

Zeitgeist, Nostalgia and the Search for Authenticity

The Mint project in Macquarie Street Sydney is neither a project of restoration to an idealised recreation of the past nor a frozen notion of a perfect architectural moment. 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 scares 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 guard and the nostalgia of the conservatives are both a resistance to time. To the flowing equalizing continuous motion of moments and events that is time.

Both seek to distort time to deny it. Both are romantic, a romance of memory and forgetting.

One wants to forget, fight and resist the pull of the past, thinking that itself will never become past, and is blinded by the shining and glittering image of youth.

The other wants desperately to remember what is already lost, longs for the security of the past, what is known and understood misses the solidity of an imagined romanticized past and is warmed by the reassuring glow of age.

The shining flight of the zeitgeist and the grounded melancholy of nostalgia.

So-called Architectural Heritage is so often struggling under the weight of nostalgia, and turns it's 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 more particularly the contemporary context that has given rise to these quarrying 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 like quotation, reference, interpretation, twenty year old terms recycled and updated from a nineteen eighties post modernism. A minor adjustment to the product but repackaged, redefined to fill a wanning market, a regular update relative to the necessary flux of fashion and constant thirst for the new.

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, laughing and inviting further infection right in to the heart of our conservative flesh 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 complete, only to be morphed into a new parasite leading the way and creating innovative infection, immune to the new cultural anti biotic, immune to our defence and eating us critically away.

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?

Over the last couple of days I was reading the recent novel Cosmolpois by the American author Don DeLillo. The protagonist Eric Packer is a young multi-billionaire, in fact almost the entire novel is set within his stretch limo cruising slowly through Manhattan as his money moves around the world at unimaginable speeds and the Yen stays high, eating away his fortune, losing Eric millions each minute, killing it's creation, eating it's own child. As the car moves into Times Square Eric and his chief of theory Vija Kinski (yes he has a theory advisor) are caught in the midst of a violent anti globalisation protest

The only people undisturbed by the protest are those queuing for cheap tickets, consumers steadfast to the end. Eric watches the protest outside, on the TV screens in his limo; it makes more sense on TV. The



protestors are rocking the car urinating on it; tear gas is wafting through the air as police in riot gear and protestors clash. Skateboards TV crews spray paint and violence. Within the rocking bullet prove limo Eric is naturally enjoying it all live and on TV. At this moment Kinski (the theorist) asks...

"You know what capitalism produces. According to Marx and Engels"

"It's own grave-diggers" he said.

"But these are not the grave diggers. This is the free market itself. These are a fantasy generated by the market. They don't exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go to be on the outside. There is not outside."

"The market is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system."

"The urge to destroy is a creative urge."

"This is the hallmark of the capitalist thought. Enforced destruction. Old industries have to be harshly eliminated. New markets have to be forcibly claimed. Old markets have to be exploited. Destroy the past, make the future."

...There was a shadow of transaction between the demonstrators and the state. The protest was a form of systemic hygiene, purging and lubricating. It attested again, for the ten thousandth time, to the market culture's innovative brilliance, its ability to shape itself to its own flexible ends absorbing everything around it.

The market is without doubt the greatest appropriator, transforming and recuperating all into a single valuation system. And what is our human relation to this market? Where are we? What space do we occupy?

Well, 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 will momentarily disturb us from our abstract floatation.

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, but we understand less and less. Information has become the ultimate commodity. Information moves between us at incredible speeds but we are still frustrated, we want it faster. Speed and Efficiency are our masters and we are all living longer but we have less and less time. We must change, keep changing, and be faster. The velocity at which information travels is now over 500,000 times the rate at which people and goods move. Our thirst for information and more importantly speed of information is now unrelated to value, it has become the ultimate commodity.

Speed and information are our obsession, yet speed frequently wastes that which we hold most precious, and that which it was supposed to overcome - time. We rush more and more hectically, transmit information ever more quickly and in greater volume but paradoxically have less and less time.

This is our Post Modern world dominated by the angel of speed, the ideology of efficiency and the free market, it is a world of consumerist obsession, where 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 that is, except of course the media news crews. Cameras quickly refocused from the police special forces and

protestors to this new spectacle. A man has sat down 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 the more real images on the multiple flat screens inside. He turns to his Chief of Theory for an interpretation.

"It's not original," she says finally.

"It's appropriation. All those Vietnamese monks, one after another, in all their lotus positions .Immortalising themselves. It's not original."

Of course appropriation is all about context, take the burning man out of the Streets of Manhattan, place him in Bagdad or the West Bank and we would barely bat an eyelid, probably it wouldn't even make the news.

Three years ago approximately 3000 people tragically died in Lower Manhattan in a single day in what became a media feeding frenzy of slow motion replays of planes, smashed buildings, heroics, pain and retribution. But on that same day approximately 30,000 children under the age of five died of preventable causes such as malnutrition, starvation and lack of basic health care (UNICEF 2001). Appropriation is about context. Does this change the content, the meaning?

Deschamps tired old appropriated toilet in the gallery, certainly scandalises no one anymore, nor for that matter does a cow cut in half or a sharks 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.

Normalised and sanitized within the numb white walls and uniform lighting, carefully set not to degrade the surface of the object, making sure it lasts for ever, defeating time.

So what happens when these art objects are removed from these rarefying enclosures. Every summer between Bondi and Bronte sculpture is arranged often precariously at the edge of the sea. 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, the clouds, measured the passing of time. It was made out of the very site in which it was displayed, was made out of sky and time. Seemingly immune to the gradual rise in interest rates, or the persistent 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 for example, could be anywhere, is entirely autonomous. It is suspended on columns, over a landscape or over the water, but in this case over archaeology of the very machinery for the production of money, or rather the agreed representation of money the very fluid of the market, transparent clear and intangible.

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 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 alerted 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, the requirements for an auditorium, but the brief was in fact for a larger flexible back-box racked auditorium and these actual constructed proportions match exactly those of the adjacent superintendents pavilion. It is its antithesis, it's matching opposite, its sister.

Is this room autonomous or entirely dependent, is this an intervention, an adaptation, an infection, 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 allusion of the late twentieth 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 project of 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 merely a thoughtless and pragmatic reflection of our consumerism and market driven globalisation with 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 their nature and 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 contemporary world 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 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.

All the more often we experience a zone or space where we interface or intersect in some fleeting social simulation at speed, rather than the experience of a place in which to be 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.

So 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 an occasional feeling of anxiety of disconnection or isolation, try watching TV or renting a DVD or even try buying something you don't need, consumption is good, or focus on the problem of interest rates rather than being, it too brings anxiety but a more understandable anxiety for which others are responsible and to blame. 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 question 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 equal the place makes us, builds our character, determines us at the same time as we continue to build and transform the place; 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. 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 the 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

So our attention could 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, , 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 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 its 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 understand 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, goes around the cognitive limitations of thought, and 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 wholistic 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 crowded 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 fills my head, or the sounds of Sculthorps or Mahler, 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 off 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 though 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 then 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.

—Richard Francis-Jones