managers or public scientists, are left almost as apologies for those still in the game. Thirdly, a creative dirtiness is implied in this aesthetic and political gaming along with corruption; any idea of competing in architecture is all but denied when in fact 'dirty architecture' is just about this – competition!

May the best gene, meme and dream win, selfishly but generously! The notions of influence, of copying, of appropriating, of undermining and undercutting are stringently denied whilst it has become more obvious this is all part of usefully messy collaborative process that makes up architectural practice today, what we can begin calling mistakenly probably, the 'architectural genome'. The desire in this type of radical hypermedia thinking, confusingly referred to as 'cutting edge', must go even further. By its appeal to intellectual smartness, it expects architecture to get beyond the software programmes that can now offer accessible, even facile warping of

almost all possible diagrammatic shapes. Inventive software programmes already have long shown how to offer interminable ways to extend the smooth curve into seamless, hallucinogenic architectural representations often professionally but not critically legitimated as 'fabrications'. These merge seamless with a re-packaged engineering like the Levi's advert, and find their way into countries that have as yet not professionally invested in such 'fluid machines'. Sadly out in the margins of our own tourism, through budget airlines and investment drift, the architectural future of some of the world's developing and catch-up cities is already written, derivatively, in the past of this smart discourse.

Crucial to this hypermedia 'cutting edge' is the new contemporary mapping made possible by the plethora of 'virtual worlds'. To resist where necessary this smart thinking, we must explore also the implications of further architectural alienation. Any arrival at a representation of a conventional building derived via sophisticated software must not only be delayed but it, too, must be totally undermined. Yet despite all this talk about hypermedia, the endgames, the degree zeros in literature, architecture, film or theatre, few of us ever acknowledge that this often represents little more than the degree zero in our own thinking. The information is not frozen, we are! Does

anyone remember how much passion and confusion was put into that apparently harmless piece of pseudo-scientific jargon, 'meaningless signifiers'? Can anyone guilty of tossing out words and phrases in the quasi-intellectual project trace the looser version made of them, the grander scaffold for thinking claimed from them?

Some years ago I suggested, comically but not without some seriousness that the Twentieth century might be usefully read through the following neologisms: *Saussurization-Flaubertization-Carnivalisation*. Of course these terms were hijacked and appropriated from the then current trends on semiology: Saussure's 'Course in Linguistics', Flaubert's mention in Roland Barthes' 'Writing Degree Zero' and Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnavalesque'. Never has the obvious carnival which architecture has clearly become, however, been taken seriously. Is this the result of 'smart' idiocy or the obvious fact that we are never in the right place at the right time with the right discourse-makers? And where are they? Who are they?

It might be appropriate, some thirty or forty years on after the distaste about theory and philosophy's interference into architecture, to try and paraphrase this comic and perhaps faulty triad. *Saussurisation* was the stage of semiotic promise in architecture. This condition was met

when a chain of signifiers could go together and be read as a signified(s). Roland Barthes did much to bring this into literary criticism and its effect from such influential publications like 'Mythologies' meant that, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we would get the full relativistic and journalistic input of Barthes' fragments in culture. Non-linguistic systems began to be read as texts. This had already saturated architecture by the late 1970s when semiotic theories began offering ways of reading architecture's intentionality, and reading buildings as legible texts, thereby encouraging often illiterate architects to consider 'legibility' in architecture. Whilst the fall out of Saussure and the generalisation made about the 'arbitrary sign' continued, the application of a linguistic model as a way of articulating the visual world took different turns. A sense of detail, craft, theft, structure and play entered contemporary cultural writing including architecture. It formed a deep passion for the frivolous and the poetics of 'upset'.

This notion of the 'frivolous' could be further characterised by inventing the critical term *flaubertisation* from the way Barthes saw Flaubert in 'Writing Degree Zero': "Since Literature could not be vanquished by its own weapons, was it not better to accept it openly, and, being condemned to the literary hard labour, to 'do good work' in it? So the

'flaubertization' of writing redeems all writers at a stroke, partly because the least exacting abandon themselves to it without qualms, and partly because the purest return to it as to an acknowledgment of their fate." But, as if to surprise us, the obvious arbitrary nature of fixing signs and reading *signifieds* from a chain of signifiers meant that any attempt to decode an invented architecture would always imply a re-coding of that architecture. The result was a delinquent and delirious appropriation of architectural semantics in the last 20 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There was no such thing as a decoded message in visual terms. Unlike an intelligence message based on deciphering code and then acting on its assumed 'meaning', the visual decoding could never be final, never be arrested, never be stabilised. Thus it was obvious to anyone listening to Peter Eisenman in Beaubourg in the late 1970s, or listening to those who ploughed ahead with the appropriation of French theory, that all architecture would be on a runaway semantic game just as 'Peter and friends' would take than runaway train right on until the new millennium. Laurence Ferlinghetti met Noam Chomsky; the phoney island of the mind was born and critical gaming was smart trade.

Critical gaming could then be partnered with tectonic gaming and boy-not-girl were the architects good at it? They were indeed. The discourse centres would

be controlled, the cosmic language could shift to the phenomenological with mantras from chaos science and fractal theory whilst the anti-phenomenologists would re-group in oppositions of various formation. They would go on meeting and phenomenology-bash ad infinitum. Bring the house down! Chance knowledge of Wittgenstein could game with Heidegger, whilst Husserl, Derrida and Virilio would seduce the talking heads to invent (the) architectural imagination all over again. The oppositions passed over to assemblages. It was a grey time, grey rooms until the Soviet Union collapsed and freed Melnikov and it became convenient to categorise these events and the new results achievable in architecture. Useful here was the attention paid momentarily to Bakhtin's literary criticism and his notion of the 'carnavalesque'. The carnival invents its own rules, and always acts according to them. This needed no nuclear physics or physicist's hoax to explain how this could begin helping us to understand the directions architecture would take if it went on believing in the chain of signifiers, in intentionality and the legibility of the forms and ideas mapped onto the boards which had by then become screens.

From this moment onwards (when exactly?) architecture could not fail to be caught between history, theory and practice. It entered a strangely agreed and disagreed

field, where visual systems could not fail to promote architecture of no agreed finality. Architecture became a non-destination feeding centre. The degree zero was useful, appropriated and devastatingly seductive. The hijack and necessary abuse and control of philosophy, the refinement of Post-modernism laid out by Lyotard and flattened by fellow-travellers naturally led to layers and layers of critical verbiage about degree zero architectures and any other useful adventure and attractive notion that would go on celebrating the theoretical slippage of no arrival. How the architects who wrote out the carnival liked to mock the very words that might have lifted us out of the mediocrity! The useful errors were made up ahead. Architectural thinking could operate with some dubious validity within ideas about instability, ideas that of course conveniently hijacked mathematics like Godel's Theorem or Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle'. The generalising truths made from these along with useful phrases creamed from the French like 'l'informe' became parts of buildings. And even distressed denim jeans, patterned watches, food patterns, fashion in general, agreed to delay conclusions. Nothing could mean this and not that. And if they did, in the case of radical chic, another product or manufacturer else would usurp the code and re-vitalise the accepted garment into another code. Like the Punks with an old dinner jacket, a T-shirt and a safety pin. Semiotics and

*meaningless signifiers* proved wonderfully indeterminate and opened the way for the carnival of relativism which we were to see close the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and open the 21<sup>st</sup>. It all became rather simple: some of us could live with this liquidity - some of us could not!

