Irrational Exubrance

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This paper examines the supposed "end of theory" in architecture culture championed by adherents of so-called "post-critical" practise. The aim is twofold: first, to describe how the post-critical offensive against both the vanguard-ism of the modern movement and the oppositional framework of postmodernism is in fact indebted to the rhetoric of the new economy rhetoric; and second, to make clear that the corresponding aestheticisation of 'flow' inevitably reveals its contradictions in architectural forms addressing the unevenness of globalism.

For the past several years, a prolonged stock-taking of architecture as a *critical discipline* has unfolded. Since the beginning of the late nineties, a period recalled in Alan Greenspan's declamation which serves as the title of this paper, this *fin-de-siècle frisson* has played out in several ways: the appearance of important anthologies of architectural history and theory; the assumed ascendancy of digital design, both pedagogically and professionally; and the fact of globalisation in our everyday lives. In the United States, architecture has undergone a peculiar kind of 'irrational exuberance'. It is a phenomenon marked by the emergence within the academy of an attack against what Fredric Jameson has dubbed 'the golden age of theory', an era which emerged from the vicissitudes of the 1960s. This attack has taken at least two paths: one, the deliberate domestication of theory by historiographic reassessment; and two, the rise of a purportedly 'post-critical' design practise. The latter, in particular, has been attributed to a generational conflict in American academia.[1] While this is likely true, it is unhelpful here to get into a family feud. Instead, it may be preferable to do two things: first, to outline the contour of the post-critical offensive against both the vanguard-ism of the modern movement *and* the oppositional framework of postmodernism as indebted to valences of new economy rhetoric, often for what could ostensibly be described as 'better, faster, cheaper' design practise; and second, to make clear that the corresponding aestheticisation of 'flow' – the fetish for access and connectivity on a worldwide scale – inevitably reveals its contradictions specifically in architectural forms marked by the unevenness of globalism.

ACT 1: 1999

In September 1999, the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* published a special issue devoted to 'Architectural History'. According to Eve Blau, the *JSAH* editor, the goal was nothing less than marking 'the turn of the century and the millennium' by charting and reflecting on 'changes in the discipline and professional practise of architectural history over the last three decades'.[2] Blau argued that architectural history had 'expanded to engage' issues such as class, gender, and race; that architectural history had 'moved into other disciplines' and became the concern of philosophers, literary critics, and urban geographers; architectural history had been 'radically transformed' by poststructuralism and cultural studies; and that architectural history had been 'opened up' by literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and computer technology.[3] Despite these expansions, movements, transformations, and openings, the goal of the issue was not, Blau admitted, 'to define the parameters of our discipline', but to suggest the 'shifting ground of scholarly concerns *at a key moment in our history*.'[4] Why, we may ask, is September 1999 a particularly 'key moment' in architectural history? What occurred in the 'last three decades'? Why this historical bracketing? Why the introspection?

Any millennial reconsideration is really nothing but an arbitrary century shift that means little for the practise, teaching, and articulation of design, history, and theory. Yet we cannot dismiss the *JSAH* issue so easily – it is part of a larger phenomenon. Consider the Berlage Institute's 2003 *Hunch* magazine that solicited 109 'simple and hard questions about what architects do today'. Consider the *festschrift* for Bernard Tschumi's deanship at Columbia that pondered 'the state of architecture at the beginning of the 21st century'. Consider the 2004 'Stocktaking' issue of *Harvard Design Magazine* that asked 'questions about the present and future of design'. Consider the anthologies *Architectural Theory since 1968* and the *Oppositions Reader*, both published in 1998 and both edited by Michael Hays. And consider Hays's own journal *Assemblage* that printed its final issue in April 2000 by requesting scholars and designers 'to reflect on your practise, to situate it within current theoretical positions, and to speculate about future ones.'[5] The 'key moment' of history to which this range of reassessment is addressed is revealed in the final article of the *JSAH* special issue. In 'Theory into History; or, The Will to Anthology', Sylvia Lavin

