

The [Im]Possibility of Slowness

A note on globalisation, ideology and speed in contemporary architecture

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May I lead you to the shores of a mountain lake? The sky is blue, the water green and everything is profoundly peaceful. Mountains and clouds are reflected in the lake, and so are houses, farmyards, courtyards and chapels. They do not seem man-made, but more like the product of God's workshop, like the mountains and trees, the clouds and the blue sky. And everything breathes beauty and tranquillity.

Ah, what is that? A false note in this harmony. Like an unwelcome scream. In the centre, beneath the peasants' homes which were created not by them, but by God, stands a villa: Is it the product of a good or a bad architect? I do not know, I only know that peace, tranquillity and beauty are no more. Why does the architect both good and bad violate the lake...¹

— Adolf Loos

Trivial

Quentin Tarantino, the writer and director of two brilliant films, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, is rightly acclaimed as one of the most promising filmmakers of our time. Tarantino has detected that speech at speed becomes abstract, a kind of self-referential game. He presents our conversation as a language game centred around consumerist trivia and product obsession and illustrates our exceptional ability to say nothing in this game, at voluble length.

Interlaced within these flat, continuous and humorous language games, and seemingly almost more trivial than the content of our conversations, are acts of extreme violence, which disturbingly somehow also seem funny.

This distinctive mix of immediacy, consumerist obsession and extreme violence skilfully woven by Tarantino is a defining product of the *fin de siècle*. His work may indeed represent the final stage of postmodernism, where an art work is emptied of all content, stripped of politics, metaphysics, and moral and ethical interest. Tarantino mirrors the conditions and values of postmodern existence: a contemporary life disconnected from the concreteness of existence, where

we can be more interested in the price of consumables than in the question of being.

More

The cultural context of our contemporary postmodern crises is evident in the emphasis on the signifier over the signified, on language over being. We have rejected the Utopian meta-theories of modernism, with its logocentric domination of metaphysics, as oppressive

ideology, and we seem to have overcome modernity's existential crisis through simple acquiescence in our alienation. Ironically, we have done this at the same time as recuperating the imagery of modernism.

Alienation no longer bothers us: we accept and indulge in our isolation and separateness. We are suspended within disconnected, universalising zones of consumption and mobility, freed from the weight of content and meaning, absorbing ourselves with appearances, efficiency, image and interest rates. Only the most extreme acts of transgression, of human violence and environmental vandalism, momentarily disturb us in our abstract flotation.

We are imbued with the ideology of globalisation, inflation and technology to the extent that we are primarily shareholders or subjects of the free market, rather than citizens of the state. Information overwhelms us, yet we understand less and less. Information has become the ultimate commodity. It travels now at over 500,000 times the velocity at which people and goods move, but we are still frustrated: we want it faster.

Internet

For a price all can now have their say in the ultimate abstract realm of communication, the Internet, a worldwide structure of communication connecting (and isolating) everyone—as does the world market—into an identical system. And yet this vast network leaves virtually no physical traces. While the Internet provides everyone with an opportunity to speak, is this freedom of speech, democracy, or merely a Babel-fest where everyone can equally have their say and be ignored?

Speed

Speed and information are our obsessions, and hardly anyone actually makes anything anymore. While architects deal in information and don't actually make anything either, our entire purpose and meaning depend on fabricating/building. What is the impact of the angel of speed?

Building processes themselves have changed relatively little: they are not significantly quicker, but the speed and volume of information surrounding architectural projects have exploded. Buildings are now developed within a sea of information: more and more and more information is required to construct a building, and despite the apparent speed at which it travels, the sheer volume of information now more than consumes anytime saved. Submissions, responses, quality assurance, just-in-time management: more information engulfs our projects, but to what end? Is the work better or even quicker, or is it more compromised, more wasteful?