However like many of architecture's own internal enthusiasms over the years this instability too must be regarded with some suspicion. If we doubt the huge scale of this relativism, think back to what Terry Eagleton had to say about Roland Barthes in the 1980s: "Barthes' problem was that, failing to reinvent Brecht, he became instead an Azdak - rogue, scavenger, opportunist and bricoleur, the burr on the ass of the Establishment." Interestingly, in the 1980s, words like rogue, scavenger, opportunist and bricoleur would have been tantamount to unseriousness. Read a typical hyped text about architecture in the new millennium and one will realise those four words are now integrated along with everything else possible into an architectural strategy that, above all, must not forget to 'sound right'. Have not the meaningless signifiers come full circle, with nowhere to go? Yet when there are calls to place, re-situate, or even remove 'theory' from the agenda of architecture should we not be careful that this 'carnival' has not already derailed the architectural imagination?

To question this further let's take some pieces from an architectural text picked up at random: "The inclusive project is about assembling and integrally organising layers of significance, both material and immaterial. Redefining organisational structure in this way, switching between themes, using the architectural imagination to proportion information and finally making it sound right, is unconnected to a particular form of geometry." How we quite use one architectural imagination as opposed to another imagination in order to proportion information and finally make it sound right is either an intelligence message that has to be decoded to infinity, or a useful signifier of its own confusion, therefore meaningless. Presumably *proportioning information* is a suggestion of a pseudo-mathematical way to arrange priorities and hierarchies that are assumed proportioned. But proportioned into what? "The same information can be proportioned in numerous ways without altering any of the structuring parameters, in the same way that a donut can be twisted into a Möbius strip without losing its original proportions."

Stop there. Is this really such an architectural achievement? A donut twisted without losing its original proportions? Most people thinking of a donut would probably long for a donut to lose its original proportions and become

something more than a Möbius strip. But then this seems to be the twisted result of the inclusive project. Where has architecture's intellectual project gone? What has it been doing for so long? "The geometry of the inclusive project is a typologically generated one; it is a textured field, a localised relief structure that is based on specific information and that can take on any form, any style, any look." Obviously pushing at one point will distort and move and re-shape into another point on the projected curve. But there is so much generalised here in the words as to defy any re-structuring and to confirm inclusiveness in the only way possible; nothing is different from anything else. Clearly this is not the case, for a box is not a blob. But unless we have understood the 'inclusiveness' of all the phrasing we are not convinced. "In short, in the inclusive organisation blob and box are the same." Is plain speaking impossible in architecture any more?

These words mime a knowledge that is an alibi for a lost intelligence, an abandoned imagination, a directionless architecture, the lost project of architecture. This is not the 'after theory condition', this is a condition beyond critical gaming, 'post-critical' if you wish in the virulent sense of the phrase.. "Made of the same substance, mobilising ingredients on material, temporal, virtual and constructional levels," the distinction has become

meaningless. But don't forget it has to sound right. Does one know where the citation ends, and where the thinking is a fetish for disquiet and architectural malaise? Of course these words only become meaningless as a distinction if it sounds right. But where is the architecture in all this? Clearly - obeying this inclusiveness - if it doesn't sound right then the distinction is not meaningless. If, as Eagleton says and of which we are in his debt, that Barthes served to keep the revolution warm, inventing along the way new guerilla tactics and fragments of subversive strategies, it is probably not the inclusiveness above which he would have had in mind.

Let us for a moment return to a period when it was quite possible to believe in texts and writings like those cited above. *Indeterminability* and the various ideas that could allow it to be articulated into buildings, spectres or forms that we call architecture, had immense repercussions. What began as a promise for ultimate understanding, a cluster of right or more correct meaning for painting and drama, for buildings and art, ended up as an inevitable carnival of signs. Carnavalesque, architecture began operating within its own rules, internalised, closed, possibly just coinciding when the early Modernists had themselves control the gaming to set up their own operations. By so doing, as Bakhtin's carnival tells us,



architecture could re-locate itself as a discipline using this potential confusion and relativism of agreed meanings. Architecture could then supposedly use words to upset and invest new meaning by loaning from any other system. If out of this we wish to denounce the influence of French theory in the controlling architectural discourse centres, we would be naïve to think no further fetish or seduction for fashionable theory will take its place. If the research into genetics, neuro-science, bio-mimicry and the disciplinary crossover remain fashionable, we are also likely to be convinced that architecture is much more the 'meme machine' than so far recognised. Not only would this imply a re-writing of critical histories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but might reveal the shape of our collective delusions, our professional fear of acknowledging influence and abandoning control. From bio-mimicry to cultural survival, from cultural mechanisms to generic systems in architecture, the 'meme' might be the next fascination from which new *archobabble* will emanate, from which architectural theory will insinuate itself once more into mainstream architecture.

Taking a clue from bio-mimetics we could begin to explore, for example, the way ideas are copied and adapted from natural systems into other areas – extracting the smart, lasting and clever designs and systems and

integrating them into new design systems. This is not a question of any literal, straightforward copying but an exploration of the multiple tasks systems and organisms take on, teasing out and appropriating which functions they are optimised for and re-locating their 'smartness', their 'cleverness'. If in science, the objective might be to produce smarter materials and structures more responsive and responsible to the environment, what role could architecture play in this?

Did not architecture operate similarly throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century updating ideas, shifting dominant ideas and discourse by those coming in from the margins, thereby constantly re-assessing the past, constantly questioning the basis of its own originality? Authenticity occurs and trades in and on itself, when the displaced margins become central, whether we are faced with a new (digital) paradigm or not. We thought we were long past this agony today. But it is not so clear. The 'information bomb', the structure of connections, the media revolution, the market economy, the fame academy and born-again architecture; what aspects of these are programmed and re-programmed by the profession and education? That this is so much part of architecture means we really need no longer ask that question. But what part does the 'favoured circle' in architecture play in all this? We suspect

an immense role is played by taste, prejudice and let us accept it, ego and cussedness. The history of architecture is littered with stories of the stubborn charisma and battered egos persuading those less enlightened to accept both reasonable and unreasonable architectures. Professional systems (journals, image banks, universities, institutions, professions, corporations etc.,) operate in a self-perpetuating autonomous manner, allowing and then coercing the 'good ideas' to become fashionable. Fashion cannot fail to work by allowing systems to replicate themselves.

