

# Architectural Praxis after Modernism

Keith Ballantyne, A.I.A.

*Keith Ballantyne is a practicing architect pursuing an M. Phil. Degree in Architecture at the University of Edinburgh. He is currently in his second year of study and is focusing on contemporary design theory as it relates to contemporary interventions in existing/historical settings with emphasis on the relativity of design.*

The physicality of the city is experienced through the composition of its buildings; buildings placed on sites in relation to one another. One can trace the evolution of a city through time by reviewing its morphology. Interesting as the city is as a whole, it is the individual buildings and their immediate contexts, which are of principal interest in this paper.





Fig. 1: Vienna. Royal Palace set against public street. Clear hierarchy.



Fig. 2: Prague. Religion at the center of civic existence. The ethical structure of civic life.



Fig. 3: St. Vitus's Cathedral, Prague. Symbolism and narrative.

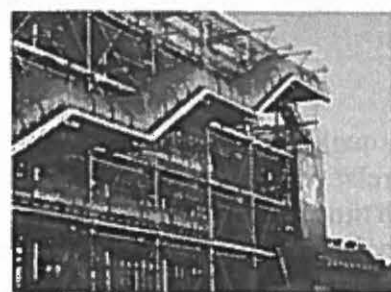


Fig. 4: Centre Pompidou, Paris. Deliberate negation of contextual reference.

As architecture continues to search for its purpose in contemporary society, having shed the restrictions of a single or dominant narrative or style and girded with a plethora of theoretical and philosophical rhetoric, it seems increasingly at risk of becoming marginalised in this age of globalization. Architecture, which used to be reflective of a society's culture, i.e. religious affiliation, political ideology, degrees of openness/closed-ness, and wealth, or lack thereof, no longer explicitly expresses such ideologies as the impacts of technology and globalization spreads. As such, architecture has largely become commodified and is often pursued as novelty or attempts to express its significance through its aesthetic; trying to embody some narrative of meaning through metaphor or the like. The difficulty with such attempts is our inability to define "meaning" in a diverse, multicultural, post-Enlightenment society.

After realizing the failures of Modernism in Post-War Europe, we have seen the Postmodern reaction. In many ways the ideological antithesis of Modernism, Postmodernism emerged and diversified into what today looks like a new version of Pre-War Modernism, an issue I will revisit later. Depending on one's point of view, the expressive variety of approaches and aesthetics that Postmodernism and its progeny has provided is a welcome diversion from the barrenness of the modernist past; it is interesting. The Postmodernists' attempts at reconnecting or "situating" their architecture in their surroundings, their attempts to infuse their architecture with a sense of place (whether as palimpsest or through some other metaphorical means) in retrospect has in many cases been criticized as being shallow or lacking authenticity. The quest for greater understanding and expressions of meaning has led to a plumbing of the intellectual depths of cultural philosophy for insights. In so doing, the rhetoric has become increasingly less accessible to a consuming public, thereby potentially making a connected or situated architecture even less likely. I suggest that public importance or meaning will ultimately be found in the aesthetic generated, and not through some greater depth evident through architectures that have been infused with dense theory understood by only a select few.

Recently a design competition was held for the "fire site" along the Cowgate and South Bridge in Edinburgh's Old Town; one of the few intact, large, and available sites in the Old Town proper. The competition formed the basis for a 4th-year architecture/multimedia design studio, whose brief was to accommodate a new market for the Old Town. Many of the student projects reflected a high-Postmodern aesthetic, with no obvious reference to historical context, materiality, or scale. Most of the projects interpreted this brief with a maximum of open space and a minimum of density. The graphical representations were provocative, complete with computer animations, highly rendered surfaces and the occasional hint at occupation through the insertion of scaled, two-dimensional people. The vastly more exhaustive conversation of theory/philosophy notwithstanding, one could only be taken by the stark contrasts offered by the budding architects for a site that is replete with contextual influences. Perhaps as a matter of complexity or incompleteness, the projects were decidedly interesting - some engrossing, and exciting - but it does beg the question, is that enough? The overall lack of concern for context clearly illustrates how far from "Postmodernism" these Postmodernists have moved. What once was largely an effort to connect with context and history has become a fascination with the process of investigation, with context largely being discounted and marginalised to insignificance. It is simply no longer proper to refer to these works as being postmodern.<sup>1</sup>

As architects, we seem to believe it is our responsibility to intellectualize our role, infuse our architecture with our interpretations and understanding of psychology, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, and aesthetics. We seem convinced that by doing so, architecture will find relevance and again establish itself as a core cultural element in our civic existence, thereby creating a better future for mankind. While I may appear cynical, I am not proposing that we stop rigorously pursuing a greater, deeper understanding of the human condition, or that we should be afraid of intellectualism. Rather, I suggest that we should understand the degree to which our intellectual rigors will be read or understood through our architectural interventions and expression. Hans Ibelings in his book *Supermodernism* comments how 'recent architecture reflects a declining interest in accommodating a symbolic cargo or rendering a sometimes only half-understood philosophical or scientific idea'<sup>2</sup> and that '... the tendency of postmodernists and deconstructivists to look for hidden