Speed frequently squanders what we hold most precious and what it is intended to overcome—time. We rush ever more hectically, transmit information ever more quickly and in greater volume, but paradoxically we also have less and less time. Any time that may be saved is to be quickly invested in the consumption of new goods or indeed in the production or processing of more information. Speed, Change and Efficiency are now values in themselves: ends rather than means.

Our postmodern world is a world of consumerist obsession where needs are so completely transformed and distorted by ideology and advertising, and through technology, that we only want what is current, follow the dictates of fashion, and measure the success of Christmas through consumer spending.

Quentin Tarantino perfectly expresses this all, demonstrating that what is of interest to us is not any loss of being but the quality of the coffee or the speed and efficiency with which we can clean out the car.

So what is the place of architecture and culture, if it is not wholly integrated into this market system of consumerist products?

Postmodernisms

The architectural landscape of the contemporary postmodern condition seems to be emerging from a period of heterogeneity. Within the last ten years there is evidence that the emphasis of contemporary work has moved from context, history, identity, art envy and directions in French philosophy towards a greater homogeneity and universality that may be related to the processes of globalisation. Central to this development in contemporary architecture is an apparent return to Modernism, or perhaps a neo-modernism, universal to the extent that it may need to be considered as a new cultural dominant.

Within this pervasive cultural dominant there remain residual and varied directions or styles, all granted a certain equivalence and each servicing particular market demands.

Still commercially popular is historical postmodernism, either in the form of a kind of neo-metropolis in the city, or the falsely reassuring images common to residential suburbs. There are various forms of deconstructivist postmodernism, with their destabilising images now assuming a high-art market value. deconstructivist postmodernism may reflect more accurately our present condition; but while historical postmodernism, with its comforting and familiar images, may be falsely reassuring, we have to consider that the destabilising images of deconstructivism are no longer received, nor intended, as critical. Much of this work has failed to move beyond literal architectural interpretations of complex constructs borrowed from contemporary philosophy, so frequently presented as literal formal fragments, oblique angles or folds. In this guise, the ultimate form of expression is the exhibition, the conference paper, the printed or electronic image. Even more than historical postmodernism, which retained a populist ideal, deconstructivist postmodernism is projected as high art for the elite.

Recently it has been suggested, primarily by Charles Jencks, that a new form of postmodernism derived from developments of nonlinearity in mathematics and science is the correct avant garde. This is an architecture inspired by nonlinear dynamical systems and chaos theory, so-called new science (although not so new). Eisenman, Libeskind, Gehry, and Ashton Raggatt McDougall are all apparently exponents of this New Science-Postmodernism.²

Despite the apparent variety in direction, these postmodernisms focus primarily on the signifier, on the immediacy of experience: there is a neutral attitude towards content. With very few exceptions, architecture is projected as image, surface effects drawn over neutral constructions, with the various directions and styles competing for consumption in the market modernism?

But what of the seeming return to modernism or neo-modernism—or perhaps both within this pluralist postmodernism? Is there really a return to the modern project of human emancipation and liberation, and what possible relevance can it have to postmodern existence? Or is this return to modernity better understood as merely the predictable swing of the pendulum of fashion: a retro-modernism exploiting ironic nostalgia for a century almost past? Or an updating of syntax relative to market opportunity, acknowledging the reduction of architecture to commodity, style, or designer-product: more form than content? Is this return to modernity simply reflective of a general exhaustion with the endless images of a postmodernism that now seems fleeting, more difficult and weaker than we first imagined? In other words, have we just given up and gone back to what we know, what we know failed, but what we know nevertheless?

Contradiction

In any event, what of the irony of a return to modernity: how can it be possible, when returning contradicts the essence of modernity? modernity by its nature is directed towards the future. It overtakes the present. The avant garde is by definition forward and must not risk turning from the future to look back on the wreckage. Is not a return to modernity a contradiction in terms?

