

Maneuvering Out of Architecture's Meaning Crisis

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INTRODUCTION: MEANING CRISIS?

The issue of meaning is among the most discussed topics in architecture's history and theory. Some authors blame the current lack of consensus on how should we build, others say architectural theory fragmentation is inherent to the contemporary society, but all agree that architecture no longer has the accepted position it once enjoyed. Historians like Spiro Kostof (1995) and James Ackerman (1980) ask, from different points of view, for an enlargement of the definition of architecture.' From a more professional or practical perspective, Denise Scott-Brown (1980) and Moshe Safdie (1982), despite their opposite perspectives, indicate the uncomfortable situation of architecture's discourse.'

The overall feeling presents architecture in a deep crisis both internally (regarding the lack of foundational theory or coherence) and externally (regarding its role in the cultural or social spheres). As Ignasi Solá-Morales pointed out, "present day works of architecture and their authors reveal desires, intentions, but limited projects" (Solá-Morales, 1997, p. 14). From such an uncomfortable position many trials flourished in the last two or three decades, but what was once perceived as a transition from modernists to post-modernist paradigms, is now seen as a "no-escape" situation or cul-de-sac.

Linda Groat presents the metaphor of the cul-de-sac in "Rescuing Architecture from the Cul-de-Sac" (1992). The article dissects some roots of such a crisis, since the birth of modern society in the 17th century, until the unfolding of post-structuralism into current architectural theory. According to Groat, "architecture has suffered from an increasingly impoverished ideological and philosophical foundation" and because of that "the role of architecture seems diminished," with the architect gradually considered as a superfluous professional. It was not like that 50 years ago, when Modernism was celebrated as redemption, something capable of fulfilling all the needs of modern societies all around the world. Despite its plural and multiple roots, early Modernism shows a powerful attitude regarding its mission and stature in order to provide the new identity demanded by the emerging societies. The analysis of Modernism's development reveals a successful deliverance of its message and its study can help us understand the contemporary condition because much of the present crisis lies on the uncertainty of its mission, stature and identity.

The idea of maneuverability seems a fruitful metaphor since it implies some consistent steps to deal with the cul-de-sac. The first necessary step for maneuvering is the need to look back without leaving the "steering wheel," or reflecting on the development of Modernism to which we are undoubtedly tied (critical understanding of past experiences). The next step is the careful control of movements, or the need to have precise knowledge about architecture's techniques and processes (internal coherence). The last and maybe the most important one is the need for a map in order to guide oneself

forward, or the understanding of the cultural, social and environmental implications (external coherence). The idea of maneuvering at the cul-de-sac seems an interesting approach to the problem since it also implies the need and possibilities for architecture to move from within and not passively wait for a future external rescue.

Considering this framework, this paper analyzes the cul-de-sac dilemma presented by Groat, the roots of Modernism as presented by Brolin and some facets of the contemporary architectural scene, in order to speculate on some maneuvering possibilities to escape the crisis.

CUL-DE-SAC DILEMMA

In "Rescuing Architecture from the Cul-de-Sac", Linda Groat asks about the nature of the theoretical cul-de-sac, manifested in both research and practice and if there is a way forward that will resuscitate the stature, identity and mission of architecture. The first question looks backward to the development of Modernism, while the second looks forward to the possible escape from the current position. This paper will follow both paths indicated by Groat, starting from her presentation of the dilemma.

Groat quotes Stephen Toulmin to present the idea that modern society has two different origins, the humanistic one, related to Shakespeare and Montaigne on the XVI century, and the scientific one, related to Descartes' and Galileo's epistemology of the XVII century (Toulmin, 1990). Although the humanistic modernity was born first, the scientific quickly prevailed, suffocating the former manifestation relegated since then to a secondary role. In order to relate the confrontation between humanistic and scientific modernity to the conflicts occurred into the Modern Movement in Architecture, Groat discusses the Anglo-American preference for the scientific tradition as a necessary alliance between some form of empiricist science and the maintenance of a free, autonomous, and creative individual for creative disciplines such as architecture.

As suggested by Art Berman, within the empiricist tradition, "esthetics rests upon a psychology, rather than metaphysics". It is seen as "a poetic of form, structure and organization, rather than of transcendent truth" (Berman, 1988, p. 24). Such emphasis of form and structure will be fundamental to explain the later adoption of structuralism in architectural theory. The goal is always the combination of both Cartesian and romantic entity of self. Therefore, in Anglo-American tradition, the battle is exclusively within empiricism with the epistemological prevalence aborting any humanistic development out of the limits of empiricism.

From a slightly different point of view, but referring to the same Anglo-American tradition, Lawrence Cahoon raises the problem of an insistent and exhausted subjectivism, which should be held responsible for the current crisis of modernity and the empiricist framework (Cahoon, 1988, p. 217). Subjectivism is precisely at the

core of architectural crisis, since the main problem is the conciliation of the creative self with the broader cultural structure where it should be manifested, free and responsibly.

