

Talking about a new sensibility

Autor(en): **Eisenmann, Peter**

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Peter Eisenman

Talking about a new sensibility

Lecture of November 2nd, 1999, ETH Zurich

Goethe said, we all live life, very few have an idea about it. Translating this to architecture, all of us live in architecture, very few of us have an idea about it.

I want you to imagine that you are sitting in an operating theatre, those fantastic medical school operating theatres, where the medical students watch operations being performed. There is very little communication, the students have on coats and masks, etc. and they say nothing. I want you to imagine that you are watching a doctor cut up a body. As you are watching this Performance, you do not know why the doctor is cutting up the body or why you are watching this. The doctor in this case and surprisingly the body are the same people. What is being operated and by whom?

Between 1966 and 1968 three important books were written about the state of architecture. One of the books was written by an American, Robert Venturi called 'Complexity and Contradiction'. The other book was written by the Italian architect Aldo Rossi, called 'The Architecture of the City' and the third book was written by an Italian historian and theoretician, Manfredo Tafuri, 'Theories and Histories of Architecture'. These books were written at a moment when in 1968 the students took the streets of Paris and the blacks in New York, in Detroit, in Los Angeles ghettos torched their own environments. The students occupied the universities in Europe and in the United States. This series of events signalled general unrest. Tafuri's book is in a sense a response to that condition. Tafuri was writing about the problem facing architecture in 1967-68. His book asked what could architecture do after two world wars, after architectural modernism, Archigram and Superstudio. By 1968, there was a moment, when the world needed to be seen as different, there was a change in the sensibility in music, in film, painting, sculpture etc. Essentially, Tafuri was writing about what were the forms of radicality that would sustain architecture in this moment of change?

In all moments of change, it is necessary to know first of all what is changing from what to what, and what sustains forms of behaviour in a moment of change?

It can be argued that from Alberti's first book of architecture through Palladio's four books of architecture, through all major didactic books of architecture including Tafuri, Venturi and Rossi in 1968, books of architecture are about how it is possible to act radically, that is how can one define difference at any moment in time. 1968 was a very interesting moment for my generation, because we had been weaned on Le Corbusier, Mies van de Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright, some of us even knew something about Adolf Loos. And we realised that the energy of modernism had expired. What both Venturi and Rossi attempted to do, each in their own way, was to project what forms of radicality could sustain behaviour in 1968. My generation was sustained by that theoretical energy. Now, in 1999, some thirty years later, very few discourses have been written that theorise or rethink architecture in the present. We may be in what has been called a post-ideological moment, and what could be argued is that the operation that you are witnessing is the body on the table, which are the remains of 1968; It is almost lifeless. And before it dies, it is necessary to dissect it to find out what animated it for these thirty years.

The doctor appears to be an old doctor, he perhaps does not know contemporary methods of sustaining life, or perhaps he does not know how to keep people from 1968 alive. And so he is saying to his audience that we better look at the problem that the doctor and this body have before you are left with nothing. The doctor is operating in front of you because he believes that there may be a new sensibility operating in the world today and that that new sensibility may not be known either to the doctor or to the body or to many of the people in the operating theatre. They all may be unaware of what constitutes this new sensibility, protected as they are in their wonderful medical college high on top of a mountain in the center of nowhere in some clinic cut off from reality. What the doctor is trying to say is that while these witnesses may think that this body on the table is very much alive, those who are knocking on the doors of this operating room are saying that that body on the table is quite dead. And any of you, who would like to resurrect that body, have a problem, because that body and others like it have no idea as to the nature of this new sensibility. What basically a new generation of people are saying is that those bodies sustained by Tafuri, Rossi and Venturi are no longer relevant. That these nameless bodies have died and other bodies are about to die as well and cannot be saved by any doctor's operation. The voices are saying that you and your instructors do not understand this new sensibility, and even if they did, they are incapable of operating with it. The doctor is making an argument that it is necessary to recognize what this new sensibility is and how it might operate in architecture. If there is such a new sensibility, what would it deal with? What most doctors have understood is that following each new sensibility would lead to a salvation, a continued rejuvenation of life. That the old sensibility that sustained life from Kant to the present,

that is a dialectical critique, which is still operative in most conditions in architecture today, may no longer be operative. A sustaining principle of this new sensibility.

