Zeitgeist, Nostalgia and the Search for Authenticity

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The Mint project in Macquarie Street, Sydney, is neither a project of restoration or reversion to an idealised past nor a frozen notion of a perfect architectural moment. There is no blind reinstatement of the past, and no nostalgia. Or, is there? What is this romance with the ruin? Why not tidy it up, clean up those edges and remove the scars and wounds? And what of the Zeitgeist? Are these new, refined modern interventions the culture of our time? What of a vision for the future?

The Zeitgeist and nostalgia are about time: two opposite poles, perhaps, of an attitude to time, but in fact closer together than first appears. The Zeitgeist (so frequently the catch-cry of the avant-garde) and nostalgia (so beloved of conservatives) are both a resistance to time—to the flowing, equalising continuous motion of moments and events that is time. One wants to forget, fight and resist the pull of the past, thinking that it itself will never become past. The other wants desperately to remember what is already lost, longs for the security of the past, for what is known.

The shining flight of the Zeitgeist and the grounded melancholy of nostalgia. So-called architectural heritage so often struggles under the weight of nostalgia; it turns its back, hoping it can forever resist time. Go back and restore what has been compromised or damaged. Seek comfort and meaning in our history. But I want to discuss in more detail the language of its disaffected twin, the Zeitgeist, the avant-garde, and also the contemporary context that has given rise to these quarrelling siblings. Appropriation, sampling, infection, parasitic morphing and palimpsest: what do we mean by these terms in an architectural context?

Are they a repackaging of terms such as quotation, reference, interpretation—20 year-old terms recycled and updated from 1980s postmodernism? Or is this the language of the avant-garde, the critical edge of our culture, adopting the partial strategy of 'infecting' the conservative, obese body of our moribund society? Inviting us to scratch that itch and spread the virus, only to find that it is deadly, kills the host or, better, transforms it like some Hegelian anti-thesis into a purer new form. The heroic task of the avant-garde then seems complete—only once more to be morphed into a new parasite, creating innovative infection, immune to the new cultural antibiotic, immune to our defences.

Is there a meaningful difference between these two possibilities? Is there really a political dimension to what is behind these terms, beyond that of the conservative maintenance and updating of syntax that is essential to our free market consumer culture and political slumber? Recently I was reading the novel *Cosmopolis* by the American author Don DeLillo. The protagonist, Eric Packer, is a young multi-billionaire. Almost the entire novel is set within his stretch limo, which cruises through Manhattan as his money moves around the world at unimaginable speeds, and the Yen stays high, losing him millions each minute. As the car moves into Times Square Eric and his "chief of theory", Vija Kinski (yes, he has a theory advisor), are caught in a violent anti-globalisation protest.[1]

The only people undisturbed by the protest are those queuing for cheap tickets, consumers steadfast to the end. On the TV screens in his bullet-proof limo Eric watches the protest raging outside; it makes more sense on TV The protestors are rocking the car and urinating on it. Tear gas wafts through the air as police in riot gear and protestors clash. At this moment his theorist explains that the protesters and their violence are desirable; they are an integral and necessary part of the system they wish to destroy. The protestors are market-produced, they energise and perpetuate a total system; their actions fundamentally change nothing. In the riot, DeLillo writes, there was "a shadow of transaction" between protestors and the body politic. Violent protest is characterised as "a form of systemic hygiene". The market is, without doubt, the greatest appropriator, absorbing all into a single valuation system. What is our human relationship to this market? Where are we? What space do we occupy?

Well, alienation no longer seems to bother 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. We sate ourselves with appearances, efficiency, image and interest rates. Only the most extreme acts of transgression, of human violence and environmental vandalism, will momentarily disturb us from our abstract flotation. We are imbued with the ideology of globalisation, to the extent that we are primarily shareholders or subjects of the free market, rather than citizens of the state.

Information overwhelms us, but we understand less and less. Information, the ultimate commodity, moves between us at incredible speeds. The velocity at which information travels is now over 500,000 times the rate at which people and goods move, but we are still frustrated. We want it faster. Speed and Efficiency are our masters; we're all living longer but we have less and less time. We must change, keep changing, and be faster. Speed and information are our obsessions, yet speed frequently wastes that which we hold most precious, and that which it was supposed to overcome: time.

This is our postmodern world, dominated by the angel of speed, and the ideologies of efficiency and the free market, it is a world of consumerist obsession, wherein our needs are so completely transformed and distorted through ideology and advertising that we only need what is current, follow the dictators of fashion and measure the success of Christmas through consumer spending.

But back to DeLillo's novel for a moment. The violent confrontation between the protestors and the police is interrupted by an extreme action, the kind of transgression I was referring to earlier, that stops everything for a brief moment. Everything except, of course, the media news crews. Cameras quickly refocus from the police special forces and protestors to this new spectacle. A man has sat down with his legs crossed on the footpath, covered himself in gasoline and set himself alight. His glasses melt into his face, his flesh turns black and bubbles and all is momentarily frozen in horror. Our multi-billionaire sees all this live through the limo's windows and also, in more real from, on the multiple flat screens inside. He turns to his theory chief for an interpretation, only to be told that even this extreme act is lacking, is not original—it's "appropriation". Remember those Vietnamese monks?