How does this process, this brilliant cussedness, of ego and eternity, work in architecture? How much is architecture part of a memetic structure? Have not architects always exchanged ideas and improved upon previous ideas, mediating their own role, asserting their own originality within a prescribed system, whilst disguising the loaned world for the singular world? Is it any surprise that 'authenticity', from being one of the main notions in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought is no longer current? Any extract from any page of Theodor Adorno's work, *The Jargon of Authenticity* will demonstrate architecture's unlikely but unstoppable contract with language and failures to meet the promise of that language. For example: "such language-procedural indifference has become a metaphysics of

language: that which in terms of its form seems to fly above its correlative, thereby establishes itself as something higher. The less philosophical systematization which Nietzsche called dishonest, is theoretically possible, the more that which had its place only in the system transforms itself into mere assertion." vii

Something higher again! Though linguistics was not proved to be the controlling discipline of semiotics, it did enough to attract whole cultures and groups to the promise of articulating visual forms as 'statements.' Architecture by the year 2000 was not only read this way, it could be co-opted, spun and hyped into the product design it sought to be. It needed not the simple reversals of Postmodernism or Deconstruction (mere alibis) upsetting previous signs to invite a trivial back and forth game. Cyberspace, virtual realities and digitalisation would take care of that undermining those trivial game of historicism. Semiotic promise gave way to semiotic performance and then gave way to its own meaninglessness. In John Updike's book *Roger's Version*, Roger Lambert the Divinity Professor is telling Dale, the high flying computer freak trying to prove God's existence on the computer: "Next to the indeterminacy principle, I told him, I have learnt in recent years to loathe the word 'holistic'; a meaningless signifier empowering the muddle of all the useful

distinctions human thought has laboured at for two thousand years.” viii

Now we know too well it was the rare writer or theorist in architecture that stayed away from Martin Heidegger in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and succeeded in speaking plainly. With the plethora of commentators and secondary texts, post-philosophical concerns were almost impossible to avoid whichever discipline one turned to. Many writers, critics, historians had long invented their debates with Heidegger, borrowing, swerving, altering and tampering until their vision of architectural theory and history proved able to re-shape Heidegger’s thinking into a critical-phenomenological approach for an architecture of ‘corrected’ place and ‘sited’ meaning. Down to earth, architecture became an understood and misunderstood domain and dwelling. It was supposed to offer identity-giving structures that fed the nourishment of the past, whilst trying to implant us into the undefined, un-referred-to present. Other critics have informed their own versions of a ‘critical regionalism’ with a place-poetics, borrowing, hijacking and then leap-frogging Heidegger’s ‘domain’ with help from Paul Ricoeur or Gaston Bachelard. Vocabulary shifted, words like ‘trace’ and ‘resistance’ became essential.

The important ‘trace’ in all this revision of architecture sited and not sighted, a seduction that crept once more into general architectural commentary, was the idea of a final strategy. Again something absolute offered itself, however relative, tempting the correctness inherent in an inflected genius loci theory with a tectonic authenticity. Architecture, instead of remaining redundant, became once more competent and professionally liberating. Theoretically re-defined, it once more promised much. Was this madness or a paradox within reach as this liberating role for architecture was promoted whilst many architects continued to prove redundant to the political and social forces that controlled and shaped their commissions and their environments? However, it was the shock of this promise that once more attracted others to the errors of the major thinkers, but once again only through the thinking of the commentators. Only now is it recognised how architecture and the intellectual project has stuttered along like this for at least thirty or forty years, if not more. We need not speak further about the spate of linguistic-philosophic applications in architecture and the dazzling metaphors from French thinkers that could trope upon themselves. But a question is now begged: has our vulnerability assumed a greater role and are we beginning to acknowledge our own fallibility?

There was an invisible world of invisible architecture made all the more available by the new science of 'imagineering' and 'virtuality'. It was clear, even already in the early 1980s, that such a set of 'invisible' theories demanded their own swerve and deflection. Virtuality provided adequate scaffold. A subtle avoidance of the obvious opened the gate for a spate of natural looking 'virtual' theories of little relation to architecture as known. The degree zero was finally ecstatic! Was it appropriate to recall Updike before St. Augustine or Roland Barthes' *Degree Zero*? It has taken three decades for this 'degree zero' slogan to become so generalised, trivialised and a cliché authenticated by entries in those supposedly humorous throwaway books on 'Instant Architecture' or 'Architecture for Dummies'. The ideological future of the profession may always be up for grabs, but like most clichés basically accurate, the zero may remain a relatively unsatisfying analysis of the situation.

This then is the carnivalisation in architecture that now collides as we end the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with dismal utopias of the immediate, the building as statement, as sound-byte, as logo. This also coincides now with the calls for a pragmatic architecture, for a new realism that attends to the workshop and digital fabricator, which allows the blame on unrealised architecture to be put on

all examples and mimicry of French theory. Architecture became advertising as it carnivalised and abused philosophy that has also abused other philosophy. D&G is a brand name taking architecture beyond the scenographic and the delirious coming full circle in the new millennium as it echoes Saussure's meaningless signifiers.

Finally free, the blob and the box indistinguishable, free in their meaninglessness, no agreed and accepted finality, this is a delayed holding position for instant, playful and mediocre architecture. Not because it is a priori meaningless, but this coincides with the point where meaninglessness collides with inclusive frivolity. Political servants will turn to the architects. But the architects have become the public scientists of weightlessness, abstaining from architecture to become another architecture altogether.

So why listen to architects? If architecture has set up its own metaphysics of language, its own retreat from theory must contest that metaphysics. Is there such a thing as an architectural meme? If so does this help us understand how ideas survive, are replaced, mutate and return in other guises? Did modern architects from the last century negate collaboration whilst being involved in the greatest conspiracy of all; hallucination? Is the author of *Cyberia*

Douglas Rushkoff correct to ask: does the best meme win? Is this not what our collective metaphysics denies as we authenticate the words we wish to use for and against architecture? And what if the meme is changing constantly - fashion memes, lasting memes, organic memes, animal memes, digital memes, architectural memes - the Next Paradigm or the One before the Following Paradigm? What relations exist between Darwinism and architecture? The media is the message, memory, histories and (auto) biographies. From the analogue to the digital, exploring the space of smoothness and dismissing originality, understanding the meme might lead to re-definitions of plagiarism, interfering as architecture so often does like a jewel-theft in the surface and depth of architecture. Gloved hands seduced by the techniques of the surface and wondrous surface tension!

Is this all a matter of critical fiction? Does this help us prepare a re-assessment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or does it serve to explain the plurality, multiplicity and pace of change in the architectural trends today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Is that where the intellectual project is today? Meanwhile what amount of ordinary architecture goes on unaffected, housing the homeless, housing the majority, housing those catastrophic countries that fail at the slightest aid and development? And how much architecture goes

on unaffected by whatever building type, envelope, form imagined, resisted or prostituted? Just what is this privileged discourse within architecture that leads to the alienation of public souls? What is this discourse of lost words and verbiage that never quite accepts the public's misunderstanding of architecture? As Stevens puts it in the *Favored Circle*: "a profession becomes redundant if no one can tell if a treatment has worked or not. This is one of the most significant problems affecting architecture. Within the field, architects often argue about the quality of a building, whether it is successful or a disaster in aesthetic terms. Moreover, their assessment of the success of a treatment (building design) is often at variance with the assessments of others. The supposed experts cannot agree, and the public often cannot agree..."

Another death of the architect? We could and should end the sentence ourselves!

