

Balancing Forward: Notions of Continuity in the Shifting American City

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The American urban landscape, regardless of location, has always been the material representation of the American ideology of progress. When economies were local, the urban landscape reflected local conditions and connections. Because economies now defy regional boundaries, our cityscapes speak of that extremely non-specific reality. The region that most consistently represents this sense of placeless-ness remains Southern California. As cultural historian Carey McWilliams states, “Californians are more like the Americans than the Americans themselves.”¹

In current architectural practice, there seems to have emerged two distinct ways to respond to such a condition. The first embraces architecture’s potential as a cultural barometer; its ability to represent in concrete form the ideological landscape of the current heterotopic reality. The second strategy embraces not the ability of architecture to represent a specific present reality, but its ability to represent past conditions prior to the globalization of time and space. It advocates a return to the local and to history. While both responses have some degree of validity, the first often ignores the negative practices of advanced capitalism; while the second offers a type of resistance to certain negative conditions, but too often in the form of ineffectual nostalgia.

In this paper I will argue for a third attitude for making architecture in a global city such as Los Angeles. It is based on a different type of contextual response to ‘place,’ emphasizing a balance between the past and the future rather than *choosing* between the past and the future. It depends on a condition of oscillation between continuity and invention rather than promoting either nostalgia or blind optimism. In short, I will argue for an architecture that supports an urban morphology that holds within it elements that are intentionally about continuity and transformation, and other elements that are intentionally about erasure and temporal flux. This contextualist response asks us not to judge our landscape for how much it represents place or placeless-ness but how much it represents both; thereby advocating a general strategy of ‘balancing forward.’

PATHOLOGICAL VERSUS PROPELLING PERMANENCES

The notion of seeing the city not as one but actually two strategies draws directly from Aldo Rossi’s writings in *The Architecture of the City* (1982). In this text, Rossi illustrates a binary condition of urban permanences first theorized by Marcel Poète in the sixteenth century. Here he states,

*Permanences present two aspects: on the one hand, they can be considered as propelling elements; on the other, as pathological elements. Artifacts either enable us to understand the city in its totality, or they appear as a series of isolated elements that we can link only tenuously to an urban system.*²

Propelling elements are such that they remain vital to the urban structure beyond the purposes for which it was originally built; whereas pathological types can become obsolete once their specific function ceases and/or the ideology upon which they were based shifts.

Rossi cites the Palazzo dell Ragione in Padua as an example of a propelling urban element. It represents a building where “the physical form of the past has assumed different functions and has continued to function, conditioning the urban area in which it stands....”³ He contrasts this example with that of the Alhambra in Granada, which having housed Moorish Kings, no longer acts in its original manner and has ceased to be part of the present city or its future.

As Rossi states, “It stands virtually isolated in the city; nothing can be added. It constitutes, in fact, an experience so essential that it cannot be modified.”⁴ In America, the distinction between such building types is not between a basilica and a castle, but instead between the warehouse and the corner gas station. In contemporary revitalizations of the urban core, the former typology is receptive to transformation and revitalization; whereas the latter type is so pathological, so about its original function, that developers would tear it down rather than transform it.

Unlike the traditional city where there is a balance between the two conditions, there exists very little development of propelling building types in the contemporary city such as Los Angeles. Instead the vast majority of the urban fabric is comprised of highly pathologi-

cal building types. Whether the car wash, the gas station, or the fast food establishments, these buildings are pathologically limited on three levels: their specific functionalization, their iconographic form, and their material impermanence. Such pathology is in direct response to the global capitalist economy, which demands a physical environment that maximizes corporate iconography and changing consumer desire. In this environment, buildings become icons for the products they are selling; thereby becoming as disposable as what is sold within them.

As illustrated by the transformation of the Alhambra, pathological buildings either become monuments to a past era or are destroyed when their cultural function becomes obsolete. In a landscape representing economic efficiency and global flux, few buildings remain as monuments in Los Angeles, where most pathological building types are eventually destroyed. As a result, our landscape is not one of transformation and re-generation but complete erasure; not one of memory and place, but forgetfulness and placelessness.

In the few instances when these pathological buildings are transformed beyond their original use, the cultural memory associated with the object disallows the building from transcending its original function. In our global capitalist culture, when buildings become corporate icons of certain products, the cultural memory of their original marketing intent inhibits any future existence beyond their original function. We all can imagine the IHOP that has been transformed into a sports bar, car dealer and/or drycleaner; each time equally without success. No matter how thorough the physical transformation, it will in essence always remain more of an IHOP than anything else.

