

“Une Architecture Autre”?

The state of contemporary architecture can perhaps be characterized by the euphemism circulating in academic circles known as ‘Bilbao effect’. Hal Foster in his recent book *Design and Crimes (and Other Diatribes)*, sharply criticizing Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, and referring to Guy Debord’s 1964 pronouncement of the arrival of the spectacle culture, writes:

Thirty years ago Guy Debord defined spectacle as ‘capital accumulated to such a degree that it becomes an image,’ but the reverse is now true as well: spectacle is an image accumulated to such a degree that it becomes capital.

For the critics of spectacle society, contemporary culture has capitulated to this capitalization of image in the all-pervading postmodernization of late capitalism. But if in our millennial situation defined as the post-society of surveillance, critical theorists frame their analysis in optical imagery, it is because, as a cultural theorist recently put it,

our post-society is not just a function of spectacle (as Guy Debord asserts) but of hypervisibility, an epidemic of what [Jean]Baudrillard terms the ob-scene excess of display, and which [Slavo]Zizek calls ‘pornography’, that spectacle which fixes and objectifies the viewer:

More than 100,000 of such viewers found themselves *fixed* and *objectified* when they flocked to the Winter Garden pavilion of the World Financial Center adjacent to Ground Zero in New York city to view the seven architectural proposals selected out of 406 submissions which were displayed for the public in the aftermath of the catastrophic event of September 11. The seven projects, as Anthony Vidler aptly puts it, “*glittering and translucent behind their vitrines, like so many mannequins in a department store window,*” viewed in the state of hypervisibility. Architecture for a moment occupied the front page of media and became the subject of a fierce public debate. Paradoxically, hypervisibility of the Ground Zero competition and the rebuilding of the site, which was sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, generated an enormous publicity and public interest, while at the same time, reducing the public role of architecture to image and excessive symbolism, and expressionism; suffice to recall how

the winning design by Daniel Libeskind Studio, presented in the triumphalist and nationalistic language of the *Freedom Tower*, of 1776 feet high, promoted by New York Governor George Pataki for its narrative of memory and trauma, was wrapped by the rhetoric of so many symbolic images of memory, freedom, light and memorization embedded in its form, notwithstanding the fact that by now Libeskind's original design is disappearing, truncated by the pragmatic imperative of developers and bureaucratic agencies. In the public debate following the competition, Peter Eisenman, otherwise a consistent exponent of architecture's autonomy surprisingly declared in *Charlie Rose's* program that "architecture finally is where it should be, in the political, social process." Contrast this statement with remarks by Richard Meier, a member of New York 4 - the group which included Peter Eisenman, Charles Gwathmey and Steven Holl - who in the same program confirmed the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation imperative that what was needed was *an iconic place-making in the city*. In other word, image making as the stabilizing power "refilling the evacuated symbols of American military and economic might."

Yet, the postcritical turn in contemporary practice which, according to one critic, is also a turn to post-theoretical and post-political discourse, is the symptom of the disengagement of architecture from its social function. The Ground Zero competition and the disappointment it caused among its critics is a symptom of the state of contemporary architecture mired in the culture of spectacle.

Still, the symptom of this state can be traced to an earlier occasion when Rem Koolhaas in a reply to his critics declared:

I have never thought of our activity as 'affecting change'. I'm involved with how 'everything' changes in ways that are often radically at odds with the core values of architecture. In spite of its apparent success, I see 'Architecture' as an endangered brand, and I'm trying to reposition it. To me, it is ironic that the (I would almost use the word 'innocent') core of our activity - to reinvent a plausible relationship between the formal and the social - is so invisible behind the assumption of my cynicism, my alleged lack of criticality, our apparently never ending surrender.

To these remarks, Hal Foster, in the same work cited above commented:

On September 11 'everything' changed again, and more than ever we need designers able to reinvent the 'relationship between the formal and the social' in non-defensive ways.

It is moreover symptomatic of Koolhaas's position that he should have attempted to 'reposition' the architectural discourse not in an architectural journal but rather by guest-editing an issue of *Wired* magazine (June 2003), triumphantly titled *The Ultimate Atlas for the 21st Century*, in a magazine which was once *the hip site of computer fetishism*, and now *the oracle of post-Silicon-valley-meltdown dystopia*. In this issue Koolhaas departed from his ironic stand of early OMA in order to map the *realism* of the present global state and its dominant technology, which he has termed as *a fragment of an image, a pixilated map of an emerging world*. In a word, architecture in its *virtuality*. The same *realism* is displayed in a provocative essay he titled *junkspace*, a piece of writing in science-fiction genre, obliquely referring to the reality of modern capitalism. Fredric Jameson, in a recent reading of this essay and in the context of Koolhaas's other publications on *The Project on the City* views Koolhaas's writing in terms of "someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." Jameson went on to say that it would be better to characterize all this in terms of History:

[a] History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here. The problem is then how to locate radical difference; how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia. The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings.