Contemporary international modernism is, without doubt, a reaction against the various incantations of postmodernism; but also it seems linked to the processes and ideology of globalisation and the associated homogeneity. Much of this work is characterised by fully-glazed, expressionless building forms, neutral boxes projecting an insubstantial transparency and a conscious lack of substance. Rendered to the level of the poetic though careful detailing, these works frequently project a deliberate homogeneity and anonymity. Symbolism and metaphorical allusion, so fundamental to postmodernism, are foregone in lieu of a fetish of surface and material. It may be that market forces, globalisation and consumerism are now being expressed without the rhetoric of place, history or radical protest, and without any false pretence of meaning; and this may represent a first step towards a more authentic and critical contemporary architecture, or merely a simple acquiescence.

The context of the neo-modern is a contemporary world characterised by non-place, pseudo-public realms and consumption disguised as community or individual expression. Perhaps the expanding horizon of information and knowledge, and the extension of possibilities through the electronic media, make the world, in a sense, more accessible, more familiar; but at the same time, this extended territory is less and less meaningful. More and more often we experience a zone or space where we interface in some fleeting social simulation, at speed, rather than experience a place in which it is simply possible to be and to meet. Airports, shopping malls, hotels and other transit zones are non-places of consumption and mobility, encouraging thoughtless, constant action and offering no moment or place to stay. Even our image-conscious apartment/retail complexes are more investment locations, designer products, and frames in which to be seen rather than places to actually be.

We have an overwhelming amount of information, space, stimulation, simulation, individualisation, and speed, but so little sense of being, community or place, and so little time.

Ideology and the Seagram Building

Of all the arts, architecture has the most direct and unmediated relationship with the economy and society itself. While Western society has experienced many changes and transformations since the Industrial Revolution, the basic organising and overriding principle of social and economic life has remained the capitalist production of profit. The attraction of capitalism is not difficult to understand: the private accumulation of wealth and individualism are powerful influences, and capitalist modernisation has achieved real and positive gains for society. This includes reduction of nature-imposed necessities, contact between different societies through the formation of the world market, and new cultural possibilities brought about by the stimulation of new wants and needs, and perhaps most important, the possibility of wealth and access to technology.

However, all this has been achieved at considerable cost to humanity—in the forms of violence, oppression, and the destruction of traditions—as the valuation of all activity has been reduced to the calculation of profit. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.³

The massive upheavals, social violence and conflicts of capitalism were mediated through the operation of ideology—ideology understood as a distortion of reality, or justifying mask to specific interests, or perhaps best as Hal Foster suggests, the limitation of thought in such a way that social conflicts and historical contradictions are magically resolved. The bourgeois revolutionary slogan liberty, equality and fraternity, for instance, or the scientific positive secularism of the nineteenth century, are examples of ideology, as is our more recent corporatist ideology of the market place, with its miraculous cure-all, world trade. Think of the unquestioning, almost religious zeal with which we pursue privatisation and globalisation. “Debt as the devil” and “Kill inflation” are the catch-cries of this line of socioeconomic myth-making that glorifies the service economy and legitimises financial speculation. The consequences of such ideology are an oppressive conformity and passivity: it is the market that makes the decisions. At its command we are prepared to disassemble, cut and restructure our social systems.

If the will of the market requires us to abandon a town or abandon a community, so be it.

However, a quite separate reconciliation of the human conflicts within capitalism is attempted by culture.

Throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, culture’s attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable frequently either confronted or tried to compensate the modern alienated condition.

As Franca Moretti remarks: “While capitalist society is unthinkable without the scientific and technical progress reflected in the separation of intellect and morality, it is equally unthinkable without the incessant attempt to annul that separation and remedy it, an attempt to which the extraordinary and apparently inexplicable proliferation of aesthetic activities that distinguishes capitalism bears witness.”⁴

During the modernist period, the critical reconciliation offered by art and architecture maintained its separation from the instrumental operation of ideology only through turning inwards and exploring increased abstraction in an attempt to get behind the surface and the immediate to reveal essential meaning.

