

Five (Hypo)theses Toward a Critical Practice in Architecture

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I will present a series of (hypo)theses—a coinage which recognizes both their polemical intent and their provisional status—which form an argument in refutation of what seem to be the primary manifestations of “critical practice” within contemporary architectural discourse, and in support of my own position. This investigation was instigated in part by the frequency and elasticity with which the phrase “critical practice” is currently used. While some architects and theoreticians seem to use the term in ways which evoke the Frankfurt School’s materialist social critique, and as part of an explicit project of direct, affirmative action, others use the term in the etymologically correct but effectually dubious sense of provoking a crisis, either in social or architectural terms.

Although any substantive consideration of “critical practice” should really address the underlying concept of criticism, and trace a line from Kant through Nietzsche and Marx to Benjamin, Lukacs, Adorno and Habermas, such a genealogy is clearly well beyond the scope of a twenty minute presentation. However, it should be clear that the very notion of “critical practice” is part of the inheritance of post-Enlightenment modernity, and as we shall see, is inseparable from some of the fundamental assumptions of that intellectual tradition in ways which can be problematic.

FIRST (HYPO)THESIS: THE CULTURAL AUTONOMY OF THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE AND OTHER MYTHS

Unless specifically construed otherwise, the proposition of “critical practice” carries with it the residue of an avant-garde epistemology; that is to say it presupposes the autonomy of art (or in this case, architecture) to act critically on society from without, and it presupposes the distinct stratification of society into a “high” culture which produces this art and a “low” culture at which its critique is directed. Both presuppositions are thrown into crisis by the transformed conditions of cultural production and socio-cultural organization within postmodern experience.

Most theoreticians of postmodern culture identify a struc-

tural transformation from the conditions of modernity as central to contemporary experience. In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen describes the demise of what he calls “the Great Divide” between high and low, authoritative and vernacular cultures;¹ in *The Sociology of Postmodernism*, Scott Lash describes what he calls the “de-differentiation between cultural regimes” as creating comparably homogenizing effects.² All this is to say that practices of art and architecture which aspire to vantaged states of autonomy from which to critically address contemporary culture must confront the inescapability of their implication within the real and cultural market economies in operation today.

This is especially true for architecture, which before the emergence of proto-Modern sensibilities in the eighteenth century and especially before the invention of the avant-garde in the nineteenth century, happily accepted its status as a material expression of power. Today, architecture is so deeply implicated in the production and perpetuation of existing networks of social, cultural, and economic power relationships that its ability to act with direct, resistive, critical effect against those conditions—which are as often as not, directly or indirectly, its sponsors—is highly circumscribed at best.

SECOND (HYPO)THESIS: CRITICAL PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

Two primary tendencies may be observed to operate within self-described “critical practices” in recent or current operation. The first of these interrogates the constitution of the architectural object by investigating form. The second tendency questions the discursive construction of architecture by appropriating strategies from other modes of cultural production.

The “critical” manipulation of architectural form—usually accomplished through transgressions of conventional formal syntax—tends to exclude as “external” issues of social, cultural or economic instrumentality from scrutiny as loci of critical activity. This can lead, and has led, to a

disjunction between the allegedly “critical” form of a building and the activities the building shelters and represents or of the economic interests and institutions it serves.

The convention center in Columbus, Ohio, designed in 1990 by Eisenman Architects in collaboration with Trott and Beam exemplifies this condition. Underneath the “decentered” façades, and the roof forms which conflate freeways with telecommunication cables, the supposedly vertigo-inducing shifted geometries in the building’s public spaces (but not in the exhibition hall, where after all, business is business) the building’s program, the disposition of its programmatic elements, and its urbanistic character as an internalized box entered from a vast parking lot are entirely, well, conventional.

The Columbus building is effectively indistinguishable from any other “trophy” convention center erected in the United States during the last two or three decades as a pawn in the increasingly desperate inter-urban competition which distracts investment away from more socially beneficial but less income-producing forms of urban development.

In the second mode of critical practice, which interrogates architecture from outside its discourse, which is to say through analogous strategies of spatial practice or aesthetic production, the most common discursive paradigms seem to be the socially and politically activist art movements of recent decades, such as Conceptualism and Minimalism, and performance art.

The work of Diller and Scofidio is an example of this; their installation “WithDrawing Room” and their performance piece “The Rotary Notary and His Hot Plate.” While such work can indeed shed a light on the cultural politics of spatial practices, and the cultural construction of the body in ways which critically address conventions it transgresses, this illumination is too often indirect, and the critical content of such work is often directly proportional to its insulation from the realities it scrutinizes. This construction of critical practice as alternative practice raises the specter of self-marginalization from the production of the built environment.

