

Labyrinth of Images

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Published in "Labyrinth of Images," *Architecture Australia* March (Melbourne: Architecture Media, 1993): 71–3

Contemporary practice shrinks the role of the architect from that of an active agent in the construction of community and its structures to that of an exterior designer or interior specialist.¹

— Diane Ghirardo

Contemporary architectural practice is in a state of pluralism. postmodernism, deconstructivism, neo-modernism and regionalism all have currency. This heterogeneity is not the critical cultural endeavour of an un-coerced society but, as critic Hal Foster explains, a "cultural dominant", a conception which allows the coexistence of a range of different features.²

In a pluralist state, criticism tends to be dispersed and rendered impotent. Equivalence is granted to various directions and "difference" becomes desirable to market operation. The supreme commodity value in architecture—style—is revised and we are given the freedom to choose. Pluralism presents the illusion of change and the illusion of democracy while furthering the capitalist need to innovate and yet change nothing—a role previously reserved for fashion.

An important characteristic of the various directions within our pluralist condition is the neutral attitude to content. Attention is focused almost exclusively on the signifier and on the immediacy of experience: surface effects drawn over a neutral construction. Architecture is projected primarily as image and presented for consumption, with the various styles competing in the market.

Commodification

Commodification is the process whereby the social relations behind the production of a commodity, together with its 'use value,' are eroded and masked by the abstraction of the market as 'exchange value' becomes primary. Social labour is similarly separated from its product to become a mere factor in production, and accordingly is treated in instrumental terms. Commodification provides a universal basis for linking everyone into an identical system of market valuation. The human conflicts produced by such abstract valuation are significant, but were mediated through the operation of ideology—understood as a distortion of reality, or justifying mask for specific interests. Importantly, art and architecture offered an alternative, critical, reconciliation.

However in our contemporary advanced consumer society, art and architecture no longer are a separate, reconciliatory and possibly critical force but are fully integrated with the instrumental operation of capital. Such complete infestation of commodification allows the disappearance of ideology, as consumption itself becomes enough to reproduce and legitimise the system. Symptomatic is the way we measure Christmas in terms of consumption and refer to our citizens as mere "consumers."

History

History is being reduced to available and immediate images for consumption while the social reality of historical events and their pressure on the present recedes. Mass media in the form of publications, advertising, television and video ensure our historical isolation through the reduction of world history to multiple images on television, nostalgia films and museum culture.

Architecture has also contributed to this distortion of history. Postmodernism effectively erased historical content, reducing the past to a vast collection of value-free images for 'double-coding' and assembly over neutral constructions: Western classicism for the classicists, art deco/*Metropolis* for the slick corporate practices, early Le Corbusier for the neo-modernists and Russian constructivism for the deconstructivists. All sources are devoid of social content.

Mesmerised and distracted by these images while our sense of real history recedes, we become incapable of forming critical representations of our present experience.

Postmodern Architecture

As we know from the innumerable architectural publications with which we are bombarded, the historical postmodernism of Michael Graves and the like reacts against Modernism's abstraction. It seeks a return to history and the humanist tradition through the development of narrative ornament and figure. Deconstructivist postmodernism on the other hand assumes an anti-humanist decentering of humanity and is against the return to representation. Deconstructivist postmodernism may be a more accurate position-paper on our present condition, but while historical postmodernism's comforting historical images may be falsely reassuring we have to bear in mind that the destabilising images of deconstructivism are no longer received, nor I suspect intended, as critical. Both postmodernisms focus exclusively on the signifier, and the immediacy of experience, having little or no interest in content. Both project architecture primarily as image: image drawn over social instrumentality.

While historical postmodernism is well established in Australia, particularly in large commercial practices, deconstructivism is confined to the architectural schools and the planimetric shifts of contemporary practitioners. In Australia there also is a certain attraction and market for regionalism but where this work is image-based and, for example, aestheticises the landscape, it also reduces architecture to image.

Postmodern Theory

Contemporary cultural theory, as offered by Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, attempts a critique of the dominating operation of Western ideology, but rejects any totalising and Utopian alternative, such as that offered by Karl Marx, as reductive and necessarily containing repressive ideology. So-called "postmodern thinkers" condemn broad interpretive analysis, doubt the existence of universal or elemental truths, and above all seek to avoid forms of political oppression legitimised by resort to "reason." The focus and context of postmodern thought is the plural and the specific, the fragmentary and the chaotic.

Foucault's analysis of the micro-politics of power in different interstitial localities—prisons, asylums, hospitals—reveals the operation of power built up independently of any systematic strategy of class domination. Utopian schemes cannot explain what happens at each locale nor escape what Foucault describes as "the

power-knowledge relation”
in non-repressive ways.

Liotard also believes knowledge to be the principal source of power. But for him the operation of power and repression lies in the multiple “language games” of different social groups within contemporary society. Lyotard accepts the flexibility and contradictions of these heterogeneous language games in the interest of openness but is concerned that only selective games give rise to institutions—universities, legal systems etc.—that control knowledge. His heterogeneous acceptance attempts to open the entry for excluded sections of society such as women, gays and other minorities.

Derrida believes the logocentric philosophical tradition, with its domination of metaphysics and strong assertions about truth, is more accurately understood as ideology. As Derrida wishes to avoid exposing one source of suppression only to replace it with another, his own deconstructive terms (deconstruction, difference, trace, etc.) are subject to analysis and are posited as “undecideables” with no claim to single meaning. Meaning is constantly deferred.