This seems to be the case of the early post-modernists in adopting the French-based structuralism as its main theoretical support. According to Diane Ghirardo, we should recognize that the post-modernist adoption of structuralism successfully raised the issue of meaning to the architect's routine. Unfortunately, as Ghirardo continues, "it was not a matter of analyzing how meaning is produced, but rather of vesting the architect with the responsibility for designing buildings that radiated meaning" (Ghirardo, 1996, p. 32). Structuralism's appeal in Anglo-American discourse was based precisely on its apparent credibility as an empiricist, quasi-scientific approach to meaning theory. This should give architects the power to "apply meanings" to their buildings. The two-faced Signified/Signifier structure brought an empirical spin to the analysis of communication process.

Although we now perceive such empiricist emphasis in the beginning of structural semiotics, the evolution of such theoretical perspective led to a more humanistic and challenging attitude of the late works of Barthes and Foucault. However, the initial acceptance of structuralism in America was emphasized as a "reading-theory", on what happens during reading and not on how or why it happens (Berman, 1988, p. 148). Structuralism as a "reading-theory" allowed Americans to reconcile the early writings of Barthes (1960s) with empirical subjectivism, but avoided the humanistic idea of "self", present on continental structuralism and absent in its American version. Art Berman continues, pointing out that in American structuralism, the relation between "self and language" was kept within the limits of empiricism, into the limits of early (or linguistic-based) structuralism, aborting the late (or literary-based) structuralism of Lacan, Foucault and Barthes at the late 1970s (Berman, 1988, p. 171). Celebrated as the theoretical support for the early post-modernists, such late-structuralism was rejected shortly after, surpassed by the empiricist/scientific aspects of deconstruction, leaving the best of structuralism theory with little or no impact on architecture.

One of the main problems in the application of late-structuralism into architecture, was the idea of the slash "/" on the Signifier/Signified duality as a void, a no-thing. According to Berman, the "/" was a space, a void, a no-thing that should allow some creativity to arise into the meaning process. The detachment or distortions caused by the slash "/" in the late-structuralist approach to the Signified/Signifier relationship was not recognized by the architectural community of the 1970s which, in a preview of the contemporary dilemma, demanded quick solutions and precise directions. What architects were trying to do, as Diane Ghirardo reminds us, was to apply meaning to their buildings, not to provide space for meaning to happen. The adoption of early-structuralism in architecture was turned into a game of personal styles that attempted to somehow lock in the meaning process. The fixation of the "/" into something under the control of architects allowed them to reinforce their roles as genius-creators and at the same time explain it empirically or quasi-scientifically. Structuralism was refuted due to both the excess of systematic organization of the linguistic metaphor (against the myth of creative self) and the excess of subversive power of Lacan's and Foucault's works (against the empirical tradition).

As an answer to this frustrating attempt to rescue architecture, Deconstructivism was promulgated in the late 1980s. The idea was again the achievement of a quasi-scientific strategy, capable of solving both the internal and external architectural problems. With post-structuralism as the main philosophical support, Deconstructivism relies primarily on the work of Jacques Derrida, although continental post-structuralism thought has been articulated by others as well.

The translation of post-structuralist ideas into architecture is problematic from the beginning, since it is based on Derrida prima-

rily, excluding Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, and Barthes, authors who have a strong ideological or challenging attitude. Those other post or late-structuralist authors have worked towards displacing the established meaning fixed by the power structures (academy, church, state). Their idea was to detach the signified/signifier unity to challenge the predominant authority, allowing the reader or the subject to subversively deconstruct or disassemble any discourses or object.

This broader concept of post-structuralism is described by Fletcher as "a form of modern philosophy that, with its emphasis on the relationship between knowledge, discourse and power establishes the context of study and positions it as a challenge to commonsense definitions." In a post-structuralist inquiry, knowledge productions are understood as an exercise of power, and language plays the role in mediating the relationship between power and knowledge. Post-structuralist discourse is intimately connected to the idea of resistance, and its applicable technique, labeled later Deconstruction, works as a destabilizing strategy. The goal of Deconstruction strategy is to create a "discursive space, (...) to offer an alternative interpretation of reality that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions, thereby creating — theoretically, a place where new things can be said and new social structures envisioned" (Fletcher, 1997).

In opposition, we have Derrida and the reader-centered path of communication, which appears to be a very conservative position inside the challenge-oriented post-structuralism. Jürgen Habermas is among the critics of deconstructionists, that from within the philosophical perspective, labels Derrida's approach "young conservatism" (Habermas, 1981). The impossibility of any kind of communication leaves two frustrating possibilities. passive reception or yelling echoing in the desert. According to Derrida, meaning should be considered multiple but it is not targetable, therefore, neither mutable nor challengeable. It should not be necessary to displace meaning since there's no possibility of placing it fixed. The "conservative" consequence is the impossibility of challenging it.