Propelling buildings operate in a wholly different mode. Through palimpsest and limited physical modification, these building types are only temporarily co-opted by their new function, retaining enough of their original ontological structure to allow for future modification. For example with the Puebla Nuevo School designed by Daly Genik, a mini-mall has been transformed into a vibrant parochial school taking advantage of the existing corner lot typology. Or in the case of Frank Gehry's Temporary Contemporary in downtown Los Angeles, an obsolete factory building now houses an extension of the Museum of Contemporary Art. In these rare instances, the original typology was accommodating enough to allow the transformation of meaning and function without significant recollection of previous programs. While these buildings house schools and museums today, they could easily be transformed once again to hold an equally diverse set of functions.

AN ARGUMENT FOR THE PROPELLING TYPE

I would argue that the lack of place-fullness in American cities such as Los Angeles is not due to the stylistic lack of 19th century building fabric, but instead due to the imbalance of pathological and propelling building types. It is not necessary to combat the forces of what Werner Oeschlin calls 'economic functionalism' through re-establishing past typologies, but by bringing forward a more diverse attitude toward specialization and functionalization.⁵

Through re-balancing our landscape so as to include a significant number of building types that allow for future reuse, a sense of permanence and transformation could be re-established without resorting to stylistic nostalgia. As Alberto Perez Gomez writes,

Today we live in an age when a new radicalized faith in applied science has become increasingly international and trans-cultural, fueled by ever more efficient systems of communication and information, blurring traditional boundaries and, with them the qualities of specific places engaged in everyday modern life.⁶

And while it is true that we should try to arrive at an architecture that is of this place and time, there must remain in architecture the ability to posit a critical discourse against that which is reactionary and prescriptive. The inscription of propelling building types within the sea of commodification and specialization is, I believe, a form of critical resistance; a form of what I would generally call 'productive antagonism.'

On one level, this strategy of productive antagonism is in fact a type of broad contextualism. In a landscape which offers only the pathological (as seen in this example of a typical Los Angeles commercial strip), the insertion of a propelling element seems most appropriate toward establishing a balance of place and placelessness, local and global, permanence and flux. In the atypical landscape such as the loft/warehouse district of downtown Los Angeles, where a vast landscape of propelling types exist, the insertion of a pathological fragment such as a gas station, restaurant, or cultural monument would work towards a more balanced morphology in that particular context. And although the traditional city can be read as a set of fabric and object buildings, the distinction I am proposing is inherently not formal in nature. Pathological buildings can be fabric elements or object elements. Propelling buildings can be objectified or establish an edge condition. Instead this notion offers only a way to think about permanences and transformations within an urban fabric, rather than re-instating traditional formal opposition between supporting fabric and monuments.

What is one of the most interesting potentials of this strategy is that, unlike pathological elements such as the City Hall or any Carl's Jr., the propelling element does not create a sense of place through iconography but through morphological influence. As Rossi clarifies,

An urban artifact determined by one function only cannot be seen as anything other than an explication of that function. In reality, we frequently continue to appreciate elements whose function has been lost over time: the value of these artifacts often reside solely in their form, which is integral to the general form of the city; it is so to speak, an invariant of it.⁷

In a city of pathological types, there is no relation between things. Each element is unique and typically autonomous. In a city that contains propelling typologies, on the other hand, a sense of conditioning and potential connectivity can occur as these elements endure over time. These types provide an alternative way to think about place-making without the need to import the iconographic

imagery of 'place' with all of its inevitable trapping and ideological difficulties.

A NOTION OF MATERIAL PERMANENCE

For this idea of a critical resistance to become manifest, one has to address the material permanence of the building fabric. For the pathological type, the culture at large will determine its ability to remain in the landscape. If it is conceived as a monument a priori like the Walt Disney Concert Hall or St. Vibianas Cathedral (both in downtown Los Angeles), it will remain as a vital monument as long as its constituent culture feels that it is vital.⁸ If a building like the original McDonald's is built to be replaced but becomes a monument, it too will be saved even if its materiality does not suggest such permanence. The propelling type, on the other hand, demands an idea of material permanence beyond its current lifespan in order for it to be in essence propelling.

In some ways, one might argue that the distinction I am offering in this essay is not dissimilar to Venturi's distinction of a duck and decorated shed; the duck being pathological and the decorated shed being in a sense propelling. Yet, both types in Venturi's definition lack a sense of materiality as a condition for their understanding. And as a result the temporal impermanence of Venturi's shed will always make it economically more feasible to remove it from a context than to re-use it. Instead what I am arguing for is that the propelling type should take on the condition of material permanence as a critical stance against erasure. As Kenneth Frampton states:

The tectonic reemerges as a critical category today because of the current tendency to reduce architecture to scenography. This reaction arises out of the universal triumph of Robert Venturi's decorated shed, that is to say from a prevalent tendency today to treat architecture as though it were a giant commodity.⁹

In a strategy that depends on a future transformation of a building beyond its initial function, a building's material condition must be considered essential to its potential success. If a building is too immaterial or insubstantial, the future layer would most probably not be one of addition or layering but one of obfuscation and erasure.