The gravest of doubts was whether – or how – architects could continue to sustain their traditional role as form-giver, creators and controllers of human environments... Even when modern architecture seemed plunged in its worst confusion it could still summon up a burst of creative energy that gave the lie to premature reports of its demise. Modern architecture is dead; long live modern architecture!

- Reyner Banham (1962)

# Architecture is Dead

## Long Live Architecture!

*No meaning where none intended* means the architect and not only the critic can seek to lay out and offer critical menus, scripts, and narratives that allow us some idea of what being an architect is like today. Of course architecture is not dead, it is sleeping, sleepwalking or sleep-deprived. Writing today – critical and journalistic – is not so much a trawling of the guilty, aimless wanderings of an indifferent bystander in contemporary architecture, it is the caricature of writing and unrest so often lost within this field. We keep returning to the intellectual project. Is this our embarrassment or part of our fallibility? However, before this is once again hastily attacked for whimsical incomprehensibility, for unfairly capturing the investigation of this indifference or cheerful insouciance, there are lines of force within hidden, marginal texts on



architecture that rarely see the light of day. That said, a pattern has emerged that may not be shaken off by new Esperanto-visions and digital diarrhoea. This is the unfortunate vision of the digital being-cum-architect squatting over console, interface and defecating the wonder of formless beings into the deep void.

Architecture is dead because it is no longer a question of the dispossessed, the disenchanting and disenfranchised but the notion of disfigured beauty propped up by Velcro visions, elegance scaffolded by errant philosophy, and the grand designs of telecultural journalism. These have become banalized productions that spatially cramp the very soul, leaving the world content to witness celebrities interviewing themselves, mimeographing theory and life in front of a camera. Until the ego is only completed by filming these stained individuals eating the insides of a sheep's head.

Most architects exist in a double life of privilege and despair, prudence and audacity. Many end up with a half-life as apologists for accepting decisions out of their control but not out of their influence and manipulation. There is a de-radicalised, neo-conservative attempt to contain, sustain and script change whilst the drivers for this change, even the theoreticians and historians, now

exist elsewhere, often beyond this precious profession. Why there are not more suicides in architecture if compromise is so painful is beyond me, as they sup with the devil developers and repulse hedge fund investors. If failure is so abject and rewards so unjust, why do they continue? Where is the *salon de refuses*, of those who do not wish to participate? Are they condemned by the cynical quip, the talent for the put-down?

Remember one of the most popular books in the early 1990s *A Critique of Cynical Reason* by Peter Slotterdijk? Knowingness turns into cynicism when it cannot exit, when it comes up against the buffers. But do we make the buffers, the knots and obstacles in order to protect ourselves from a direction that we are not sure about? How can we avoid the ache of knowingness when it all but cancels us out? How can we participate in learning when we are told we no longer have the talent to decode the world? Is it time to jump?

World conditions do not usually dictate our living as much as the fictions made from them, which is why fear designs architecture today as much as bio-ethical patterning and life-science aesthetics. Plasma screen fictions, virtual lives and other untouchables of the digital world are starting to allow different measured freedoms to fit within narrowed

visions. Architecture, no longer frankly a tacit dimension, has struggled for years to defer or then merely ignore the cognitive delusions it continues to play on itself. Conferences and symposia are organized with just this delusion in mind; talking heads thrash out the light-bulb idea or the delicately desperate and nuanced returns to Aristotle or Plato, whilst others struggle to measure the things they know against the growing things they will never know. Language used about architecture often demonstrates a thoroughly privileged position that will see architecture kept to its own slim devices of professional hubris and strategies of no further communication. Meanwhile advances in science and technology, which prove the building as a system is time and time again so inefficient as to be embarrassing, is all but left out of the professional agenda. There is a cunning protection within the architectural community – within the christs and anti-christs - that all but scripts the hero against the dullard once more.

Yet today when we look around it's time to put the breathing mask on instead of just holding the nose. Language can neither fight the architecture we, or others, wish to design, or prevent the architecture we, or others, lament. No amount of intellectual horseplay and engaging banter will alter the various conditions that invite

narrower and narrower visions. No amount of waiting for the barbarians will sideline public opinion and once more announce architects are hard done by. This has been a con-game for decades played out in the suburbs of the mind, on those phoney islands, in the ego-womb. Who dares no longer wins; who cares neither! Yenderan, that city Tadeusz Rozewicz wrote about, that city about to disappear from the map some 40 years back along with many others cities, has disappeared. The golf courses and malls are dead. The houses that survived behind the flat screens are dead, and the rest is in ruins. And as Joseph Brodsky wrote: 'you cannot cover a ruin with a page of Pravda.' ix

Architecture has finally fulfilled the fallen promise of language and followed its own fallen form into fiction and privacy. The architectural sets designed for full wraparound sound, theatre and digital sensation have *in effect* collapsed around the feet of the City Fathers, the Politicians and the Matriarchs. No *jirga* will take the few necessary decisions left it, before the maps are re-charted. Those about to disappear from the map have increased.\* There is little hope left us besides that of irresponsible, cheerful optimism, knowing we are sleep walking into a failure that is about to happen before we even get there.

Are we to abandon such apparently aimless writing and indifference to theorising because Yenderan and other cities will die? As the golfers assemble for their 9-hole game across the high rise buildings that skirt the bay, the golf is played from building to building, rooftop tee to rooftop green, and the small drones caddy the virtual players to the next tee or putting green. Soon the drones will play the game for the golfer, who will remain sitting in the lounge with a gin and tonic. A hole-in-one sees the golf ball disappear into the void of the highrise and exit as an avalanche at the feet of the street level atrium. If it is all cinema, who is to blame? Must we ask ourselves for more systematic writing, for more ways to conform to the practice of footnote and fetish, in order to play tenure games at the universities and proposal games at the awaiting publishers? Or are we, well wrapped within our own 'disinternet', presented with more sincere and delinquent modes of eccentric vision which, if by following the two Poles, Milosz and Gombrowicz, we might at least be helped out of the riddle. This contemporary riddle which charts new theory and seduction in architecture. Ready to plunge ourselves so swimmingly back, yet forward, to the subjective and anti-rational celebrations and serious playfulness of the wounded but still drifting soul? <sup>xi</sup>

But all that's doubtful. The language will eat itself. Over-interpretation and contradiction become instant. The visionary tradition of architecture and all its relentless heroes has been so deadened by endless modes of disfigurement, second and third life versions of dubious architecture that it still seeks the eccentric margins once more. And those theatrical sets called cities that have no corners but need more than weak theories to support their vision ensure the dream will differ not from the last vision or the one before that. What do clients or customers seek and buy after opting for this or that building we might ask? Who will be the brave researcher who blows the whistle on architecture's poor energy performance? Who will take deschooling seriously and survive? Who will announce delinquency in the very syntax that cries out for the meaning it can never achieve? After 55% have bought the chosen vision, 12% buy the alternative vision whatever it is, and another 12% buy the other alternative. A small line then flashes on the screen and reads: At the end of the day you save up to 60% and get a bestselling vision, an emergency but safe home, an icon to die for, or a celebrity to sleep with for your town or city which is still, unfortunately, disappearing from the map. <sup>xii</sup>