In the Deconstructionist method, the creative self is placed in between signified and signifier. The creative self should take the role of the slash "/", the interval, the anchor that fixes meaning. The new theory fosters autonomous individualism and controls its challenging powers by avoiding any possibility of interaction. Here we have again the problem raised by Cahoon, regarding the difficulty of the subjectivist tradition in understanding that creativity arises from the relations between subject and external reality. In order to balance the "self" and the language, deconstructionists tend to isolate the self from any external connection, from any "other" (Cahoon, 1988, p. 216).

In architecture, the body of rules that should guide architectural composition and the supposed support from the contemporary philosophic investigation comes together. Deconstructivism (architectural translation of deconstruction) provides internal coherence with the infinite variety of composition rules and solves the problem of external coherence by denying its possibility. Looking back on the developments of Modernism, we can perceive this strategy occurring before, to the same purpose of assuring some stability to architectural process. These strategies of stability we shall call anchors. Deconstructivism can be better understood if considered as another anchor, another self-contained discourse trying to stabilize meanings in a turbulent architectural ocean.

THE SHIP METAPHOR

Although the main focus of this paper is the problem of identity, it is important to perceive the intricate connections between the issue of meaning and architecture's mission and stature. The consolidation of the mission, stature and identity of architectural modernism took place between the various discussions among professionals, in the early decades of the 20th century. The CIAM (Congress International de l'Architecture Moderne) was the main forum in which modernist architects shared their experiences, beliefs and hopes.

Initially restricted to some European architects, the CIAM quickly spread overseas and acquired participants from the entire western world. Despite their different origins, the beliefs about and hopes for the shared mission and stature of modern architecture seemed strong enough to discourage any possible divergence when so many architects came aboard the CIAM boat. The success of the first journeys were such and the demand for such ideas were so large, that it became the generative paradigm in architecture, just after the first World War, exporting its social mission, stature and identity, to whomever demand it. According to Newman (1980), this demand or conditions can be synthesized into four main considerations or reasons for modern architecture, shared by different societies worldwide. 1) The new industrial society attracted to the large industrial centers replaced the rich and established institutions as the architect's new clients. 2) The buildings those clients needed were not palaces, temples or mausoleums but housing, schools, factory and office buildings. 3) The provision of the buildings for the new urban mass society required new industrial technology as the source of the materials to supply the demanded quantity. 4) There was a growing discomfort with the use of traditional styles.

Even given those four conditions as a consensual demand and modern architecture as a consensual answer, some divergent attitudes can be perceived since the beginnings of the modernist journey. As Cahoon reminds us, early-modernity is highlighted by a strong emphasis on subjectivism (Cahoon, 1988, p. 206), which in architecture would be reflected as an unavoidable interest on formal issues. Part of the CIAM group seemed more interested in those formal or internal concerns, while another part remained attached to the social transformation to be facilitated by modern architecture. We may label the former stylists and the later socialists. Around mid 1930s the CIAM agenda turns gradually to the domination of the stylists. After World War II, and the CIAM congress of 1947 is exemplar in this sense, the "boat" had already split and the few remaining shared ideas were not capable of uniting the two (or the many) groups anymore.⁴

What interests us at this moment is to perceive the heritage left by each of the main groups. While the stylists remained with the floating material, the socialists kept rudder and compass on their hands. Therefore, the social concerns sunk a few miles ahead with the socialists tied to rudder and compass, having the exact idea of where to go but no ability to stay floating. Saved from the immediate death, the stylists floated and floated, pushed by the sea currents. But the situation of being pushed by the oceanic currents was not very comfortable; and most architects had problems with the instability of designing in the different styles dictated by the changing currents. Also, as stated by Cahoon, the emphasis of late-modernities lies on what he labels anti-culture, or the difficulty to articulate meaningful relations in a broader context. In order to avoid instability and future surprises on the way, the stylists developed *more* and more their personal styles, used as an anchor for stabilizing the fragile flotsam.

The personal styles worked as a good anchor but the following immobility and isolation brought larger problems to the architectural discipline. As suggested by Diane Ghirardo, "from modernism to deconstructivism is a long distance in terms of style, but in terms of the heroic architect formalizing personal interpretations of social crisis there is no distance at all" (Ghirardo, 1996, p. 38). No wonder deconstructivism says that there can be no communication or rational discussion of interpretations. Placed miles from one another and frozen by the development of their individual styles, architects suffer from isolation among themselves and an even worse gap between them and the contemporary society. Solá-Morales states that "the explication of architecture exclusively in terms of architecture itself is a slack excuse, an attempt to deny the evidence of much broader relationships" (Solá-Morales, 1996, p. 7). In brief, architecture found itself at the Cul-de-sac, without maneuverability, without seeing either ahead or backwards, and without a trustworthy mapping of its own situation.