Jameson referring to Koolhaas's *Junkspace* article continues to say,

I think this writing is a way of doing that or at least of trying to. Its science-fictionality derives from the secret method of this genre: which in the absence of a future focuses on a single baleful tendency, one that it expands and expands until the tendency itself becomes apocalyptic and explodes the world in which we are trapped into innumerable shards and atoms.

Jameson then concludes that

The dystopian appearance is thus only the sharp edge inserted into seamless Mobius strip of late capitalism, the punctum or perceptual obsession that sees one thread, any thread, through to its predictable end.

Now, Rem Koolhaas's own criticism of the Ground Zero competition, or better his diatribe on this event, as the last

word in *Wired* magazine is indicative of the same *baleful tendency*, in a scathing political criticism, rare for an architect, directed at the winning entry, titled *Delirious No More* in the section simply called "9/11":

From now on, the most important city in the world is dominated by the tower from which first dangled an ape. What is the connection between zero tolerance and the cult of Ground Zero? In any case, the disaster resurrects Giuliani's depleted persona. New Yorkers surrender to empathy. The tragedy of 9/11 inspires a mood of collective tenderness that is almost exhilarating, almost a relief: Hype's spell has broken and the city can recover its own reality principle, emerge with new thinking from the unthinkable. But Politics interfere. In spite of Bloomberg's pragmatic sobriety, the transnational metropolis is enlisted in a national crusade. New York becomes a city (re)captured by Washington. Through the alchemy of 9/11, the authoritarian morphs imperceptibly into the totalitarian. A competition for rebuilding Ground Zero is held, not to restore the city's vitality or shift its center of gravity, but to create a monument at a scale that monuments have never existed (except under Stalin). On March 17, at 9:30 am, the winning architect rings the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. At 8 pm, the president issues his ultimatum to Saddam, the "displaced" author of the WTC disappearance. At midnight on March 20, the war starts. At 8 am, at a breakfast meeting in lower Manhattan, the "Master Design Architect," an immigrant, movingly recounts his first encounter with liberty. Instead of the two towers – the sublime – the city will live with five towers, wounded by a single scything movement of the architect, surrounding two black holes. New York will be marked by a massive representation of hurt that projects only the overbearing self-pity of the powerful. Instead of the confident beginning of the next chapter; it captures the stumped fundamentalism of the superpower. Call it closure.

What I have remarked so far, and it is really no more than re-marking the concerns of critics with whom I am in agreement, is only a rough inventory or stocktaking of the debate on the present state of discourse and practice. Critics complain that architects, on the occasion of the competition for Ground Zero missed the opportunity to reinvent aesthetic practice and to imbricate it with the emergent technology in order to theorize a politically engaged site of encounter with contemporary cyberculture. This is a valid criticism. The practice of design and theory is thus situated on the opposite poles: On one end stands the uncritical integration into a dominant form of digital technology and the socioeconomic forces of postmodernization, and on the other end, the withdrawal into an autonomous disciplinary practice of formal and semantic investigation. On both ends, it seems that

architecture and theory have abandoned the contestatory encounter with the political order and the practice of its critical positioning in the face of an all-pervasive culture of spectacle extended to the hypervisibility of image I alluded to.