What happens if - interestingly - the conventional corporate and formulaic direction of the profession of

architecture sees and recognises its own development and control with no echo? Would this answer market conditions, the strategies of a neo-conservative, neo-liberal democracy? Or are we waiting until Francis Fukuyama takes back his words, and another guru scripts the necessary misrepresentations to feed the myth? Remember that theory so quickly the soundbyte, 'the end of history'? Who really took it back to Hegel and Marx? Would this also be another zero? Just who amongst us then might be redundant: aging professors, instructors, historians and teachers; practising architects or non-practising architects; drifters of gaming and empiricism, or those younger micro-serfs? And just how much architecture – if we can call it that – will go on being built by those considered, in our arrogance and hubris, to have no right to be called architects? It is said – excuse the jargon – we are now in a Post-critical condition.<sup>xiii</sup> That we have learnt to distrust any language we can apply to our acts. I am all for this but the carnival has not gone far enough. This too is blamed on the digital turn as if the excess and surplus of data and flow turns us into post-informational orphans. The Twitter, YouTube or Facebook generation may not think like this. But they'll be thought out as they are bought out, before it happens. We – the belated analysts, the guilty bystanders from the last century – may have to invent this critical fiction to calm ourselves, as if we can protect ourselves by

the legacy of the past. It was important what we did then, but now, well, it's all so transient! <sup>xiv</sup>

Let's not be pulled in by this, so close it is to the cynical turn. A healthy nostalgia and the cry for fundamentals might be a useful rearguard action, present since the Renaissance but it never revitalises the present. History can do that in a more genuine, self-selecting way. We recognise the pattern – hoping to hold onto life until the unwanted parts of it pass. Passively aggressive, nostalgia is ultimately, in philosophical terms, an ungenerous position. Meanwhile a life itself has passed. Anyone living through the Post-Soviet East European nightmare in the 20<sup>th</sup> century knows this. Now those living after Bosnia, after Basra and Baghdad, after Kashmir and Kandahar, after Cairo and Damascus know this. Anyone remembering the films of the Polish director Andrej Wajda knows this. Anyone knowing what goes out of print and fashion faster than you can say 'deconstruction' or 'architecture is dead' knows this.

The struggle for the soul of modern architecture (versions 1.0, 2.0.) has resulted in an endgame of some proportion. <sup>xv</sup> Despite the Dubai lifestyle packaged as remote control, gated-living in cities like Islamabad or Bangkok, is it really likely that architecture is actually in worse shape than it

was in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? If we could plagiarise, if we could recycle, if we could appropriate and forget our eminence which virtual reinvention is doing for us, we might realise that most contemporary architecture we see consists of little more than competently fleshing out and implementing the tired blueprint of what remains an unpopular and consistently manipulated modern architecture. There is a clear failure here: architects did not communicate the benefits of the Modern. These benefits are still there, Modernism 1.0 or 2.0. However if this continues we have to be clear: in the longer indifferent scheme of things most architectural work will turn out to be inconsequential. It is also very possible that in some years we will be treated to exercises that explain how something as important as architecture has been shaped and played with by the trite argumentation of post-philosophers clashing with the tribal egos of its own protagonists.

But does anyone really care anymore? It is worth repeating, word for word: *most architects exist in a double life of privilege and despair, prudence and audacity. Many end up with a half-life as apologists for accepting decisions out of their control but not out of their influence and manipulation; a neo-conservative attempt perhaps to contain, sustain and script change whilst the drivers for this*

*change exist elsewhere. Why are there not more suicides in architecture if compromise is so painful, supping with the devil developers and meeting repulsive hedge fund investor so agonising, failure so abject and rewards so unjust?*

Where is the salon de refuses, of those who (do not) wish to participate?

# The Revolution will be Tweeted

## Re-building a Mind

There is always a risk that education may put you at  
odds with the tasteless, clueless philistines who run  
the world and whose lexicon stretches only to words  
like oil, golf, power and cheeseburger."

- Terry Eagleton <sup>xvi</sup>

To speak, to be so explicit at such a time, to adapt a line from the poet Paul Celan, seems to be the crime it always has been. Yet to speak and speak plainly is essential, and few architects can and are prepared to do it under the present circumstances. But what are the present circumstances? A fashionable uncertainty, fluid times, fast paced immediacy are all as attractive as a fashionable relativism. Anything goes, nothing means, 140 characters suffice! Are these such old issues that we no longer know how to dismiss them? A retreat from theory to theory has allowed those disengaged to de-radicalise further, to support indifference, frivolity and what can only be described as a rational inertia. Some like to go further with the abuse and describe this as the lazy fascism of (de) construction.

Take the blurb on a recent publication about 'Instant Architecture': it reads like a coffee advert. *"The good news is that it's cool to like any style of architecture. But don't waste your time looking aimlessly at all the unimportant stuff that stands in most cities. You should concentrate on those structures that rise above the ordinary. In addition, you shouldn't be afraid of expressing a fondness for some off-beat brand of design. In fact, the more esoteric your choice of style, the more likely you will be to impress your friends."* This relativism allowed is the relativism sought. Look for anything out of the ordinary. Seek the off-beat! Impress your friends! Intended or unintended, as the irony may be, a more impoverished way of looking at architecture could not be found. Don't waste your time. *All the unimportant stuff that stands in most cities?* This dismissal is impressively and devastatingly irrelevant, but widespread. I am writing this in Luang prabang on the side of the River Namkhan. I pass the poorest villages in the world. All the important stuff that still stands, that gives them life. I seethe at this dismissal. I cannot be alone.

Yet who is to say this attitude, this dismissal expressed by Instant Architecture like freeze-dried barista coffee brands, is not a smart agenda. Who is to say it is not representing the same fashionable agenda, the same cutting-edge

petulance that can fire any resistance to style, a blue-denim Darwinism to impress friends and colleagues in the world of the academe? One thing is certain, in everything about architecture that is uncertain today, no one seems to want to own up to the nonsense, the seduction of dazzling metaphors, the superfluous lift of history and the way one architect's ego can undermine another in order to achieve 'fame'. Just get a guitar and learn how to play. One has the feeling it is no longer necessary to mention a philosopher like Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze or Alain Badiou and their influence on architecture, so quickly is influence shifting and trends appearing and disappearing, and so irrelevant it is to most architects in the profession. Though Adorno tells us that every ecstasy prefers to take the path of re-communication rather than sin against its own concept by realizing itself, it is 're-communication' which today is suspect. What is architecture? What does it mean? How does it mean what it means?

Architecture has stopped meaning for us. It has been asked before: Has it ever meant? Are we allowed to repeat ourselves, wear the T-shirt sold in Thailand or Laos, which says on the front *Same Same*, and the back, *But Different!* We have gone through a period of at least two decades when these questions carried more alarm than is really possible for architecture to sustain. Architecture as

that higher art, supported by metaphysical elegance, or architecture as an arrogant private but alienated discourse. Or Architecture as that lower art, nearer the ground, an architecture with less of the heavenly about it. A kenotic architecture, self-emptying dignified by the skilled passion of building and construction; architecture not always lifted by architects and their metaphysical aching to be asked to perform more. Let's not be over pessimistic about this redundant condition in architectural thinking, theory, history and writing. The *degree zero* exists for all of us.