THIRD (HYPO)THESIS: ARCHITECTURAL FORM AND CRITICAL CONTENT

As a medium of communication, architecture is polysemantic rather than monosemantic, indeterminate rather than determinate, and any meaning is contingent on both sender and receiver. Especially in complex, culturally pluralistic societies such as the United States today, architectural form considered as a sign is incapable of disseminating an explicit, singular, or unequivocal message, rendering it a problematic medium for expression of effective criticism.

The appropriation of Classical architecture as an instrument of representation by wildly disparate political systems serves as an easy example of the futility of attempting to assign any singular meaning to any architectural syntax.

The difficulty of recent attempts to assert a legibly critical content to architectural form is exacerbated by the “post-Great Divide” susceptibility of all forms of contemporary cultural production to ever-quickenening processes of commodification and trivialization.

The brief trajectory of “Deconstructivism,” which was alleged to challenge the anthropocentric verities of the Western cultural canon through its “destabilizing” attack on architectural form, is a prime example of these conditions. As exemplified by the programmatically conventional buildings included in the inaugural show at MoMA, “Deconstructivism” operated entirely on the signifiatory component of architectural form. The practice has proved notably unequal to its task, or even capable of resisting its own commodification.

I offer Grinstead / Daniels’ restaurant for Kentucky Fried Chicken built in Los Angeles in 1990, just two years after the inaugural show “Deconstructivism” at the Museum of Modern Art. This composition admirably fulfills co-curator Mark Wigley’s formal prescriptions for an architecture of deconstruction: “(Pure forms) are infiltrated with the characteristic skewed geometry, and distorted. In this way, the traditional condition of the architectural object is radically disturbed. . . deconstructivist architecture disturbs figures from within. . . This is an architecture of disruption, dislocation, deflection, deviation, and distortion. . . This produces a feeling of unease, of disquiet, because it challenges the sense of stable, coherent identity that we associate with pure form...”³ The alleged destabilization of “Deconstructivism” was effortlessly and unresistingly transformed into an entertaining setting for the consumption of fast food, as it was itself consumed.

FOURTH (HYPO)THESIS: ARCHITECTURE AND CYBERSPACE

Many self-described “critical practices” situate themselves in relation to the proliferation of instantaneous, globalized networks of electronic communications which have undeniably altered the cultural construction of space and time, place and history. Such practices ascribe their critical content to their representation of these conditions in architectural form, in opposition to architectural languages which are asserted to deny or suppress such realities.

While this initiative does indeed identify a fundamental condition of contemporary experience which architecture can indeed critically address, the potential value of its critique is compromised by its affiliative, rather than oppositional stance.

Bernard Tschumi’s video pavilion in Groningen, Holland exemplifies this mode of critical practice. The pavilion is a glass box containing a number of video monitors which can be viewed simultaneously or individually from both inside and outside. This box is lifted off the ground and tilted along both its long and short axes, in order to disorient its visitors from the conventional, gravitationally-based (and hence

based in experience of the material world) reference of verticality.

Tschumi's pavilion exemplifies the difficulty of representing a phenomenon which is immaterial and a-corporeal through a medium which is neither. In configuring his pavilion, Tschumi could not evade architecture's intrinsic materiality. The pavilion's minimalism places a paradoxical emphasis on the tectonic moments which are unavoidable in any artifact assembled from more than one component or material, a fact brilliantly exploited by Mies van der Rohe among numerous other architects. The steel clips which connect the pavilion's structural glass mullions to its glazed envelope betray a materiality which utterly defeats Tschumi's project. And even though Tschumi sought to evoke the a-corporeality of electronically mediated experience by disassociating his pavilion from the horizontality of the groundplane (although not so drastically that it could not be occupied), the intrinsic corporeality of architectural experience is inscribed within the dimensions of stair treads and risers, the height of handrails, the size of doorways, and even by the eye-level height of the video monitors themselves.

But most problematically, the very "criticality" of this mode of practice is suspect; it seeks to merely reflect, rather than resist, the proliferation of electronic media. Tschumi's practice offers no "counter-project;" it accepts, if not valorizes, the reduction of life to a disembodied experience, to a passive consumption of images, and implicates architecture in this process.

FIFTH (HYPO)THESIS: TOWARD A CRITICAL MATERIALITY

Most modes of critical architectural practice are effectively undermined by their constitution as projects of representation, that is to say that their claim to critical effect is supposedly achieved through formal signification. Architecture is reduced to a sign, the materiality of which is irrelevant.

In contrast, I will argue that one of the ways in which architecture can act critically is to resist the cultural valorization of dematerialization and denial of subjective corporeality is through a "counter-project" grounded in realities of the materiality of architecture as well as the corporeal nature of its experience and its production.

As a material object, architecture must respond to conditions of vertical and horizontal forces, its condition (with rare exception) as an artifact assembled of multiple systems, components, and materials, and the deteriorating effects of temporal existence.