ESCAPING FROM THE DILEMMA: THE NEED FOR MANEUVERABILITY

From the cul-de-sac dilemma we perceived three necessary steps for architecture to start maneuvering and navigating by itself. The first one, looking back without leaving the steering wheel control is already going on. The increasing interest in the understanding of modernism as a plural and multiple phenomena rather than the later International Style consensus, indicates that the discipline of architecture is making an effort to look back. The rescue of early modernist experiences like Futurism and other manifestations like Russian Rationalism and Constructivism, demonstrates the demand for reflecting upon the development of Modernism in order to acquire a critical understanding of past experiences.⁵ The other necessary step, the careful control over its own movements, or the need to have precise knowledge about architecture's techniques and processes is more than developed. Since the crash of the CIAM boat and consequent "sinking" of social concerns, architecture is extensively developing the tools and techniques inherited from modernist design process. Computers and virtual reality can be seen as the further development of compositional arrangements and design obsession with precision and detailing in order to achieve the necessary internal coherence. The last and maybe the most necessary step for successfully maneuvering is the need for a map in order to chart the course back in movement, or the understanding of the cultural, social and environmental implications. Referring back to Cahoon's idea of creativity arising from the relationship of the subjective self with others, the map is absolutely indispensable. This seems to be the activity lacking in current architecture's training and practice. The ability to look not only back and forward but also around, or the development of a cultural interaction that should bring some external coherence back. In order to restore architecture's mission, stature and identity, it is necessary not only the ability to maneuver itself out of the cul-de-sac dilemma, but also an accurate comprehension of the situation around, a kind of navigation map. Without such precise mapping of the surrounding social and cultural environment, the gap between society needs and the architect cannot be bridged.

According to Cahoon, modernity is not yet exhausted, but the emphasis on subjectivism by itself seems to be. In response, Cahoon argues for a reconciliation of the self with culture, where culture is taken as "the totality of a society's interpretation of itself and the world, embodied in public or shareable human products" (Cahoon, 1988, p. 246). Taken as a communicative phenomenon, culture would be used as the basis upon which architecture would restore its mission, stature and identity. Since culture is based in shared language, not in shared beliefs, culturalist architecture would allow a high degree of diversity into the same coherent structure, the structure of cultural values. Culture, taken in the broad definition presented by Cahoon, would be the fertile ground for a relationship between the creative self and the external reality. A relationship not based in the exhausted subjectivism nor on the sterile deconstructivist isolation, but on the infinite and always two-way path of meaning process into a larger and more complex topography.

As observed by Solá-Morales, architecture does not need a topology (referring to the universal logos or a universal theory of place) but rather a topography, or a mapping of the diverse routes and courses (Solá-Morales, 1996, p. 5). The idea of maneuverability also conveys what Solá-Morales calls the need for mille plateaux, (referring to Deleuze's book *A Thousand Plateaus*), rather than one more platform (Solá-Morales, 1996, p. 86). Instead of another stabilizer, architecture needs conscious and precise movements as a way out of its uncomfortable fixed position. Adapted to fulfill the necessary steps to achieve maneuverability, the topography can be adopted as the necessary navigation's map. Presenting an accurate resume of all the possible paths and alternatives for acquiring a higher degree of identity into the cultural realm, architectural topog-

raphy would allow architecture to move with stability and accurate directions. In opposition to the anchoring of personal styles, a topographical maneuverability guides and indicates movement, while the anchor immobilizes and isolates. The metaphor of the maneuverable topography, understood as an awareness of the cultural realm around, may be the one and only escape from the cul-de-sac dilemma, restoring architecture's mission, stature and identity.

NOTES

- ¹ Kostof argues for the inclusion of non-canonical or out-of-mainstream architecture in order to enlarge the definition and consequently the role of architectural discipline nowadays. Ackerman, on the other hand, argues for evaluation of architecture based on personal, environmental and cultural experiences, which seems to partially overlap with Kostof's argument, the last emphasizing the building, the former emphasizing the architect.
- ² Scott-Brown's analysis points the gap between architect's and society in general, while Safdie is concerned with the lack of social concerns in late-modern or post-modern architecture. Both present the diminishing role of architecture in current society.
- ³ Newman labels the two main groups Style-metaphysicists and social-methodologists. For a more direct and straightforward approach I choose to label them as stylists (those more concerned with form) and socialists (concerned with the social aspects of architecture).
- ⁴ For an interesting insider account of those times see Smithson, Alison. *Team X Meetings* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).
- ⁵ It is important to note that while most of the modernist experiences before WWII has already been studied and revisited extensively, the developments of modern architecture after the War, especially around the 1950s has not deserved enough scholarly attention yet and remains understudied.

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