

Between Six and a Million

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Ephemerality and speed of change are the most distinctive qualities of the contemporary city. In this context, space is more tangible and constant than mass. So often, space is assumed to be the void between objects. Instead, it is a heavy, tactile, sensual substance in which the body is immersed. The resulting perception of space, as a material presence, inverts the conventional perception of architectural space as the void between physical, tangible architectural elements: the walls, floors and ceilings. Architects are primarily interested in form, a condition re-inforced by the architectural photograph. However, if architects re-consider space, they will realise that its population is not static and predictable, as the Modernists assumed, but fluid and indeterminate. Six people one minute and one million the next. For architects, the aim must be to design space and to think spatially. As there is no singular 'form' to space, the consequences of a spatial agenda are not uniform but they will transform the ways in which architecture is used, produced and discussed.

Los Angeles is an analogue for architecture, in that the city and the discipline are divided into a series of discrete ghettos that prevent any overview or critical appreciation of the whole. The fragmentation of the city of Los Angeles and the discipline of architecture into seemingly autonomous, mutually exclusive and carefully controlled areas of activity is of course compatible with the regulation of society re-

quired by capitalist ideology. In capitalism, every type of desire, from the political to the sexual, can be displaced into commodities to become a source of profits¹. Capitalism turns an icon into t-shirt, a political action into the name of a perfume. The whole grinding process of commercialisation reduces all phenomena to commodities emptied of everything except their financial value. Ideas, icons, buildings and bodies are crushed to the level of capitalist detritus. Radicality is reduced to a product for sale.

In Los Angeles, the police and the inhabitants of the city patrol and contain the boundaries of the ghettos. In architecture, the members of the self-regulatory mechanisms, such as professional bodies, educational institutions and architectural magazines are the police force, excluding attacks on the 'integrity' of the discipline. Therefore, the entire discipline of architecture is analogous to the whole of Los Angeles and the professional body is equivalent to a police force. The architectural photograph performs a similar role to the one undertaken by the freeway in the city. Their purpose is to prevent unwanted connections, and permit desirable ones. To deny and conceal difference. To maintain the separation of the ghettos. Two thirds of the surface area of Los Angeles is occupied by roads. The photograph occupies an equivalent position of importance and dominance in architecture.

The photograph squashes and edits contradictions, so as to present a de-contextualised commodifiable image of architecture, ready for appropriation across the world. However, the architectural magazine also conceals the fragility of architecture's aura and hides its absorption into consumer culture. Architecture is presented as higher form of production merely to defend and promote the class it represents. Architectural photographs are pretty meaningless because they all have similar characteristics. The same blue sky, the same absence of people. The profusion of architectural projects and balmy weather turn the shiny pages of the architectural magazine into a sanatorium for architects. The architect being the patient and the projects the medicine. Of course withdrawal symptoms may be suffered after we leave the magazine's re-assuring embrace, but under its bright skies we can simulate the clean fresh air and brisk healthy exercise that are important components of life in the moun-



Fig. 1. Freeway, Los Angeles, 1992

tain sanatorium. Consequently, the reception of the photograph is isolated and internalised not collective and political. The viewer is absorbed and distanced at the same time.

In the architectural photograph there is no exterior, just interior. The photograph presents the myth of its own reality to convince us that outside lies a diminished reality or even unreality. In *Don't Look Now*, Donald Sutherland foresees his own funeral as he works to restore a church in Venice. Maybe the dwarf who kills him is after all his vengeful daughter, enacting the oedipal revenge of the photographer on the architect. Is the pain in your body, or your head?

The pre-eminence of the photograph in contemporary architecture is exemplified in the Barcelona Pavilion. The Pavilion was built for an exhibition in 1929. It was, therefore, constructed and demolished in the same year. Nine years ago, it was rebuilt from photographs. On the cover of the issue of *Blueprint* published to celebrate this event, the proud instigator of the Pavilion's reconstruction stands in front of the building while an errant piece of late twentieth century technology, a rubberised expansion joint, droops out of the gap between the sheets of travertine. To add further irony, a post-war concrete building stands directly in front of the Pavilion obscuring the latter's relations with its original context. However, the existence of the concrete building is rarely mentioned in architectural articles. Can you imagine the frantic contortions of the photographer to exclude the opposite building from photographs of the Pavilion? Between 1929 and 1986, and while the Pavilion did not exist, it was probably the most copied building of the twentieth century. The photograph was being copied, not the building. To understand the extent of the appropriation, we just need to visualise the Pavilion with a few petrol pumps on its forecourt, a cashpoint machine in the wall, or a barbecue by the pool. The Barcelona Pavilion has circulated the world as an image.