The first two conditions of architecture's materiality—the resistance of static forces and its nature as an assembled artifact—have, in their poeticized or heightened expression, been addressed by Kenneth Frampton in *Studies in Tectonic Culture*.⁴ The condition of weathering—as an acknowledgment of architecture's temporal duration—has been addressed by David Leatherbarrow and Moshen Mostafavi in

On Weathering.⁵ For brevity's sake, I will not repeat their arguments in this presentation.

The corporeal nature of architectural experience is such a universal, self-evident condition that it may seem to be simply a neutral fact incapable of maintaining any independent (let alone critical) content. However, de-familiarizing this condition through the focused control of surface, space, and sequence is, in the context of the proliferation of "activities" within contemporary experience which immobilize the body and enforce the passivity of the receiving subject—watching television, working at a computer—arguably a critical action in itself.

The architecture of Adolf Loos, as exemplified by the Mueller house, provides one paradigm of the valorization of the moving, experiencing subject. The primary promenade of this house is a superbly orchestrated counterpoint between visual and bodily paths. Beatrice Colomina has underscored the fact that Loos considered his interiors to be unphotographable—an early example of resistance to the denial of corporeality within architecture experience, and to the reduction of architecture to dematerialized image⁶.

Architecture is produced as well as experienced by embodied subjects. Because the overwhelming majority of buildings are composed of more than one system or material, the presence of the producing subject is inscribed within the processes by which building components are fabricated and assembled into their final configuration. While robotized production of many building components, and decreased dependence on materials or systems requiring skilled labor, especially on-site, is an ever-increasing reality of contemporary construction, it is safe to assume that some opportunity for expression of the corporeal reality of building processes will always exist, and may always be made. Details may be designed, materials and processes may be utilized, which will reveal the hand, and through it the rest of the body, of the embodied subject who manipulated them. They also encourage what might be called an "imaginative projective investment" of the perceiving subject onto the architectural object—a recapitulation of Geoffrey Scott's empathetic rationalization of his taste for Classicism in *The Architecture of Humanism*,⁷ but applied to a very different architectural vocabulary. Such investment can approach a vicarious kinesthesia.

The Maison de Verre by Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet provides an example of the expressive inscription of the producing body into architecture; fasteners are exposed, and composite components, such as the primary columns which are built up of separate steel sections and panels of ebonized wood, are highly articulated in ways which describe their assembly.

In the Maison de Verre, the corporeal engagement of the experiencing subject is also sponsored by the building's transformability; walls slide, plumbing fixtures pivot, and stairs may be pulled down from ceilings. One is an active participant, not a passive occupant, within this architecture.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that some dimensions of

“critical practice” must transcend the immediate, phenomenal aspects of architectural materiality. The following are five ways in which architecture can act critically by directly instrumentalizing social, spatial and productive aspects of its material nature. As Walter Benjamin commented in “The Author as Producer,” “Rather than ask, ‘What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?’ I should like to ask, ‘What is its position in them?’”⁸

1. Architecture can challenge existing patterns of socio-spatial relationships—of spatial politics—through a reconfiguration of the adjacencies, separations, or subtler modulations of sequential, visual, or acoustical relationships, etc., through which they are produced and perpetuated.
2. Architecture can challenge existing socio-cultural structures and power relationships by providing shelter for individuals or activities which have been excluded or marginalized within a society, and by providing tangible representation of such individuals and activities within the spatial public realm.
3. Architecture can optimize the social, political, economic and environmental implications of specific construction materials and systems, as well as the processes by which they are produced.
4. Architecture can challenge the alienated and adversarial relationships which exist between architects, contractors, builders, in their conventionally construed roles within the building production process, as well as the passivity of the conventional roles of owners and users.
5. Architecture can challenge the economic instrumentality of architectural production by investigating the implica-

tions of, or completely circumventing, the conventional institutions and processes by which building construction is financed.

In conclusion, the project I am proposing is distinguished from most “critical practices” through its capacity for both criticism—of the cultural reification of the spatial and temporal effects of mass mediation—and affirmation—through its valorization of architecture and the thinking, moving, non-virtual people who inhabit it.

The materiality of architecture, its temporal duration, and the corporeality of human existence are undeniable realities, no matter what tools we use to construct our images of the world.

NOTES

- ¹ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. viii.
- ² Scott Lash, *The Sociology of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.
- ³ Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1988), pp. 16-17.
- ⁴ Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
- ⁵ David Leatherbarrow and Moshen Mostafavi, *On Weathering* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
- ⁶ Beatrice Colomina, *Publicity and Privacy in Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).
- ⁷ Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism* (New York: W.W. Norton).
- ⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer”, in Peter Demetz, ed., *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 222.