Postmodern theory, in its determination to avoid promoting alternative sources of domination, adopts the strategy of dispersal, embraces fragmentation and pluralism, minimising the authority of any single group. However, this occurs at the expense of some coherence and may diffuse resistance to more central forms of social manipulation and coercion. Neo-Marxist critics such as Frederic Jameson and Alex Callinicos are critical of postmodern culture and suspect that such fragmentary strategies may unintentionally align with the forces of commodification in a “plurified” capitalism.

Postmodern theory, however, is by nature difficult to collect and generalise. The revelations offered by such disciplined and specific investigation are valuable in exposing the repressive operation of ideology and are important in the development of a more liberated and complete social body.

The Modern Project

The Enlightenment project of human emancipation through rational social organisation turned, as we know, full circle. The oppression of myth, religion and superstition were lifted —only to be replaced by the “rational,” instrumental operation of capital, consumerism and the illusion of democracy.

In architecture, the naive pursuit of purified expression and social content appropriate to a “liberated” society was defeated by this same “rationality.” Modern totalising Utopias promising liberation contained their own alternative, repressive ideology.

We therefore find ourselves isolated as “modern individuals,” politically marginalised and distracted from the impoverishment of our experience by a continuous chain of production and consumption. It is doubtful that we have enough confidence or energy to rescue this blighted “modern project” of liberation.

Homelessness

In “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Martin Heidegger uses the example of a farmhouse in Germany’s Black Forest to explain a deep and complete form of “dwelling.” Dwelling, for Heidegger, requires building and artefacts to articulate and support an integrated and harmonious human presence. It is a world of traditional, cultural and spiritual connections to place. However our contemporary condition makes this poetic form of dwelling an impossibility for all but perhaps those, as yet “unliberated” indigenous people.³

The myths and rituals from which we have been “liberated” cannot be recovered. Nor can we be compensated by the superficial decoration of our buildings with empty symbols and motifs. Such desperate strategies only confirm our impoverishment, as does the invention of “contemporary myths” in the work of American practitioners such as John Hedjuk.

We cannot overcome our modernity. We can, however, acknowledge our homelessness.

Silence

The “silence” in the work of Mies van der Rohe is such an acknowledgment. A silence perhaps at its most compelling in the Farnsworth house, Illinois. Here, liberated humanity is suspended from the world in which it can no longer dwell. The sparse and purified platform permits no masks of comforting self deception but instead confronts us with the reality of our estrangement, while the natural world is only preserved through emphatic separation from our corrupting presence. The work is at once beautiful, true and terrifying.

It is only from such silent revelation of our impoverishment that an authentic contemporary architecture is possible. These silent and rigorous assertions of our homelessness, most powerful in the work of Mies van der Rohe, are also characteristics of Louis Kahn's and more recently Tadao Ando's architecture.

Tectonics

If contemporary architecture is to affirm and move beyond such melancholic silence, a means of expression capable of resisting commodification is vital. Such inherently resistant expression is, in fact, the basic medium of architecture—tectonics. Architecture as craft—not architecture as sculpture, text, double-coding or package marketing. A re-grounding of architecture within tectonics is now essential.

It is important to understand tectonics as not merely a reference to the structure and construction of a building, but as the medium with which we work. Tectonic expression necessarily is a selective and formally controlled process perhaps better explained as the “poetics of construction.” Poetry, understood as the formal construction of alternative realities within reality. Constructs, which through their resolution, have the capacity to comment on and critically reveal the nature of the human condition.

Tectonic expression cannot be easily reduced to image and is inherently resistant to commodification through the clear assertion of reality. It is the antithesis of Robert Venturi's “decorated shed,” which aligned architecture with commercial building and marketing techniques, to become merely decorated building.

The nature of tectonic expression in architecture is well illustrated in the work of Louis Kahn. The library designed by Kahn at Exeter, New Hampshire is not merely the articulate expression of construction and structure, and the adoration of the joint, but a critical expression of the program and nature of our social institutions in the structure and construction of the work. The works of Jørn Utzon serve as equally clear examples of tectonic expression, in particular the church built at Bagsværd, Denmark. Clearly these are not buildings of surface effects or mere images, but complete works of architecture in depth through the plans, sections, structure, construction and materials.

Content

An authentic contemporary architecture through the construction of alternative realities will comment on and reveal the nature of our human condition. The specific function of each architectural project focuses such intentions. Institutions, commercial enterprises and 'community' all are accommodated, formed, embodied and represented in building. It is in the critical interpretation of these functions that it may be helpful to draw on the work of contemporary thinkers such as Foucault and Lyotard.

However amongst the most important objectives for contemporary architecture is the need to repoliticise our desiccated public sphere of communication. The "political" public realm must be affirmed as an alternative to the isolation and indifference of the suburbs. Architecture and public places need to be appropriate for citizens rather than consumers.

Site

Architecture by nature is site-specific. However, it is important to understand this specificity at a deeper level than the mere aestheticisation of the Australian landscape or the application of various sun-shading devices over an otherwise neutral construction.

The locations for architecture have a social as well as a physical aspect. Places are not only urban or 'natural' landscapes, but are marked by human inhabitation embodying social memory and aspiration. Sites are already rich in cultural expression—not only that of relocated western culture but also the deep indigenous culture of this land. In the meeting of these cultures, it is difficult to avoid the destruction or the reduction of indigenous culture to commodity status. It may not be possible to move beyond an acknowledgment of indigenous culture that will inevitably affirm the depth of our own homelessness.

An architecture of its site will reveal what is already present—that is, it will manifest the social and physical character of a specific site.

The work of art is the material's highest form of existence once it has been removed from its natural surroundings. All other forms describe the material's gradual devaluation, ending in its complete violation in the production of objects for daily use and in today's common architecture. The process of architectural design interests us as an instrument for the perception of and engagement with reality. This is where we search for the ethical and political contents of our work.

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— Jacques Herzog