In the light of this summary and criticism, I want to turn now to the specifics of my theme, to the title *une architecture autre*, a term which was first put forward by Reyner Banham forty years ago and only recently discussed by Anthony Vidler in a seminal essay published in *October* magazine titled, *Toward a Theory of the Architectural Program*. As it will become clear shortly, in my use of the term, I give a different meaning to it other than the one Banham meant in Vidler's discussion. Prompted by the same critical observation on contemporary practice and the missed opportunity of the Ground Zero competition to address issues of urban architecture, Vidler takes issue with the contemporary reduction of the public role of architecture, and in a subtle criticism of Rem Koolhaas, helpfully foregrounds the debate which took place in the 1960s around the Archigram projects and the writings of Reyner Banham. It seems that we have come full circle to the issue of the urban architecture which genealogically goes back to CIAM, Team X, Neo-Realism, Neo-Rationalism, Rotterdam and IBA in Berlin, and the past avant-garde exercises of Archigram, Archizoom, Superstudio, and the Situationists, as well as the semantic experiments of structuralism. I should point out here that apart from the resemblances of the entries for Ground Zero to the megastructures of the 1960s, which received a positive reaction by some critics, the generation of 1960 grappled with the technology of cybernetics and aesthetics and ultimately failed in their imbrications. This offers a prehistory of the contemporary interest in digital technology, virtual space and media, and certain important lesson regarding their historical and political implications for architecture. Vidler's historical investigation into this period brings forth the prehistory of the present by mapping a new approach to the architectural *Program* as a corrective instance for the contemporary impasse in practice. He advances the theory of *Program* as the social dimension of architecture in order to show an exit strategy from the present disinterest in public discourse and excessive indulgence in *realism* exemplified by Rem Koolhaas's catalogue of *theory as inventory* of the present. Here I want to briefly outline Vidler's point and then in a complement to his argument take a different approach in projecting an alternative meaning to the notion of *une architecture autre*.

Banham in his search of *une architecture autre*, as Vidler

informs us, turned to technological, biological, engineering, and social science research. However, he was suspicious of the contemporary fetishism of technology. In self-irony Banham wrote:

a generation ago, it was 'The Machine' that let architects down – tomorrow or the day after it will be 'the Computer', or Cybernetics or Topology.

Vidler shows that Banham, in turning to an *aesthetics tradition*, revealed his real agenda with regard to *une architecture autre*: a call for an architecture that “*technologically overcame all previous architectures to possess an expansive form.*” Banham, sympathetic to Archigram but critical of their supposed lack of theoretical depth, believed that their projects that he characterized as Zoom City, Computer City, Off-the-Peg City, Completely Expendable City, and Plug-in City, offer important aspects of technology and aesthetic qualities. Regardless that their proposals are acceptable to technicians or dismissed as Pop frivolity, Banham nevertheless believed that they offer important *formal* lessons. As Vidler concludes,

Banham has traced a movement from propositions about the contribution of technology to aesthetics in the 1950s, to, with Archigram, 'aesthetics offering to give technology its marching orders.

Banham believed that they have projected “*the most compelling images of our time,*” and Vidler reads into this Banham’s dismissive attitude of this notion of the *image* which of course “*conjures up all the specters of spectacular culture, of surface and mass ornament, that, from Kracauer through Debord to Baudrillard, have generally indicated a capitulation to the (post-modern) culture of capitalism at its worst.*” Vidler further points out that Banham escapes from the notion of the *image* in classical aesthetics by adopting Ernst Gombrich’s notion of *image* put forward in the 1950s. Banham uses the term to refer “*to something that, while not conforming to a traditional canon of judgment, was nevertheless, in his term, 'visually valuable', requiring 'that the building should be an immediately apprehensible visual entity and that the form grasped by the eye should be confirmed by experience of the building in use.*” Ultimately, as Vidler argues, for Banham it was “*the presence of topology over geometry that marked the inception of 'une architecture autre', another architecture, which displayed its qualities through the characteristics of penetration, circulation, the relations between inside and outside, and above all the surface of apperception that finally, gave the image its force and substance,*

and to quote Banham:

thus beauty and geometry were supplanted by image and topology.

Vidler, in his reflections on Banham and Archigram, and in bringing the *Theory of Program* to the forth, subtly takes sides with Banham against the alleged “*unstructured and potentially ethically neutral catalogue*” of Rem Koolhaas and his dismissal of tradition. In the *Koolworld*, Vidler points out, Koolhaas seems to deem architectural terminology inadequate for the description of this world. Further, in Vidler’s view, Koolhaas’s world, in contrast to Banham’s, is “*entirely counter to any ideal of design, technological or aesthetic.*” With some historical insight, Vidler justifiably claims that the

momentary alliance between Archigram and Banham seems to offer more than a historical corrective to contemporary experiments in virtual architecture.

Vidler’s criticism of Koolhaas is a serious one. According to him,

Banham’s insistence on the role of aesthetics – of the viewer and experience – in the promulgation of a new architecture, adds to this significance and invokes the possibility of reconceiving the notion of program in a way that occludes that fatal modernist gap between form and function and incorporates environmental concern, technology, and formal invention as integral to a single discourse.

Thus Vidler ultimately concludes that

‘*Une architecture autre*’ was, in 1960, a promise of ‘*tomorrow*’; its realization today has become not only possible, but also urgent.