However, as art and architecture became increasingly withdrawn, capitalism—through the development of the mass media, advertising and technology—began to penetrate previously uncommodified areas, to the extent that in late-twentieth-century advanced capitalism, culture is no longer a separate reconciliatory and, possibly, critical force, but is fully integrated in the operation of capital. Culture is commodified and extended through the mass media and advertising to penetrate our unconscious. Such a complete infestation of commodification may even allow the disappearance of ideology, as Jameson observes: “The practices of consumption and consumerism themselves become enough to reproduce and legitimise the system, no matter what ‘ideology’ you happen to be committed to. No abstract ideas, beliefs, ideologies, or philosophical systems, but rather immanent practices of daily life may now occupy the functional position of ‘ideology’ within a purified Advanced Capitalism.”⁵

The point at which Modern abstraction, and the ability of architecture and culture to be a reconciliatory force independent of capitalist ideology, reached its limit can be precisely located with the construction of the Seagram Building on Park Avenue, New York, in 1958.

As revealed by Manfredo Tafuri:

The “almost nothing” became a “big glass”...reflecting images of the urban chaos that surrounds the timeless Miesian purity...It accepts [the shift and flux of phenomena], absorbs them to themselves in a perverse multi-duplication, like a Pop Art sculpture arrives at the ultimate limits of its own possibilities. Like the last notes sounded by the Doctor Faustus of Thomas Mann, alienation, having become absolute, testifies uniquely to its own presence, separating itself from the world to declare the world’s incurable malady.⁶

What does this mean for our contemporary so-called return to modernity? How do the minimalist images of our postmodern neo-modernism relate to the confrontation of Mies van der Rohe's sublime declaration of our poverty?

Paradigm

One of the great paradigms of modernity that changed dimension around this decisive moment is speed. For modernity at the beginning of the century, speed was like the machine: a symbol, an expression of progress and confidence in the future. Slipstreams, aerodynamic forms, buildings firmly in the ground yet given the visual potential to accelerate. An aesthetic of speed projected an image or poetic vision of a reality not yet present, a poetic anticipation of the effect of modernisation and technology.

But speed lost its poetic relevance as high-speed trains, cars, rockets and aeroplanes brought with them pollution, environmental damage, energy crises, urban degradation, gridlock, etc. The speed of people and machines that was the obsession and symbol of Modernity gave way, as did modernism itself, to the speed of information in our present postmodern age.

But what is the speed of architecture? Is it not generally stationary and seeking some kind of permanence? Or is architecture—reduced to the surface skin of a neutral construction to be updated with fashion—travelling at a market-driven speed, where occasionally, if neglected long enough, it will become fashionable again as the latest retro-style? Or can such a reduction of architecture to a consumerable be resisted?

And what, if there was a modernist poetic aesthetic of speed, could possibly be a poetic aesthetic of slowness?

If speed rarely saves time, why do we thirst for speed and treat slowness with contempt? Milan Kundera gives us a possible explanation: "The man hunched over his motorcycle can focus only on the present instant of his flight; he is caught in a fragment of time cut off from both the past and the future; he is wrenched from the continuity of time; he is outside time; in other words he is in a state of ecstasy. In that state he is unaware of his age, his wife, his children, his worries, and so he has no fear, because the source of fear is in the future, and a person freed of the future has nothing to fear.

Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man. As opposed to a motorcyclist, the runner is always present in his body, forever required to think about his blisters, his exhaustion; when he runs he feels his weight, his age, more conscious than ever of himself and of his time of life. This all changes when man delegates the faculty of speed to a machine: from then on, his own body is outside the process, and he gives over to a speed that is non-corporeal, non-material, pure speed, speed itself, ecstasy speed.

And later: "There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. Consider this utterly commonplace situation: a man is walking down the street. At a certain moment, he tries to recall something, but the recollection escapes him. Automatically, he slows down. Meanwhile, a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has just lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if he were trying to distance himself from a thing still too close to him in time.