Of course appropriation is all about context. Take the burning man off a Manhattan street, place him in Baghdad or the West Bank, and we would barely bat an eyelid. It probably wouldn't even make the news. In 2001, 3,000 people died in Lower Manhattan in a single day but on that same day, the United Nations reports that approximately 30,000 children under the age of five suffered preventable deaths from causes such as malnutrition, starvation and lack of basic health care.[2] Appropriation is about context. Does this change the content, the meaning?

Duchamp's tired, old, appropriated toilet in the gallery certainly scandalises no one anymore, nor for that matter does a cow cut in half or a shark's head. How about a dead foetus in a

gallery? Is it a problem? Is it even interesting? What happens to these objects? These ready-mades? Do they infect and transform the space of the gallery, or are they transformed by the host, rarefied and commodified? Bits of dead animals, stamped with the signature of the artist: valued investments absorbed and transformed by the market, pulling in the crowds, getting in the papers, part of what makes it all go around.

What happens when art objects are removed from these rarefying enclosures? Every summer in Sydney sculpture is arranged, often precariously, at the edge of the sea between Bondi and Bronte. One such object was a broad overlapping bowl of water placed on a rock overlooking the ocean. The surface of this captured water reflected the sky and the clouds, measuring the passing of time. The work, in a sense, was made of the very site in which it was displayed—immune to the gradual rise in interest rates, or the persistently high levels of the yen or, for that matter, the name of the artist and the notes in the catalogue.

The main gathering room of our project at the Mint could be anywhere; it is entirely autonomous. It is suspended on columns, over the archaeology of the very machinery for the production of money. The wave shape of the ceiling above—is it a device to orientate the room, a metaphor of shelter and sky, a random gesture, or the sign of the press of the books and artefacts stored in the repository above? The louvres, opening panels and sliding glass could open out to the a view of the harbour (after all, it is Sydney), or native bushland, but in fact opens to the courtyard honouring the rear—much altered and almost accidental—façade of the Mint offices.

The proportions, plan, section and volume of this timber box could have resulted from a clear analysis of the brief and the requirements for an auditorium, but the brief was, in fact, for a larger flexible black-box, raked auditorium. The actual constructed proportions match exactly those of the adjacent superintendent's pavilion—it is its antithesis, its matching opposite, its sister. Is this room autonomous, or entirely dependent? Is this an intervention, an adaptation, an infection, or the result of our interrogation of the site? If appropriation is all about context, what is ours? What is our contemporary architectural landscape?

Certainly it is intimately linked to the processes and ideology of globalisation. The symbolism and metaphorical allusions of the late 20th century seems to have been, on the one hand, abandoned and, on the other, formally updated with a revised digital shape making. The seeming abandonment of representation is manifested in an endless series of neutral expressionless boxes, layered in varying transparent surfaces to give an illusion of visual depth, together a seemingly conscious lack of substance. The almost uniform anonymity and homogeneity that results is rarely raised to the poetic. Is this work a deliberate 'transparent' presentation of our condition as it is, void of any rhetoric of history, place or ideology, a critical poetic of absence and alienation stripped of any pretence of meaning? Or is it merely a thoughtless and pragmatic reflection of our consumerism and a market-driven globalisation: an architecture reduced to an obsessive fetish of the surface.

These anonymous silent enclosures being reproduced around the globe are juxtaposed with the apparently free expressionism of digitally manipulated sculptural surfaces and forms. Then there are also the morphed digital images, fractured and random, that we could somehow easily imagine sliding from our flat screen 3D software, and wrapping the shopping centre or the service station or the car park and airport. These are ideal programmes to receive such artistically loaded forms. They are desperate for an update; it is essential to the nature and the continued commercial health of these places of consumption. A slick and even challenging new packaging, the cooler the better.

Both tendencies have in common a focus on the surface and a reductionist or complacent attitude to the poetic of architectural assembly and construction, as well as a seeming indifference to the specifics of place. Hence, we see both side by side in publications. The context of this work is a world now characterised by non-place, pseudo-public realms and

consumption disguised as community and individual expression. It may be that the expanding horizon of our knowledge and extension of our possibilities though 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.

All the more, we experience a zone or space where we interface or intersect in some fleeting social simulation at speed, rather than experience of a place as somewhere to be in and meet. Airports, shopping malls, hotels and other transit zones are non-places, of consumption and mobility, encouraging thoughtless, constant action, and offering no moment nor place to stay. We have an overwhelming amount of information, space, stimulation, simulation and individualisation, but so little sense of being, community or place, and so little time.