We might and should distrust language that we have come to treat loosely. We might also be wise to remain clear of the Constructivist agenda of essentialism and reductionism but there's no denying that no amount of re-scripting the architect's personal ideals and ideologies will bring us back to the desire to further social progress through architecture. Naivety is not the issue here, nor moral superiority, nor any prescriptive manual on how the architect should behave in specific instances; this is not an exercise in self-edification. If we do not begin to understand the deep subjectivity and unlistening narrowness of the last century, it may still the passion in our contemporary architecture this century. But passion is never so innocent or intention so willingly undistorted, which is precisely why it is no longer necessary to read

or attend to architectural journals, writing and or critical interpretations.

There are, of course, many architects who achieve through rigour a systematic, even spectacular blandness. An architect's personal evolution played with by ego and persona though skilfully contested within their own being, always remains somewhat admirably stubborn when faced with the black tie commerce of architecture itself. For many architects it has proved difficult to hold in good faith to many of the ideas inherent in what used to be admired as a (quasi?) socialist ideology. Many have been unable to circumvent the cocktail party.<sup>xvii</sup> It is not that architects no longer hold such assumptions and ideals, commonplace only 30 or 40 years ago, but it is the way architects today think these ideals and thinking can be re-shaped and should be re-shaped for any potential architecture. The false analogies between political agendas and the critical production of architecture - an alleged rhetoric of the radical or liberal left - is not so much the dead duck today. Even the attractive notion of another death of the architect, to many young architects and students, is a sleeping legacy likely to be awakened rather soon. The revolution though this time will not be televised it will be tweeted.



Any architect today faces the dilemma of resisting language yet being part of a world defined by the current hermetic vocabulary within the profession, and the media influence on the profession. By resisting misguided philosophical input and jargon, by minimising media engagement one might just survive but paradoxically remain forgotten. This is not an option that attempts visual dullness and modesty, however much the surface of buildings is layered and conforms to the international repertoire in high technology and journal imagery. I recall a time in Buenos Aires where Charles Correa lectured to students and I wondered why, at the time, he did not show his earlier pre-iconic 'wow-factor' architecture (he used this phrase) influenced by Rajasthan motifs and colour. It was a period when Postmodernism was redefining the era and architects had to appear to be doing more voodoo, more wow-factor than before. The seduction to public imagery and public symbolism suddenly meant that a competent Post-Corbusier hotel building in white modernist version 1.0 garb in Ahmedabad would not really demonstrate the iconic values the architect wished to claim for his work. Even the large airport in Delhi was left out. Its' competent modernist treatment particularly shoddy of course in the Indian climate. Instead, the iconography and echoes of the North Western Indian

desert communities of Rajasthan and Gujarat inspired the vernacular to become the 'new modern'.

It has always mystified me why architects are not forward in understanding and demonstrating the way their thinking has changed and developed over their projects. It would be worth knowing the wasted time, how work on this idea leads to that other idea. Do we all, architects or not, repress the unsteady and undirected in our thinking, thereby accepting the mask and illusion of certainty? So often lectures and presentations have nothing to do with sharing thoughts or investigating a process and the shape of thought itself. We learn next to nothing about the architect's being-in-question. Instead we get the advertising pitch, usually a catalogue of accepted and achieved success. The closed professional and privileged structure of architecture serves to strengthen this erasure and blinding, as anyone who has ever witnessed star architects arriving with a briefcase full of slides and pre-Powerpoint presentations.

Some architects in ego-mode have in recent decades gone even further and tried to control everything that is written about them as if - in the swim and rock 'n' roll of things - this is enough to get things right. In the swim of things of course, it is not. It shouldn't be but it is: the architectural

world is fine tuned to hold itself ransom to the gossip of its own limitations. Does it matter whether the architect has been insecure or even, in John Soane's case, a deeply unpleasant man? Does it matter how many characters have orchestrated their positions in history from the early days of being there at the right time, at the right place, behind the right person in the photograph that will remain in the archive? To deceive clients, to go for the chameleon, to hoodwink meetings and groups, to get a job worth dying for, was it so necessary to spend one's life doing this, buying a new racing yacht, learning to fly the jet plane, or driving the fastest car on the block? Is this necessary to prove honesty requires ultimately no loyalty whatsoever, to family, friends, colleagues, partners?

Architects are celebrated in books, histories and newspapers when it suits the world's writers, journalists, editors and historians to see them as heroes. Yet in many locales, in villages and towns all over the world, the buildings and dwelling that offer shelter are often defined not by architects but by the anonymous hands that have built them, altered them, and restored them. In our cities, however the civic image is defined by alleged heroic individuals, supported by their turbulent egos, their brave statements and their surviving tastes of the past. The pink elephants come and go in a discipline that has always

been open to what appears like accepted masquerading. This usually involves critical histories of architecture. Here it would be necessary to bring attention to a history of architecture even more selected, edited and let's agree, fictionalised, since the 1920s, a history now about to disappear, pulped into the wishful thinking of those lost decades of the 1920s and 1930s. Slipped into the jazz of that decade - the 1920s - are also the dreams of a serious if rapidly propagandized social and political agenda. This agenda was to find a resonance in both culture and society, in a rare albeit shaky optimism of clarity, reduction and essentialism. In architecture this was to coincide with the Bauhaus emerging out of Germany and contributing to social reform and political development. Sadly, that version of modern architecture (Version 1.0) interpreted often brilliantly if sparingly, as coming from Europe though setting out to be socially real and dynamic, looks as if it became over the next almost 100 years, socially unreal.

How did this happen to a movement, an orientated set of ideas and often a political position which, at certain times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, appeared according to the commentators to have so much social and cultural potential? Did architects add to this attitude with a quaint, undirected privilege that only they could fashion the

environment with an ego-charged autographed progress, whilst most building, housing and city infrastructure went on without them? Along with this dream, there also emerged that other quaint system associated with scientific thinking and the objectivity of indexing and conferencing; it was the way buildings, ideas for cities and planning were acknowledged, agreed upon, manifested and professionally closed. Whole clusters of thoughts, complex ideas and thinking systems, dissonance and non-linearity for example, ideas that owed much to the development of science, mathematics and even musical theory, were attributed to the individual architect. Suddenly the heroic architect was the owner of the building, the author of the idea, and thereby often became, by professional structure and protection, the sole guardian of progress. Despite the teamwork necessary to create, to build, to achieve any social advance in architecture and urban planning, the individual was and has so far remained supreme within the profession of architecture. Is it time to address this: or is this a naivety that has come and gone, leaving us to mourn the networks that attempt the invisible whilst society wants to reward the 'noisy' celebrities amongst us?