It confirms the dominance of the visual over the material in contemporary architecture.

The camera is the most influential and powerful architectural machine. The photograph, not the building, is the major

currency in contemporary architecture. The camera is supposedly our tool, but it can be a highly malicious one, controlling us as much as we control it. Terms such as 'the photograph never lies' imply that the camera is neutral when, like all technologies, it is historical and cultural. In 1832, Victor Hugo stated in *Notre Dame de Paris* that "This will kill that. The book will kill the building"². If we extend this argument further, the film killed the book and the computer killed the film. Each successive medium denuding the former of its role and purpose³. For architecture, the crucial moment in this process occurred when Albert Speer built the Nazi stadia as sets for Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will*⁴. A development confirmed and even enjoyed by Speer when he referred to the 1937 rally at the Nuremberg Zeppelinfeld: "I feel strangely stirred by the fact that the most successful architectural creation of my life is a chimera, an immaterial phenomenon"⁵. The architectural photograph reinforces and affirms architects' reaction to all technology. Architects are often mesmerised by technology because they see it as the 'other'. An all powerful corporate machine to which culture is enslaved. Terrified by the monstrous shadow of their enemy they retreat like defeated armies into the only part of their land and culture they can call their own. For architects, if technology is not the enemy, it is the master. However, the camera is not the problem. The question is, how is this machine used?

At the beginning of the nineties, the baby was the ultimate advertising accessory for a 'caring decade'. In architecture, the baby does not, even for cynical reasons, appear in the photograph. The most obvious and important action of the architectural photograph is to empty architecture of its inhabitants. The absence of people from the architectural photograph is the manifestation of a deep anxiety and uncertainty, concerning the role of people and technology in architecture. "It is an ideological imperative: a playing out of the relations of high culture over everyday life: a part of cultural domination and exclusion"⁶. The architectural photograph suggests a vacuous and immaterial, empty and unoccupied world that is literally hard to grasp.

However, the aim of this text is not to put people back into the photograph, but to put them back into architecture as a central concern of the discipline. Georges Bataille interpreted the storming of the Bastille as a literal and symbolic attack on architecture's authoritarian role in society, because the anthropomorphism of a building orders and incarcerates the body⁷. Bataille's prognosis for architecture is clearly fatalistic and a nihilistic scenario is easy to defend. Architecture colludes with normative social codes and every building implies a model for the human body and its behaviour. A building tells us how, when and where to behave. The texture of a floor suggests a direction and speed of movement. Fortunately, it is easier to control the people in a photograph, than the inhabitants of a building. Even the most static and stereotypical architecture only indicates, it does not determine behaviour. It is still possible to slouch in a straight backed chair because no single medium determines social

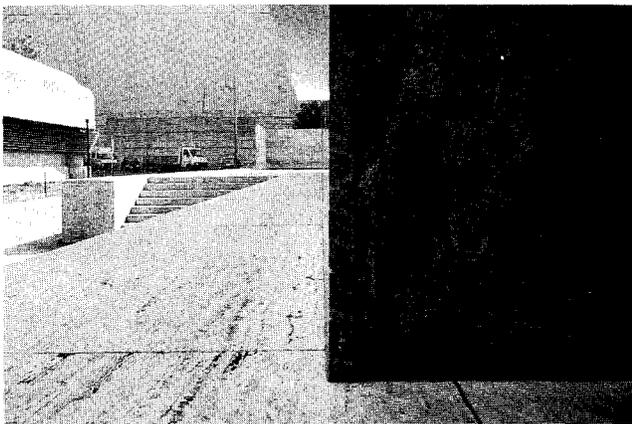


Fig. 2. Mies Van Der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, Reconstruction, 1986

codes. They are manufactured by the interplay of ideological mechanisms. Of course fucking on the kitchen table might not be a transgression but exactly what we are supposed to do.