How does architecture escape this seemingly endless cycle of market-driven flux and meaningless inventive repackaging? How can the work avoid reduction to consumer artefact, either in the form of decorated speculative investment such as icon apartments, or constant new suburban images for the wealthy, or the spectacular object to brand a new institution, corporation or city—Disney or Bilbao?

First, is it a problem at all? What are we really so worried about? Just join the party, get into the language, stick to the surface, and if you have a occasional feeling of anxiety of disconnection or isolation, try watching TV or even try buying something you don't need, or focus on the problem of interest rates… All this works, we know that for sure. But to actually resist the market appropriation, the mere packaging and repackaging and consumer updating of syntax, we can only have partial strategies. Perhaps integral to such a partial strategy is the concept of place. Remember that one of the most commonly asked questions to those we meet for the first time is, Where are you from? The place where we live is among our most defining features. Yes, we build these towns and cities filled with the buzz of human inhabitation, but equally the place makes us, builds our character, determines us at the same time as we continue to build and transform the place. There's a symbiotic mutual transformation—or infection, if you prefer.

The character of the natural and built landscape actually does hold great significance for us. It figures our settlements and ceremonies. Places assume a sacred nature though our relationship with them. We build not only in relations to water supply, shelter and other pragmatic benefits of landform but in relation to more spiritual forces that the landscape holds for humanity. Uluru is the most significant cultural and spiritual place in Australia, and this has nothing to do with the intervention of humanity, indigenous or European settlement, nothing to do with shelter, access to fresh water or other pragmatic issues of comfort and economy. Its presence moves us, connects us with the world, and allows us to somehow experience something outside ourselves, a profound interconnection.

But most places acquire meaning and cultural significance through human use, ceremony and transformation. Places assume a sacred nature though our relationship with them. This is perhaps what we should mean when we talk of heritage, the transforming of a site into a place of meaning: the creation of a deep interconnection that extends beyond a single generation. Not age as such, nor the profile of a cornice, but the embodiment of our values and ceremonies that connect us to place. Our attention could, and should, be focused on a deeper understanding of the place in which we build. Our work can become a transformation of the site, of the place; it can uncover a potential, an energy already inherently within the very fabric of the site: the dirt, the breeze and landscape of the place. The work may be considered as a kind of meditation on place.

But how is such a meditation on the site possible within the circumstances of contemporary practice? We all know that the natural flow or outcome of the development and construction industry is not architecture at all, but building, understood as an optimised investment object, minimising cost, utilising standardised conventional techniques and presenting the

most market driven image with the least means and least substance. This is the industry's natural course. How can the architect even think within this noise of production and pressures, of the development and building industry, fashion, talks and publications? Let alone respond authentically and actually read or meditate on the site.

It is perhaps though the avoidance of thought, through thought-less action. The drawing of the first line across the site intersects the site with the programme simultaneously exploring, discovering, and uncovering the project that is in some ways is already there. Thought and theory are ironically sometimes an impediment to understanding, at least to an understanding that comes directly through action. Certainly they are impediments to intuition, and intuition is perhaps the primary means through which the architect engages, via the architectural project, with the pressing cultural and theoretical issues of our time. Intuition is in some respects the opposite of thought; it goes around the cognitive limitations of thought. It is through intuition that the limitations of time can be overcome, as intuition requires no time, it is immediate. Time and thinking may in fact block this creative insight.

Intuition is an existential quality; it is beyond the rational. It is rooted in our connection to the world we inhabit; it is our feeling rather than our knowledge. It is a manifestation of the interconnectedness of all things. Remarkably, it is the means for a holistic response to the vastly complex nature of our human condition. And it is a response less from us than through us. Surprising and radical possibilities emerge. Perhaps, even the possibility to open a space for us to pause, to escape momentarily the speed, flux and superficiality of our lives.

I take a seat on the bus. I am late. I am behind in my work. My family needs more time from me. I am surrounded by blank, tired faces and advertising. The seat is uncomfortable. I am struggling under the burden of everyday existence. I place headphones in my ears and the sounds of Phillip Glass or Mahler fills my head. Or I begin to read the words of David Malouf or Milan Kundera. Slowly a space opens for me to climb into. Freed from the environment of the bus, the uncomfortable seat, the crowd. The dreadful limits of my own existence are overcome in some way, for a moment. The interconnectedness of the world is revealed in some form. As I get of the bus I begin to see things differently; although I am still late, I am no longer rushing. I see the sky rather than the advertising. I feel the wind. I see in faces lives being lived. But only for a moment. The world will soon again close in.

Architecture can also create these moments, through the way it frames and orientates us in relation to the world. This is perhaps most accurately understood as the proposition of alternative realities within reality, worlds within the world. We are made aware of the conditions of our lives through the construction of alternative realities within which things are reset in a slightly different order. Finally, our art is the making of these critical frames through which we attempt to reconcile our place in the world on an emotional and spiritual level.