The possibility of knowledge or the possibility of being has always been articulated through meaning, that is through meaningful structures that in fact tell us something about ourselves, our culture, the cities that we live in and about our times. What this new sensibility may be saying is that these buildings that we think tell us something, can no longer speak to us. What we would understand from these meanings and their critical messages was always mediated through vision, because since Brunelleschi proposed a system of visualization in perspective, which produced the human subject as a conscious being, we have thought of the human subject in relationship to the object of architecture in terms of the possibility of vision. This new sensibility might suggest that vision is no longer necessarily a dominant mode of understanding, that aesthetics are no way to judge the possibility of the critical, and that together with the semiotic, the aesthetic no longer pertains to a culture that is in place. What then is the culture that is in place today and how does it operate differently than previous cultures?

Today there is what can be called a bifurcated and not a dialectical culture, that no longer contains a necessary possibility for synthesis. For example, there is a film called 'The Blair Witch Project', which was one of the most talked about films in the United States this summer. It was made on a ninety thousand dollar budget and suddenly became a cult film.

In a bifurcated culture, what we would find is that half of you would think that the 'Blair Witch Project' was a great film, and opinions from the other half would think that it was the worst film that has ever been made. These opinions are from similar people and similar cultural background. In the 'Blair Witch Project' nobody gets killed, it is difficult to see anything, there is no dialogue, you hear noises. It is made with handheld cameras that are purposefully out of focus, and the dialogue is full of one expletive after another. The leading character is a person who I would hate in real life. I actually hoped something would happen to her. However, there are some interesting problematics that 'Blair Witch Project' presents. First of all, it is filmed with multiple cameras - not with one camera viewing the action, but three cameras. There is one camera that is filming the movie 'Blair Witch'; there is another camera filming the person filming the movie and another camera filming both. This presents a bifurcation of which is the eye that is seeing? There are two soundtracks; one the soundtrack on the color camera that is filming the movie, while the black and white camera which is filming the making of the movie does not have a soundtrack because it is not part of the narratives. There is a third soundtrack on the third camera that is recording both of the other soundtracks. Clearly this film and others like those of the Dogma group question the dominance of vision and narrative in today's film. As Walter Benjamin said that film was able to focus on the details of everyday life that are usually unseen, today films are attempting to blur that focus, that distinction between reality and

mediation. Another American film made this year, 'American Beauty', also works on the same sensibility. This film is about a family in the Middle West whose father has lost his job and the mother is a real estates sales person. The daughter is a growing teenager who has being watched on a digital camera by a next door neighbour. Every character is over-played, to such an extent that you ask 'what is the genre of this film, is it a satire?' It is quite clear when you go to see 'The Truman Show', which is about Seaside, that it is clearly of an ironic genre. With American Beauty you ask 'is the director a bad filmmaker, is it poor casting, is this a dumb movie?' It is difficult to categorize this film because the characters are cartoons that you ask 'is this really the way people are supposed to be today? Are they simulacra of real people or are these simulacra of simulacra? Do they blur the distinction between reality and simulation? Is everyone behaving this way, because this is the way media sees them?'

There are surrealist scenes where the girl's sexual parts turn into rose petals. Is this supposed to be serious, or is it irony, or truly surreal, or even pornographic. Again there is a blurring between the camera's point of view, between seeing and being seen, of a voyeurism between a boy videotaping the girl next door as she is simultaneously watching herself taking her clothes off on a TV screen. As the boy is filming her while we are watching the entire procedure, you realize this is a serious idea, using cardboard cutout characters. In the last scene where the father is in Heaven, returns us to a surreal irony where half the people were laughing and half the people were crying. One could not tell when to laugh or to cry, because the visual or narrational clues were not there.

What I am suggesting is, that in today's bifurcated culture one no longer understands the difference between the Getty Center in Los Angeles and the Las Vegas Venice hotel. They are both a backdrop for people to be photographed. They both blur the distinction between reality and the simulacra. When I was in Bilbao, there were a series of Basque protesters standing around having coffee. Suddenly a TV camera crew from a local news channel arrived and the protesters swing into action. After two minutes on camera, careful to have the Guggenheim Museum as a backdrop, they return to their coffee. For the same reason that people go to Las Vegas, these people were there to participate in a mediated experience. Mediated experiences have become in a world saturated by media a new reality. We are in a condition which Guy Debord and Marshall Mc Cluhan have called implosion, where the systems of space and time that were known through individual components have become compacted and compressed. Debord has said that the social condition has become so saturated by media that we are in fact now, no longer in historical time or in cyclical time, we are the simulacrum of media. A simulacra of simulacra.

