

THE FIRST COFFEE

Netherlands Institute for Architecture, Rotterdam. 10.32am, 10 February 1995.

Designer cakes in line on glass shelves, low voltage lights defining the form of the icing. Slightly hungover (this is a field trip after all), what I really want is some sweet tea, a mug of hot milky water with a teabag dunked in it and the worry of what to do with its sloppy remains. But somehow this is inappropriate. I am conditioned to order a double espresso, black grained against the white porcelain. Sitting down, I am conscious of disturbing the order of the empty space. Out of the corner of my eye, a glimpse of Eva lining up a photograph. I remain defiantly slumped.

The will of architects to erect and then maintain boundaries around the discipline of architecture is one of the defining characteristics of the profession. The society of amateurs is excluded from the field of architecture by the self-definition and determination of a set of terms and procedures; professional closure is then effected by the legitimization of these terms through recourse to the methods of instrumental rationality. Without the supposed objectivity of rational thinking, it is argued that the boundaries of the architecture would be assailable, and with it the whole credibility of the profession be threatened. Architecture is dominated by rationalist methods of production and modes of thought. It is hardly surprising therefore that when the profession is confronted with a society gorged on the excesses of rampant capitalism (a system also supposedly driven by the rational forces of supply and demand) it can put up no resistance but in fact becomes complicit in the very manifestation of this ideology through the production of buildings. Whilst this process has been apparent in all aspects of modernist culture, it reached its apogee in late eighties Britain, a time when the architectural profession implicitly allied itself to the principles of the Thatcherite revolution.

One of the triumphs of Mrs Thatcher was to delude the public into believing that the principles of the free market had a neutral rationale, and therefore lay outside the political sphere. Council houses, public utilities, health, education were not (and still are not) treated as aspects of a politicised society, but as pure commodities to be subjected to 'objective' principles of exchange and production. Of course, the thin

vener of economic rationale disguises a deeply political ideology. Most architects would be horrified to be included along with their buildings in this litany of corruption - it offends the liberal principles on which the profession is assumed to be based. Architects are blinded and deluded into believing that recourse to the 'neutrality' of rational production removes them from the vicissitudes of the political world. This blindness is exacerbated by the height of the boundaries that the profession has erected around itself, walls so tall we cannot see the fallen world outside. Within, the discipline of architecture develops unperturbed, evolving self-referential and self-sustaining languages. Even when ruptures to the system are announced, closer inspection reveals that they have only re-ordered an already autonomous structure. The career of Peter Eisenman is exemplary in this respect, shifting from one linguistic critique to another in dizzying intellectual pirouettes which radically revise the forms of architecture, but leave its wider condition untouched. The fact that Eisenman concerns himself only with the formalist tendencies of his linguistic mentors (Chomsky in the seventies, Derrida in the eighties and Deleuze in the nineties) and not with their later political developments, is indicative of a wider problem of political myopia that the autonomy of architecture has led to.

It is hardly surprising that a building to house an institute for architects should fall into this trap of self-referentiality. How does one represent architecture (the institute) without recourse to Architecture (with a capital A). Jo Coenen's Netherlands Institute of Architecture is a self-consciously 'good' building, assuredly knowing in its references, quoting the types, techniques and tropes of architecture with the greatest of skill. It is building where one is seduced into admiring the details, a sure sign of cultural removal. It is a building of autonomous determination, where even the drinking of coffee is circumscribed by the will of the architect. This is not to say that Coenen, or other architects, are consciously promoting distasteful values, but rather in their modes of production and detachment from the political realm, they are unwittingly allowing their buildings to be implicated in a corrupted value system.

PAPER NAPKINS

Netherlands Institute for Architecture, Rotterdam. 10.54am, 10 February 1995.

Coffee finished, I go in to see an exhibition of the work of A Famous Architect. The display of many of the projects begins with a sketch, some seemingly lifted direct from the back of paper napkins. The final forms of the buildings bear a wondrous relationship to the initial scribbles. I leave the exhibition fundamentally suspicious of architects who get out fat pens at the first sight of a paper napkin in a restaurant.