Alone in masquerading this imagined world of social progress, architects belong to a profession that claims to have invented the ideas necessary to form the proper

network of knowledge that is contained within building. Musicians might work alone, writers too, even filmmakers, though the latter have a whole crew that makes their work possible. Contrary to rumour, the architect has always worked with a team. Traditionally head of the team, this process has always been a contract, a condition of employment between two bodies, client and architect. The stories of disagreements between wealthy clients and truculent architects are legion. We know of the arrogance of Le Corbusier who told the client of the Savoye House, when informed of a leak, to get a bucket! Or similar! Many buildings, small or large, are often the result of these invisible hands, yet the signature often falls on the architect as the titular being responsible for the work. In many ways this has led to the architect holding responsibility in a narrowed, impoverished and often, unjust sovereignty. Even today many of the large firms of architects that contribute to contemporary architecture produce work that is the result of drafted teams, collaborative networks, contributing consultants and advisors all who invariably produce a building or a product greater than the idea originally imagined by the singular architect and/or designer/engineer. It is this varied and relational team that contributes to, can instigate and is responsible for much of the design. When the system is professionally acknowledged, a building can

have a signature, today like Hadid, Gehry, Foster, yesterday like Lubetkin, Gropius or Goldfinger. Using this silent code of hubris might be argued is important; architecture's fabricated realm always included the hands and minds of others in and around the One.

Today there appears little serious acknowledgment of the complexity and collaboration within contemporary architecture. Buildings cropped together, sampled, or re-assembled may get the necessary stamp of Herzog de Meuron, Koolhaas, Foster and Gehry (the names regularly change in a cycle of about 20 years) but the labour, of both mind and manual, history and meta-history, fiction and non-fiction, clearly belongs to others besides the figure-heads. It is uncertain as how this has masqueraded as a privileged system that keeps architecture tied to a creative act like music or writing, instead of the cooperative, collaborative act that it is and may eventually turn out to be, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To break the mould of this divine being - to invite the death of the architect once more: is there any other purpose for our words today?

Long before the developments in linguistics and language explored the role of the author in the text and the *langue* or *parole* spoken, the architect was the heroic guardian not only of progress but of the ideas that went into this

progress. The architectural profession, around the world, often responded with a structure of competition and medals that supported this process. Instead of the obvious inter-relationship of ideas and theories, inter-disciplinary thinking leading toward multiple and changing expressions in building, the profession has remained tied to this outdated idea of originality and singularity. The desire to stamp one's artistic and aesthetic presence on ideas that have often come from diverse impulses, backgrounds and sources, strong in the last century, still exists today in the need to see a building branded. Some architects continue to react to this world that has taken architecture far into the ready-change, off-the-shelf realm of advertising. What can be done about this will depend on a re-framing of the current structures that perpetuate architecture's privilege. If any paradigmatic shift is to be taken seriously, it would have to speak of a post-branding world, and imagine the outrage and anarchism necessary to resist the consequences. In this sense it is no alarm to speak of another death of the architect and the emergence of architecture as open source.

There are obvious underlying rumours about the architect under these fluid and uncertain conditions today that still successfully remain unrevealed and mask the inner process. One such rumour is that the alleged left-

orientated belief and hold on the notion that architecture can still be a contributing force for social reform is now dead in the water. This is as untrue as it has been deflected into other practices that momentarily exclude the architect. The development of architecture, despite the architects and the profession, is now directed and takes place under forces of stricter control, within civic and political structures that in effect marginalize the architects' visions. When professional and accreditation bodies speak of a crisis within the profession of architecture and the 'disconnect' within teaching, it is this crisis they have in mind. Whilst the architect presents their thoughts and values in architecture as a lecture, re-scripts ideas of a new paradigm that finds new audiences, these ideas struggle against the call for the entertaining, the charismatic reduction of architecture to a more familiar storyline. When this happens the writer looks once more for the crevices, the unwritten, and the 'unspace' that lies within the crack. "I believe that our civic and moral conscience should influence the man first and then the writer." To Italo Calvino's world we should add the architect.

Current media-driven market spectacles finding their way into architecture make the journey and complex process within architecture look like a shorter road than it actually is. But in this Calvino is also our guide, there is no other

route; it is long road and we cannot but be political. The question of architecture's relevance in times of alleged selfishness, consumption and corporate greed may prove to be more about radical confidence and anarchism than it is about inevitable but slow political change. The question is even more provocative: is it right to become an architect in times of radical submission, social conservatism and hijacked achievement?

The death of the architect is not in question really, but few can deny that architecture has become a profession that allows the architect to succeed whilst managing to gloss over and even avoid the serious implications of civic and moral acts. It is quite possible the architect has moved from *homo faber* to *homo politicus*, but is yet to move to answering the moral issues implicit in the ethical framing of responsibility. This could present us, if we wish, with the opportunity to explore the moral issues of the architect in terms of human existence, and specifically the architect's being. Self-understanding, long derided, becomes for the architect a measure not only of response to current world conditions, but a response to the conditions demanded of him or herself. The architect should never stop asking the questions asked of them: a critical self-reflection on what it means to be a moral creature within architecture. This is not a position of hubris, an ego-game or a revival of the

theory of virtue, but an enquiry aimed at understanding the conditions for what is considered success and failure within the discipline. What should we seek to realise within architecture, structured as we are by rules, laws, duties and responsibilities? What endows one's actions in life and architecture with worth?

As we observe thinking, history and theory disappearing into itself, sometimes hopefully, sometimes less so, there is a real likelihood that architects less adventurous, less adept in thinking, less questioned by intellectual doubt and worrying existence, will not only prove successful, they will begin to shape the profession beyond those who wish to bring critical reflection, self-enquiry and even creative solipsistic reveries into architectural production. This might be hard on the philosophers and theorists but the irreverence is clear: most of the spectacular buildings produced recently should be seen more or less as irrelevant 'autobiographies'. Most of the architects successfully negotiating software and share-ware have opted for a radical subjectivity. Few, as far as we can tell, have attacked or returned to the basic issues and values that concerned the early Modernists from versions 1.0 or 2.0. How, for example, do replicated and repeated systems best help some of the real issues in architecture: dwelling, global warming, sheltering and surviving? The attempt to sustain

a shared visual language by architects has long been fractured – irrevocably? – and it is increasingly unlikely we will reach a stage of social utopia through the software esperanto that we see all around: which is why the public often hears academics and architects mourning that their ideas are not listened to and other alleged theory-free architects happy to put forward a reduced thinking that passes for progress and social development in architecture.

De-limiting architecture (or de-skilling architects) is not a new concept. Nor are the personal motives and existential underpinning of some architects to eradicate the boundaries between life and architecture. Whilst there has been a huge advance in readily accessible software and imaging systems, there has also been an equivalent movement to de-limit architecture. Already in the early 1980s with the emergence of Postmodernism, notions like pluralism and multiplicity ensured increased non-hierarchical systems. The fondness for terms like indeterminacy, formlessness and de-territorialization crept in like stealth bombers and slowly – recognized or not - co-opted architecture's intellectual project and a confused Postmodern condition opting for more graspable, historical and even static agendas. Often the profession used vague critical notions to re-assert a formal repertoire

and design practice that assumed, misleadingly, shared historic and symbolic desire by architects.