The student revolts of 1968 were not revolts against an outside force, but were rather expressions of frustration that the two world wars and the supposed end of colonial expansion did not change the hierarchical situation of the world. For these students there was no way

out, like Sartre's 'No Exit'. From 1968 to the present despite all the theorizing of the 1960's nothing in architecture can be seen to have changed. In fact Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Hans Hollein and all the traveling minstrels that appear here before large crowds, are still doing the same thing they were doing in 1968 and before. The same thing that all the architects have been doing forever, i.e. creating monuments to an expansive culture. But, it is possible to speculate that these monuments will have little meaning or value in the next 10 to 15 years. They will be erased as quickly as they were made by a media because media constantly demands new images. As long as we exist in a media world, we will be consumed by a media. Media quickly tires of another Bilbao or another Eisenman or of another Libeskind, because they have seen them before. Media demands the constant new. At present we are in a cycle of media consumption, which in fact has caused architecture to become a simulacrum of itself, producing images and ideas which only satisfy this insatiable desire that media has, the compression that media has on real space and time.

If architecture does not recognize this condition, architecture is in danger of becoming irrelevant. The kind of irrelevance that Walter Benjamin talked about when he said that people look at architecture in a state of distraction. What can be done?

First, we need to theorize the present in terms of what the present means for architecture. What kind of radical behavior can architecture exhibit in the face of the implosions of systems that media has brought about? Architecture, in those moments of -what Foucault calls-epistemic change, has always responded with radical behavior. This is what Tafuri, Venturi and Rossi did in 1968. This is what Adolf Loos did when he wrote 'Spoken into the Void', this is what le Corbusier did when he wrote 'Vers Une Architecture'. They were responding to a change in the episteme created after the First World War.

Second, any attempt to theorize the present can no longer consider a bifurcated sensibility the same as a dialectical world, i.e. as a Hegelian, Kantian and ultimately Marxist sensibility that was a product of an industrial-mechanical era. These produced the kind of historicisms that projected Klee and Benjamin's Angel into the future looking backwards. No longer can architecture be presented as a condition of the negative-dialectic in the forms like deconstruction, nihilism and the kinds of energies that have been active from 1968 to the present.

Because the wind that blew the angel into the future over the detritus of the present is not blowing any more! There are new historicisms, different from the technical-industrial era, that have replaced Heisenberg's quantum mechanics. These concern bio-genetics, bio-technology, bio-information, new cultural interplays coming out of a Darwinian historicism, but radically changing those historicisms as models and analogues for discursive-theoretical behavior. What this means in terms of architecture I have no answer for. But I believe that they begin to suggest an alternative to dialectics, to semiotics, to the old sense of mechanical-industrial functionality and above all to the hegemony of the visual.

There are three issues, which can be addressed, one is

the coming unmotivated of presence. Two, is the becoming unmotivated of the sign. Architecture has always been a condition of a motivated sign, a sign which contains an originary meaning. The column is both a sign and a signified. We will never overcome this originary meaning, but we have to find some way whereby these things are not the touchstone from which all architecture begins. Architectural signs in particular can never be totally unmotivated, because all sign systems will have a residue of motivation. Therefore the use of the term 'becoming unmotivated'. There is, one last aspect of this new sensibility – the becoming unmotivated of the subject deals with the human mind / body / hart / spirit / eyes / ears and mouth. It says that we must begin to unmotivate the Hegelian, Marxist, Kantian body-mind-spirit condition. That we must detach those ideas that were put together in the late 18th century with the French revolution and that have remained in place in terms of the human subject in relationship to his or her object world. The becoming unmotivated of the desiring subject requires that objects which were previous thought to be stable, such as the ground, shelter and place be destabilized, become less categoric and more blurred.

The doctor operating on the body may be the closest thing today to a theory of this sensibility. And it is difficult for this doctor and this body to ever theorize anything beyond 1968. Perhaps there is a reason for all of this, perhaps media has suffocated and condensed the world of thought to such a degree that theory is impossible. That only the practice of the material, the affective are possible. You the audience will become the new doctors, write the new books, operate on other bodies. Therefore beware of old doctors who tell you what to do. Learn from the past, allow its memories to live in the present, but never copy the past. Remember that the dialectical difference between the real and the copy no longer exists, It has been blurred by this bifurcated sensibility.