The desire for a society of certainty and precision is similar to the obsessive hand-washing in individuals. Theories for the production of architecture help us create architecture, but they should not be confused with the world itself. Once the unpredictability of events is accepted as inevitable and desirable, architects can produce buildings that encourage but do not define unexpected types of occupation, or use unpredictable forms of use to generate an architecture that exposes the intimacy of a crowd, where actions rub against spaces. Feeling the taste and texture of the building on the tongue. Licking the loose pigment until none remains. Lovingly.

The majority of architecture is prosaic because it is so obviously architecture. Maybe the unpredictability of actions is related to the desirability and seductiveness of the architecture. Architecture may, paradoxically, be most suggestive when it does not tell us how to occupy it. The 'incompletion' of architecture is implicit in this scenario. I am not referring to flexibility, which is a huge red herring. Instead, this suggests a precise architecture that invites and embraces the messy and ephemeral, the grubbiness of the world, the gloriously grotty and insalubrious hinterland of life: the soap dispensers, slot machines and fire extinguishers. An architecture, shocking, fleeting and sly, so corporeal, ethereal and abstract that domestic objects become iconic.

Ephemerality and speed of change are the most distinctive qualities of the contemporary city. "All that is solid melts into air"⁸. In this context, space is more tangible and constant than mass. So often, space is assumed to be the void between objects. Instead, space is a heavy, tactile, sensual substance in which the body is immersed. The resulting perception of space, as a material presence, inverts the conventional perception of architectural space as the void between material, tangible architectural elements: the walls, floors and ceilings. This suggests an architecture of space

rather than an architecture of lines, where the former is solid and the latter inconsequential.

Architects are primarily interested in form, a condition reinforced by the architectural photograph. However, if architects re-consider space, they will realise that its population is not static and predictable, as the Modernists assumed, but fluid and indeterminate. Six people one minute and one million the next. For architects, the aim must be to design space and to think spatially. As there is no singular 'form' to space, the consequences of a spatial agenda will not be uniform but they will transform the ways in which architecture is used, produced and discussed.

With the exception of the Paranoid Critical Method formulated by the Surrealists⁹, the linearity of thought is a burden on architectural design. Deleuze and Guattari's description of smooth space suggests the nomad and rhizome as models for the spatiality of cultural production¹⁰. In any process that muddies the waters of disciplinary neatness, ideas must pass back and forth across boundaries not travel in a single direction. The erosion of disciplinary boundaries implies that the form, site and materials of a project should be chosen because they are appropriate not merely expected. Speculative work should always be a shifting target. As the physicist said to the biologist: 'You've got to have a model'. The biologist replied to the physicist: 'But I am a Biologist. We evolve things. It might end up as a golden eagle or a wart hog'. So the architect can be a musician, the project an experiment, and the site an operating theatre.

The spatiality of architectural design suggests a series of parallel but dependent procedures. In witchcraft, the deepest cut on the doll results in the sharpest pain in the body. Underlying this phrase, is the principle that all work has a literal and an implied dimension. It is itself real and a precursor for something else. Draw a building and build a drawing. Architectural research is an accumulative process, but the best does not necessarily come last.

NOTES

- ¹ Susan Buck Morss, "Benjamin's Passagenwerk", *New German Critique*, vol 10, no 29, 1983, p231.
- ² Victor Hugo, *Notre Dame de Paris*, 1832.
- ³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964)
- ⁴ Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985) p80.
- ⁵ Albert Speer, in Alan Balfour, *Berlin. The Politics of Order. 1737-1989* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) p80.
- ⁶ Mark Hutchinson, "Lost in Space" (Unpublished Paper, 1995) p2
- ⁷ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge Mass, MIT Press, 1989) p ix-xxiii.
- ⁸ Marx, Karl. Quoted in Berman, Marshall. *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*. (London: Verso, 1983) p15.
- ⁹ A Surrealist strategy in which the irrational is pushed to the limits of its 'logic'.
- ¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi. (London: Athlone Press, 1988) p 3.



Fig. 3. Carolyn Butterworth, "Licking the Barcelona Pavilion", 1992