Fig. 5: Holyrood Palace/New Parliament, Edinburgh. Symbolic juxtaposition.

meanings everywhere has become largely superfluous for the simple reason that, more often than not, there is no hidden meaning<sup>3</sup> to be found. Perhaps this comes from a frustrated acknowledgement of just how difficult a task it is to infuse such ephemeral qualities into works of steel, stone, and glass. Not to make too slight a point, rather to argue that of all the influences informing our judgment on taste, mores, ethics and the like, socialization has the greatest impact. It seems reasonable to assume that architecture will only be brought to its former prominence once it connects on a more complete social level; a level more completely accessible, if even subconsciously, to the masses. It would seem however, whether we subscribe to the notion of Supermodernism or not, we might agree that the need to ascribe meaning or allusion to architecture no longer holds the importance it once did.

It is necessary now to understand architecture in its current global context. While not succumbing to a notion that Supermodernism is all that does or will matter in our 21st century world, Ibelings does say:

*It cannot be denied that a great many designs and buildings have been seen the light of day since the 1990's that are characterized by a coolness, smoothness and abstraction that frustrates any attempt to invest them with meaning and that have no particular relationship with their surroundings. And this applies just as much to the architecture of the thoughtful few as it does to the products of the unreflective majority.<sup>4</sup>*

Perhaps the unintended seminal examples of Supermodernism are what Marc Augé calls 'non-places', 'spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure...'.<sup>5</sup> To clarify, Augé states that:

*If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.<sup>6</sup>*

Interestingly, all the building types to which he refers are associated with business and tourism, those industries which gave birth to the contemporary understanding of globalization. Ibelings refers to these building types as being 'neutral', making no reference to context but rather finding their inspiration and legitimation from program, thus freeing the architect to design from anywhere for anywhere since what is important is the 'visual, spatial and tactile sensation',<sup>7</sup> not the 'deeper meaning' or connectedness that was once sought.

One should not underestimate the impact that speedy, inexpensive global travel and tourism has had on international architecture. Once the private domain of the wealthy and of the corporate executive, world travel is now largely available to the masses. That airports, hotels, and shopping malls look the same whether you're in Tokepa, Kansas, or Edinburgh, Scotland should come as no surprise. With a growth in accessibility through expanded air traffic comes a need for more and larger airports to accommodate the expanding number of tourists needing places to stay and spend their money. The hoteliers and developers acknowledge their guests' desire for a measure of familiarity and thus construct Holiday Inns around the world to the same template, regardless of their location. This does not apply only to new constructions, historic buildings and settings are being modified to accommodate the tourist machine as well. As Ibelings notes:

*Tourism has spawned a mind set whereby buildings, cities and landscapes are consumed in a touristic manner even when people are not on holiday, and the environment, consciously or unconsciously, is increasingly regarded as a décor for the consumption of experiences.<sup>8</sup>*

As architecture is regarded 'as a décor for the consumption of experiences', it is



Fig. 6: Public Square, Schouwburgplein, Rotterdam. Redefinition of "public realm". Is this a "non-place"?



Fig. 7: Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris. Postmodern reference on an otherwise unarticulated architecture.



Fig. 8: London - Schizophrenic skyline.



Fig. 9: London - place/non-place?





Fig. 10: Paris - place/non-place?



Fig. 11: Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris. Transparency, the Modernist ideal.



Fig. 13: Potsdamer Platz, Berlin. Interesting architecture that could be located anywhere.

clear to see its role being ever more affected by market trend and fashion, where greater importance is attached to 'visual, spatial, and tactile sensations'. All such pursuits illustrate a growing fascination with, and dependence upon novelty and aesthetics, both of which are potential impediments to the realization of 'ethical' architecture.<sup>10</sup>

#### CONTEMPLATING A WAY FORWARD

It should be understood that my critique of the architectural avant-garde is meant to be productive. Their work, while not always realizable, is invigorating, stimulating and necessary and propels our discipline forward toward realizing newer and greater space. My polemic concerns architectural praxis, an issue often in competition with architectural theory.

Alberto Pérez-Gómez in a recent lecture delivered here at the University of Edinburgh, outlined his concerns regarding these issues of globalization, technology, and ethics. His reflections on the growing impact of technology in the process of architectural design express a concern for 'an obsession for novelty' and that 'these folded structures... generally ignore historical precedent and the oriented spatiality of an embodied user',<sup>11</sup> perhaps suggesting that architects are being controlled by, rather than controlling their 'instrumental devices' in the process of design. He questions whether modes (computers) are important in the practice of architecture suggesting it is naive to consider that formal extractions from computers will be important.

*This application of computer technology to design has left behind its simple utilitarian justification as a tool that might improve the efficiency of architectural production, and is now driven by the claim of the tool's capacity to generate 'new forms,' totally 'other' from our traditional orthogonal building practices.<sup>12</sup>*

The integration of computer technology into the architecture office has proven to have a greater impact on architectural design than many are willing to acknowledge. Whether through the development of software capable of 'creating' once impossible form, or in the phenomenal power available for resolving such form, the speed in which these changes have come is immense. So, what does this have to do with post-modernism and architectural praxis?