In existential mathematics, that experience takes the form of two basic equations: the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.⁷

A profound fear and need to forget explain our obsession with speed. We rush to forget our loss of being, to forget our lost sense of dwelling, to forget our homelessness and our alienation. We speed because we have nowhere to stop.

Homelessness

Non-dwelling is now the essential characteristic of contemporary life. The home and dwelling are past, are no longer possible. Developing from this, only a contemporary architecture that reflects the impossibility of dwelling can succeed in obtaining a form of authenticity. A silent architecture such as that of Mies van der Rohe may escape ideology and mystification through a supreme indifference to dwelling, a poetic testament to its absence.

The Farnsworth house in Illinois constructed in 1950, before the Seagram Building, is a clear acknowledgement of our non-dwelling. Here, liberated humanity is suspended from the world in which it can no longer dwell. The sparse and purified platforms permit no masks of comforting self-deception but instead confront us with the reality of our estrangement, while the natural world is preserved only through emphatic separation from our corrupting presence.

This may be a negative artwork or a negative place to begin, but it is, importantly, an authentic revelation of our impoverishment: we cannot dwell, we can only stay somewhere and confirm and confront our homelessness. If there is the opportunity for an authentic reexamination of the modern project within the contemporary conditions of post-modernity, then the basic objective of modernity—that of human emancipation—must be re-evaluated, and the question asked: how is such a project now relevant and possible?

The place of architecture in such a revised project must not only begin from an acknowledgement of our homelessness, our alienation, but also develop from an understanding of architecture's susceptibility to commodification and ideological influence, reject the mere updating of syntax, and acknowledge the depth of architecture's representative nature beyond surface effects and image.

Reconciliation

Through architecture as the creation of critical frames through which to understand and interpret the world, we must somehow resolve our place in it. We can begin from the negative, from confirmation of our homelessness and alienation. Yet architecture is fundamentally an attempt to reconcile our human presence in the world: surely this is its project.

Like Mies's Farnsworth house, the houses of Glenn Murcutt hovering over their bushland sites develop a similar acknowledgement of our estrangement: we are suspended and separated from a world we can only corrupt. Yet there is another dimension to the form, space and fabric of Murcutt's buildings, a kind of poetic longing to be part of, to belong. Empathy is sought with the land and with the trees, and separation itself is empathetic. It seems to me that in Murcutt's work there is at once a representation and acknowledgement of our homelessness as well as an expression of our deep desire to once again know what it is to dwell. We are suspended because we wish so much to be brought to ground without destroying it with our touch.

Jørn Utzon's first house in Porto Petro, Majorca, seems to go one step further. Remarkably, Utzon creates a place for us to stay. Here it seems it may actually be possible for us to momentarily belong, momentarily stop. This work does not violate its site: it is of the rock. It has a primordial quality yet lies within the project of Modernity, it is at once ancient and modern.

It is interesting that both Murcutt and Utzon practised outside the norm. They both occupied the margin. I could not describe either of them as efficient. They were outside the market, they resisted commercial reality and were stung by it. They were also slow.

The ideology of our time, with its emphasis on efficiency, change, speed and the free market, in many ways establishes the antithesis of the necessary conditions for making architecture. Architecture is not efficiency; in fact it is often the way in which efficiency is subordinated to other values that distinguishes architecture.

Architecture is not mere change: architecture is more about transformation and permanence; it is most often about uncovering what it is in humanity that does not change.

Architecture cannot be the servant of the free market. Architecture should not be reduced to a market-dependent consumable, as at this point it becomes merely decorated building within the flux of fashion.

Architecture does not move at speed, as any of us know who have tried to make architecture.

Architecture is slow.

Finally, an authentic contemporary architecture should not only attempt to somehow begin to reconcile humanity's place in the world but also be directed towards rejuvenating and repoliticising our desiccated public realm. We should pursue an architecture appropriate to citizens rather than consumers.