When the objective ground of reason is taken away from under the feet of architects ('your building doesn't work/ leaks/ costs too much') they retreat to the higher ground of subjective genius ('that is because you don't understand it'). Between the two poles of objective reason and subjective genius, an idealism emerges which completes the effect of professional closure. The linear procedure of moving from sketch (the intuitive mark of genius) to an abstracted set of codes (the objective truth) turns this idealism into a normative method of production. The presumed subjectivity of the initial mark of genius immediately removes it from the cultural sphere, and in this detachment any discussion of architecture is limited to matters of taste or aesthetics.

This is not to dismiss the role of sketching or to attempt to suppress the role of taste in any discussion of architecture, but rather to challenge their assumed innocence. Any system of taste or aesthetics is tied into a wider cultural ideology, and any initial mark is prejudiced by the conditioning and aspirations of the marker. The Famous Architect (as a generic type) should move from behind the mask of innocence that his/her idealised method provides, and confront the cultural positioning of his/her work and with it their political obligations.

A COFFEE MISSED.

Netherlands Institute for Architecture, Rotterdam. 11.43am, 10 February 1995.

Emerging from the Institute, I am ready for another coffee. At the end of the archive wing, a café boldly announces itself. COENEN. The architect has literally

become the architecture, but at this most intimate joining of name to building he has lost control of detail to the demands of the marketplace. The sign is graphically populist and much too large in relation to the building, subverting the self-conscious perfection of the architecture in an effort to attract the public. I cannot bring myself to go in, affronted at the same time by the vanity of the whole operation and (let's be honest, I am still enough of an Architect) by the aesthetic disruption.

The idealism engendered by the alliance of objective rationality and subjective genius leads to a belief system in which the architect completely identifies with their building as an expression of deterministic truths. The intention behind these beliefs is usually benign, architects (and in particular Dutch architects) clinging to the liberal and humanistic values on which the profession was originally based.

However, the detachment and limitations of the belief system result, at best, in a less empowering model than originally envisioned, or at worst a corrupted form of capitalist production. A tragic gap thereby opens up between a benign ideal and a reality scarred by the exigencies of life.

A sustained critique of the idealised systems of traditional architectural production has come from the phenomenological and hermeneutic camps. In their respective attempts to ground architecture in a set of fundamental human conditions and in a reinterpreted cultural horizon, these modes of thinking have effectively challenged the limitations of instrumental rationality and have broadened the scope of issues and situations that the architect can address. However, they bring with them their own forms of detachment. In attempting to reveal or reconstitute the deep structures of human existence, such architectural moves necessarily transcend the contingencies of everyday life. Henri Lefebvre summarises the problem:

Phenomenology and existentialism can be defined as philosophies which have fallen to the level of the everyday (a symptom of the crisis of 'pure' philosophy), but which have retained the negative characteristics of traditional philosophy: devaluation of the everyday in the favour of pure or tragic moments - criticism of life through anguish or death - artificial criteria of authenticity etc.¹

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991), 96.

To this extent phenomenological (and I would argue hermeneutic) philosophies result in a retreat from the presentness of the political world and into the establishment of a purified conception of society and human existence based on ‘authentic’ notions of nature, tradition and continuity. To avoid this problem necessitates a reordering of such modes of architectural thinking whilst not denying the wider cultural and existential horizons that they offer. The project of restitution is replaced by one of a radical critique which accepts the everyday and the temporal moment of the present as places to start, critically gathering the past and projecting the future.

A SECOND COFFEE

Kunsthal, Rotterdam. 12.02pm, 10 February 1995.