Fig. 12: Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz, Berlin. Premier example of "supermodernism".

The changes in architecture in the past decade have largely been fueled by advances in technology, not least of which being advances in architectural computing and its integration into offices worldwide. The ability to quickly generate ideas, represent, produce, and share them, is key in the success of architectural practice. As novelty becomes more a mode for justification and marketing of architecture, it is computers which facilitate this. As this relates to praxis, Pérez-Gómez asks '...are these fashionable new applications of technology truly significant? Are they capable of offering a place in our collective imagination?'<sup>13</sup>

It is useful to understand that our post-modern condition is continuing its evolution into something which is looking more like a version of the pre-war Modern Movement, with its love affair with technology, its lack of

"situatedness", its internationally uniform aesthetic and increasing inflexibility. It is necessary to understand that this phenomenon of Supermodernism, with its 'non-places' and 'neutral' architectures which define it, is real. Finally, while we cannot blame computers for any of this, we can acknowledge that the architect's administration of this technology is in large part responsible for this current condition.<sup>14</sup>

If we agree that architecture is significant, then the architect as agent is engaged in important work. Karsten Harries, in *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, has concluded through his assessment of Hegel and Heidegger that architecture no longer operates in its 'highest vocation' and that it no longer can. He suggests

*... we should not expect too much from architects; whether what they build turns out to be a real house, a real school, a real monument, or a real church will depend on how their work is appropriated. This they cannot control.<sup>15</sup>*

Such statements, coupled with disorienting contemporary theory, might suggest one should just lose hope, give up, as we don't have control over our work anyway. I don't accept such defeatist notions. The role of architecture has changed; its role in society has evolved. It is a building that has changed the fortunes of a small north-Spain port city. I am referring here, of course, to the Guggenheim in Bilbao, a work which its creator, Frank Gehry, acknowledges has little intellectual, or theoretical basis. He encourages people to make of it what they will; to appropriate it. It is encouraging to know that such a work, and many other examples round the world that fit the Supermodern model, still have the potential to inspire.

Does Supermodernism have to make the 'non-places' Marc Augé refers to? Must we accept as fact that globalization will bring about homogenous world architecture? These questions imply negativity, should either or both be true. With obvious exceptions illustrated through current world events, it can be said one of the bi-products of Globalization is an appreciation of the core sameness of mankind and an understanding of why this homogenous architecture is proliferating. But it is not the sameness that we should exploit in an exploration for significance or meaning. Rather, it is the differences and nuances which provide opportunity for the creation of situated architecture that, as Harries asserts 'lets us dream of utopia'.

#### NOTES

1. I do not refer specifically here to Postmodernism as the style that was so prevalent in the 1980's, rather to the plethora of theory and philosophy that has come since, and largely in reaction to, the Modern Movement. The interest here is the closing of a theoretical loop where, as architects and theoreticians reacted to the shortcomings of the Modern Movement, they have come to espouse in several key ways, the very tenets of the movement they had such a fevered reaction to.
2. IBLINGS, Hans. *Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalization*, Rotterdam: Nai Press, 2002, p. 129
3. Ibid. p. 133
4. Ibid. p. 143
5. AUGÉ, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe. London: Verso, 1995, p. 94
6. Ibid. p. 77-8
7. IBLINGS, Hans. Op. Cit., p. 133
8. Ibid. p. 135
9. Ibid. p. 133
10. Alberto Pérez-Gómez (*Architecture and Ethics beyond Globalization*; lecture delivered U. of Edinburgh, June 2003) expresses the position that architecture cannot be simply an aesthetic or novel pursuit if it is to satisfy its ethical potential. Karsten Harries (*The Ethical Function of Architecture*; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000) on the other hand, says that architecture is past the "time of its highest vocation" and as such only carries a measure of ethical potential, this as conclusion to compelling arguments against architecture being aesthetic or decorated objects only.
11. PEREZ-GOMEZ, Alberto. *Architecture and Ethics beyond Globalization*, lecture delivered at University of Edinburgh, June 2003, p. 1
12. Ibid. p. 1
13. Ibid. p. 2 I suggest these "fashionable new applications of technology" are significant, if not always in positive ways, and I assert have already gained a place in our "collective imagination". This will become even more so as these applications are further integrated into our public, private and spiritual lives.
14. I refer here to the many architects who are fascinated with the results of a facile computer operator with powerful software. The profession is rife with practitioners whose mode of operation is 'slick graphics', this is where my criticism lies. There are a number of architects today (Marcos Novak key among them) who assert that computer generated forms and models, never intended to be built, constitute a critical and valuable segment of the architectural profession equally as important as practice and the construction of buildings. These investigations provide a very different insight to the possibilities of architecture and technology, and while I may not ascribe entirely to their premises, are excluded from this reference.
15. HARRIES, Karsten. *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1997, p. 363



Fig. 13: NEMO, Amsterdam. Relational and concerned with identity.



Fig. 14: Jewish Museum, Berlin. Relational?



Fig. 15: Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. Relational, historical and concerned with identity.