In order to critically oppose the tendency of buildings to be merely advertisements for products, some urban fabric must transcend the condition of architecture as only representation, and commit to the fact of architecture as an essential thing prior to any specific function or meaning. As Frampton argues:

Building remains essentially tectonic rather than scenographic in character and it may be argued that it is an act of construction first, rather than a discourse predicated on surface, volume and plan.... Thus, one may assert that building is ontological rather than representational in character and that built form is a presence rather than something standing for an absence. Following Martin Heidegger's terminology we may elect to think of it as a "thing" rather than a "sign."¹⁰

In electing to make a building a thing rather than a sign, the building becomes not an extension of transient merchandise, but a thing that is of its place through conditioning its surroundings and being conditioned by them over time.

At some level, this issue of what I might call the 'smart' box, i.e. a propelling and functionally non-specific entity with material integrity, is already being addressed in different ways by Norman Foster, Renzo Piano, Rafael Moneo, Herzog de Meuron et al. As architect Peter Zumthor writes, "Architecture has its own realm... I don't think of it primarily as either a message or a symbol but as an envelope and background for life which goes on in and around it, a sensitive container..."¹¹ The architecture here is not valued as an extension of the commodification phenomena (i.e. Gehry's Bilbao, where an architect's artistic pursuits are co-opted as an advertisement strategy for the city), but as a means to create a physical realm on which meaning is attached more tenuously and more ineffably. Life and meaning can transform, while the architecture exists in a type of poetic resistance. As Zumthor continues,

Architecture is not a vehicle or a symbol for things that does not belong to its essence. In a society which celebrates the inessential, architecture can put up a resistance, counteract the waste of forms and meanings, and speak its own language.¹²

I believe this type of resistance is consistent with a general strategy of productive antagonism. Our cities will be richer environments when a state of balanced opposition is achieved between buildings that are temporally, functionally and culturally specific and buildings that are temporally, functionally and culturally non-specific in their essence.

CONCLUSION

In the end, I would argue that there is an important distinction between that which is enduring and that which is traditional. The most interesting elements of a traditional city are not those that remain traditional but those enduring elements that continue to be contemporary. Through the 'strangeness' of odd temporal juxtapositions and layers of palimpsest, such urban fabric is allowed to hold the memory of the past and the hope of the future simultaneously. In a project such as Inner-City Arts School by Michael Maltzan, where an old autobody shop has been transformed in a urban oasis for at-risk children, one can find the play between the enduring and the temporal, the primary and the attached, the ontological and the representation. This type of collaborative practice, which is so familiar in art (as can be seen in Asger Jorn's paintings on top of found paintings), must be imported more rigorously in architectural practice.

To create an urban infrastructure in a place such as Los Angeles that is more balanced in terms of permanence and temporal flux, home and homeless-ness, this strategy must be extended beyond what we consider 'adaptive reuse' projects. It requires a shift in the notion of authorship, running quite counter to the training and philosophy taught in most architectural schools. Studio after studio

students investigate the functionally and culturally specific rather than the propelling or potentially enduring. Whether it be a house for a psychologist or a cinema for Fellini, students are taught to make wholly pathological building types rather than investigating any notions of urban permanences. Under the guise of critical thinking, the students actually are perpetuating the extremely uncritical strategy of current capital development. Through investigating the notion of propelling permanences we can begin to apply a true critical counter-pressure to what Alan Trachtenberg calls the “incorporation of America.”¹³

NOTES

¹Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 87.

²Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p. 59.

³*Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁵Werner Oechslin, “Premises for the Resumption of the Discussion of Typology,” in *Assemblage* no. 1 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 37.

⁶Alberto Perez-Gomez, “The Modern City: Context, Site or Place for Architecture?” in Malcom Quantrill and Bruce Webb, eds., *Constancy and Change in Architecture* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1991), p. 32.

⁷Rossi, *Architecture of the City*, p. 60.

⁸With a new cathedral now being built by Rafael Moneo, there exists great debate about the future of the historical St. Vibianas Cathedral. In the end, saving such a ‘pathological’ building can prove to be very difficult if its inherent cultural value is at all in question.

⁹Kenneth Frampton, “Rappel à l’Ordre: The Case for the Tectonic,” in Malcom Quantrill and Bruce Webb, eds., *Constancy and Change in Architecture* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1991), p. 3.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹Peter Zumthor, “A Way of Looking At Things,” *Thinking Architecture*, Maureen Oberli-Turner, tran. (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), p. 11.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³See Leo Marx, “The Idea of ‘Technology’ and Postmodern Pessimism,” in Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, eds., *Does Technology Drive History?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p. 246.