It is ten minutes walk across a park from the Netherlands Institute of Architecture to Rem Koolhaas' Kunsthal. By this time, the need for more coffee is pressing. The café in the building is crowded, though not (it appears) with gallery goers. I order a cappuccino and croissant. It comes, froth spilling down the side of the cup, leaving tidal marks. Overhead, one can just make out traces of an architectural hand at work, strangely shaped lights snaking across the sloping soffit. But elsewhere the café owners have filled the space with their own world of bent wood chairs, commercial bar fittings, period lights, and dried flowers. In high Architectural circles, this invasion would jolt, but here it does not matter. There is a certain comfort in showering the floor with croissant crumbs as I take the first bite.

In *The Practices of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau makes a startling polemical leap, moving from a rooftop view of New York down into a walk along the street. In the leap he shifts the mode of vision from the detached to the engaged, he manoeuvres from a system seen as unified down to a set of subversive elements and (crucially) he collapses a supposedly timeless order into the differences constituted by the here-and-now of the everyday. Whilst his subsequent walks along the streets of New York are over-determined by a structuralist reading, the confrontation that de Certeau makes with the world as an engaged citizen is one of crucial importance. It is

in moments of the everyday that one realises that any ordering system is being constantly eroded by actions, practices and time, and that one is made aware that the conceptual limitations of a rational system allow the flourishing of the very differences it was meant to suppress.

For the architect, the everyday creates a setting in which the detached, epic, vision must be relinquished. It demands an acknowledgement of one's political condition. Where the linear trajectory and assumed neutrality of rational methodology relieves the burden of judgement, the world of the everyday demands judgement. It is in the way that each and every one of us has a relationship with the everyday that, following the feminist maxim, the personal becomes the political. This thereby constitutes a way of thinking about architecture in which the presumed innocence of the idealised system is fast lost and replaced by a heightened critical awareness. In Lefebvre's terms, the everyday is the residue left over when the highly specialised and extraordinary actions of man have been removed. But it is from this residue that the higher activities are derived, and not vice versa. The architectural implications are clear. No more gazing down from high; no more visions of a purified, reconstituted society - but rather working from the bottom upwards, always aware of the contingencies of the given situation and the political ramifications of the work of architecture. This is not to suggest that the everyday prescribes a method of designing, because it is clear that as soon as one starts to design the everyday it becomes extraordinary; Rather, the everyday acts as a catalyst for productive thinking.

To load up a single building with a theory of the everyday is a redundant exercise; to a large extent as soon as one theorises the everyday it disappears. However, Rem Koolhaas' Kunsthal in Rotterdam appears to me to have some of the qualities of engagement discussed above. Koolhaas is just as conscious of his architectural references as is Coenen, but where the latter defers to them, Koolhaas plays with them. The gesture of cutting a public route through the building and then ignobly dragging the main entrance from the street front into the centre, immediately subverts the authority of the museum as Institute. The use of rough and cheap materials in a fine art setting continues this theme, and their handling (Koolhaas resists the term detailing as too precious) hints at an incompleteness and future

alteration in the building which goes beyond the normal vision of architecture frozen in time at its moment of conception. An extraordinarily complex spatiality results from the inventive combination of two apparently banal formal devices, the skewed cut in plan and the ramped imposition in section, and yet the building somehow remains relaxed enough to allow the invasion of an incongruous café without losing face. It is architecture that conceptually, materially and formally moves from the bottom upwards, and in so doing never forgets where it came from. In this way it is immediately engaging at one level and richly provoking at another, capable of accommodating banality whilst never becoming banal.

A FEW BEERS

Kunsthall, Rotterdam. 1.37pm, 10 February 1995.

We are now onto the beers, attempting chemically to continue the rush of the building. The group are torn between those who find the whole thing silly, and those who are exhilarated. Rafe² is split, but in this dilemma summarises the experience perfectly. "I don't know whether to be intelligent or stupid, serious or funny".