By so doing, the necessity to avoid theoretical underpinning for architecture that appeared to stem from *Critical Theory* led to the profession losing contact with its own pedagogies. It has also led architectural practice in many countries to confuse theoretical constructs as prescriptions for a methodology of design. At the same time art and architecture, approaching architectural issues from different directions, began to converge. Artists explored space, urbanism and imagery, siting and re-siting their art through the use of the moving image. Digital imaging systems increased the development of installation art and the contest of relational activities previously beyond the brief of the practising artist. Artists began encroaching on areas considered the privileged domain of architects. By so doing, roles were questioned. Was the artist or architect closest to re-shaping public and private space through the increase in digital imaging systems? Was this an Open Urbanism which the architects could never imagine? The death of one would lead to the re-birth of the other, and vice versa. Would this lead to a new soft profession of image management and control, just as event management now uses architects, designers, artists and graphic artists to shape or design these transitional

environments? Is such a 'soft profession' irrelevant to the existing architectural profession? The result was and remains more hybrid, fluid and relational.

Architects and artists merged and began designing spaces and buildings that offer themselves as fluid, event spaces. The profession of course finds it difficult to deal with a fused condition whether Critical Theorists call it the new architecture of the 'provisional', hybrid architecture or the 'ephemeral'. An architecture changing and evolving constantly, ultimately with no destination, no arrival, would also become a programmable and programmatic event run by artists. As relational art explored participation, so architecture as open source could not be far away. Some of the best firms are now openly creating this Open urbanism. Software replaced process with programme and production – previously idiosyncratic and individual – was far from that. The enigmatic building turned itself inside out into an art that could redeem individual signature in a production soon to become serialised cultural imagery. The illusion would last as long as it took an architectural student to understand how to scan a paper tissue, digitalise it, re-digitalise back into space and function, thereby reversing the code back to geometric potential by material innovation and technology. Serialised architecture emerged.

The mismatch between lost utopias, soft utopias, exhausted utopias and dystopias wishing for good, individual designs of quality and durability and the requirements for social and cultural sensual productions began to sit well within the corporate field. It is a mismatch that can now not only be addressed in conventional architectural practices. The models are wider, they have opened to inter-disciplinary teams and practices. Quite possibly much of the seductive critical thinking, the brilliant immediacy of new theory, appropriations and transpositions of existing theory that made for ideas for the higher art in architecture may actually have always been an abuse of the personal intellect. The intellectual responsibility of both commentator and critic shifted in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the weight of language threatened everything architecture could achieve. Few architects pose the cunning contradiction: the network of limitations within the architecture discipline might also be a way of sustaining support for new directions.

If the architect is indeed marginalised by forces larger than the discipline, under a power that is exercised over it, what does this imply for the architect? Useful, logical but ultimately personal dissent, or a negation by other, more powerful means? Which is why many architects today

find themselves trapped within a redundant engagement. As Moholy Nagy wrote: “the provocative statement is constantly annulled by checkbook and cocktail party. Any restraining activity, if we pursue Moholy-Nagy’s position, implies not only acceptance of those external restraints puts on architects, but the conditions which self-restraint then puts back on the discipline. The critical production of architecture always came second to the commercial conditions that produced architecture. Those that live with this are beginning to produce – stealthily and intelligently - significant work.

Professionally, there has always been both an embarrassment to do well as an architect yet also to hold radical but inevitably slipping ideals. Yet, despite all the embarrassed laughter and sniggering, the leftist orientation is strongest when it is up against the wall, as it is in many masked architects. To some, losing their ‘religion’ might have been disenchantment. More significant will be those architect not trapped in the inability to transfer this conscience into the next stage of life.

For architects, we have now reached the time to re-build the mind. Any revolution will no longer be televised it will be tweeted.



- i** S.Panic, *The Curse of the Cerebral*, (1994) ; Paul Goodman, *Growing up Absurd*. (xxxx); A.Balfour, *On the Characteristic and Beliefs of the Architect*, JAE,40#2(1987) cited in *The Favored Circle, The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*, Garry Stevens, (1998)
- ii** William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, (XXXX) p 52
- iii** W.H.Auden *Forwards and Afterwords* (New York, Vintage 1974) p.78. For a development of this see in relation to language see Michael Higgins, *Heretic Blood The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton*, (Stoddart,Toronto, New York 1998) pp. 150-155.
- iv** Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, & *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p.87
- v** Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle*, MIT Press, 2001, p.80
- vi** Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, London, 1967,p.25.
- vii** Theodor Adorno *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p.87
- viii** John Updike, *Roger's Version*, Penguin, p.171.
- ix** Joseph Brodsky, *Less than One*, selected essays, p.27 Penguin 1987.
- x** Consider Architecture and war, the architecture of war. Cheney and Rumsfeld were often referred to as the 'architects of the war'. A trip to the North West Frontier Province offers a different script for architecture and war. These wars are not only reverse-engineered but the concept is now called reverse-architectures. George Crile's 'Charlie Wilson's War' should be required reading for architecture students. Compared to the film the book reverses the war and the architecture of the NWFP, and makes the situation much more a reality than the mere satire of the film.
- xi** Czeslaw Milosz, *Modes of Eccentric Vision*, Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary Vols 1,2,& 3*. (xxxx) And for the tempered journey in between these two Polish writers-in-exile see Adrian Codescu, *The Disappearance of Outside* (xxxx)
- xii** Restless visions? There is always the coincidence, the wonderful use of serendipity. The novel *Restless* for example by William Boyd comes into my hands as I wrote this essay. In it the twin narratives of Eva Delectorskaya from 1939 to 1942 and her daughter Ruth Gilmartin, are threaded through the book. Eventually, the restless

journey collapses together as Ruth learns the truth about her Mother in the present which is also the past London (1979) and the time of the Iranian revolution The architecture of the book is simple and sovereign. Boyd cuts this period stepping back and forth effortlessly, just as in an imagined architecture might go from one imagined world (construction, structure, façade, section) to another; the past only scripts what the present might like to take from it. An invisible architecture is nearer the form of Boyd's novel than we think. Architecture schools don't usually use such material however considering it perhaps too random. Whilst the profession seeks students who can communicate, the profession also ignores that to change communication is also to change architecture. Restless, William Boyd, Bloomsbury (2007).

- xiii** Cross Reinhold Martin's *Utopian Realism* with J.G.Ballard – scrape out the jargon of the first with the visions of the second.
- xiv** Not so: refer to Thomas Merton *The Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, especially the fragments on Bach and Kennedy.
- xv** This became even more interesting (though heavily written) in the way Popper tried to re-write the misrepresentation that he was (not) a 'logical positivist'. He ignores his debate with Kuhn which became important in the 1950s/1960 as Kuhn became the normative scholar unable to deal with the radical misrepresentations surrounding his 'structure of scientific revolutions' (used in 1968 protest period alongside Marcuse). All this wedged in between more misrepresentations from the epistemological anarchy of Feyerabend (*Against Method*) and the new pragmatism of Richard Rorty (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*). Steve fuller (founder of social epistemology) goes into all this in some detail in his book 'Kuhn vs Popper' (xxxx)
- xvi** Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, Penguin, London (2004)
- xvii** see Albers and Moholy Nagy. *From the Bauhaus to the New World*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume, Yale (2006)

The Phoney Island of the Mind  
Volume 1:

# The Information Isn't Frozen, You Are!

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