One of the charges brought against the everyday is that it conceals the authentic nature of human existence. With its concentration of market forces, instrumental action and political contingency, the everyday is seen as a falling from a more profound project of rediscovering our true sense of belonging in the world. The political career of one of the most famous proponents of this critique, Martin Heidegger, should be enough to warn us of its inherent dangers³, and indeed to turn

2 Rafe Bertram and Eva Pfannes are students at the Bartlett. The clarification for me of the issues outlined in this article is indebted to the students of Unit 22 and to my fellow teacher, Ro Spankie.

3 This remark may appear fatuous, but I agree with Peter Osborne's implied criticism of Heidegger apologists: "Heidegger's supporters have tended to suggest that there is something intrinsically philistine about the very idea that so great a thinker should have his work judged in relation to his (supposedly passing) political opinions" - or at very least I am proud to be accused of being a philistine. Peter Osborne, "Tactics, Ethics or Temporality - Heidegger's Politics Reviewed," *Radical Philosophy* 70 (1995): 16.

the critique against itself. I have argued that the retreat from the everyday leads to a rejection of our real political condition, and with this an abrogation of our responsibilities as architects. However, complete immersion in the everyday has its own problems leading, in Lefebvre's words, to 'an abandonment of everyday life to vulgarity ..(which) would grant art, science, ethics and philosophy the inordinate privilege of constituting superhuman - and therefore inhuman - 'worlds''⁴ The example of community architecture is sobering in this respect. In a politically correct attempt to avoid any imposition of their will, community architects react passively to the demands of their clients. Architecture, when thus circumscribed by the everyday, is reduced to the lowest common denominators of function and technique. The initial good intent leads to the disempowerment of both architect and client alike.

Lefebvre's solution to such problems is to enact a reciprocal transaction:

For we must be careful neither to abandon the (acquired or potential) wealth of the content, of the 'human raw material'; nor to lose whatever is achieved in the highest, most intense moments. The problem is therefore to define the reciprocal relation of these activities and realities.; The simple moments and the highest moments of life.⁵

For the architect, this suggests a continual movement between retreat and immersion in the world, a movement necessary because, as Merleau-Ponty notes, "one must be able to withdraw and gain distance in order to become fully engaged"⁶. In Wim Wenders' film, *Wings of Desire*, this movement is given graphic expression as the characters swoop from observing on high as angels (black and white, commentating, removed) to inhabiting the world as people (coloured, discursive, embodied, drinking coffee). That the one of the most poignant sequences takes place

4 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 86.

5 Ibid. My italics into order to stress the productive potential of the everyday

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 60. In this, his inaugural Professorial address, Merleau-Ponty outlines the tensions of the philosopher as someone moving between knowledge and ignorance, truth and ambiguity, philosopher and man, detached and engaged - tensions which are absolutely necessary for philosopher and architect alike.

in Scharoun's National library is, to my mind, no accident, since it is a building which can accept both the simplest and highest moments of life.

It is such a model that I propose for architects, to be Angels with Dirty Faces; at times hovering like light doves, at others returning to grounded, messy experiences - androgynous dreamers of worlds full of flaws and contingencies. With feet on the ground, these angels evade the delusions of utopia, but as sceptical optimists they never succumb to Tafurian despair and impotence in the face of capitalist forces; instead they reform the everyday as a place of political resistance. For these angels there is no dilemma of intelligent/stupid, serious/funny, because in their endless movement these and other dialectics are dissolved. They dismiss the either/or of nature/technology, and as Koolhaas does, allow fluorescent lights to float out into the park and a vision of nature to invade the gallery - simply accepting that nature is a construct.

One of Wenders' angels wearily notes:

I've stood outside long enough. I've been absent long enough. Let me enter the history of the world. I get tired of my spiritual existence... of forever hovering above. I wish I could grow a weight which would bind me to the earth. To guess for once instead of always knowing. To have a fever, to blacken my fingers reading the papers.⁷

...and then to absent-mindedly rub a cheek. Angels with Dirty Faces.

⁷ *Wings of Desire* (Nouveaux Pictures, 1987). Wim Wenders with Peter Handke.

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