dismisses those anthologies that maintain the critical – that is to say, theoretical – impulse of 'the last three decades'. Her bugbear is Hays's *Architectural Theory since 1968*. While Hays believes that theory helps recognise architecture's 'semi-autonomy' but also demands its relation to the larger social and material field, Lavin declares 'the end of the dominance of criticality' and its replacement by the new 'theoretical trajectories' of 'media studies', 'digital technologies', and 'the emergence of a new materialist thinking' in architecture.[6] These 'trajectories' are no longer practises of mediation or resistance; rather, as Lavin claims, they aid and abet the re-emergence of the design object as 'a distinct and distinguished theoretical event'. In other words, Lavin's 'new materialist thinking' is seen in *form* and not defined by *content*. She presents a kind of realism, but a realism that shuns architecture's relation to a larger social world (or, indeed, how architecture may participate in constructing new social relations). This realism avoids confrontation, since confrontation is equated with criticality. Through 'media studies' and 'digital technologies', this realism embraces the faddism of global capitalism. This realism tries to be *cool* and not *hot*.

FIGURE 1

ACT 2: 'COOL' LIKE THAT

If this last bit sounds a little vague, that is because it is. Yet 'coolness' has actually become a significant trope of the so-called 'post-critics', those architects and academics arrayed against the inheritance of critical architectural culture since '68 (and before) yet who wish to maintain a veneer of radicality. Indeed, coolness is an attitude adopted by Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting who, in a text from 2002, depart from a 'hot' critical position to a 'cool' projective stance. Somol and Whiting reject any oppositional framework; instead, they vaunt a diagrammatic 'instrumentality' defined by 'projection, performativity, and pragmatics'. 'Critical architectural practice' is 'reflective, representational, and narrative'; post-critical practise is 'cool', 'relaxed', and 'easy'. In their amoeboid Venn diagram, Architecture intersects Politics, Economics, and Theory (fig. 1). Yet architects, the authors insist, engage these fields only as 'experts' on design and not as critics. Somol and Whiting are motivated by how 'design may affect economics or politics' but not *vice versa*. Hence the impossibility of their envisioning the greater correspondences of, say, P T and its implications for architecture. 'Setting out this projective diagram does not', they declare, 'necessarily entail a capitulation to market forces, but actually respects or reorganises multiple economies,
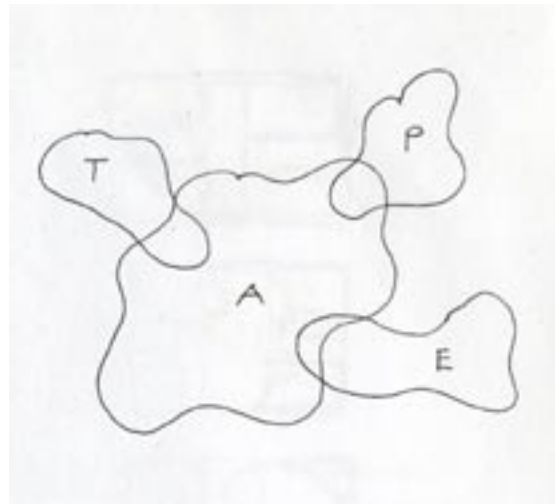
ecologies, information systems, and social groups.'[7] Expertise, it would seem, means having your cake and eating it too.

The reorganisation of these 'multiples' has been advanced by Michael Speaks, the director of the Metropolitan Research & Design programme at Sci-Arc. Speaks readily celebrates the absorption of market forces by architecture culture. In a series of articles over the past few years, Speaks has championed 'design intelligence', something he describes as a combination of 'computer design and technology' with a 'sophisticated approach to marketing, public relations, and other aspects of the business of architecture'.[8] (This is a pretty accurate characterisation of Lavin's 'new materialist thinking'.) 'Intelligence' is Speaks's 'post-vanguard' replacement to both the 'philosophy' of the early twentieth century *and* the 'theory' of the late twentieth century.[9] His model is 'entrepreneurial' because it uses 'research' to remain ahead of the pack. Speaks hails the likes of Foreign Office Architects, UN Studio, and MVRDV, even though their 'research' – like MVRDV's 'datascapes' – rarely amounts to more than pseudo-social science masquerading as social engineering. For Speaks, 'the flexible, the global, and the networked' are significant features of the 'new economy' and they oppose architectural theories that remain 'critical and resistant to the emergent reality driven by the forces of globalisation'.[10] Theory, Speaks tells us, just isn't 'quick' enough.
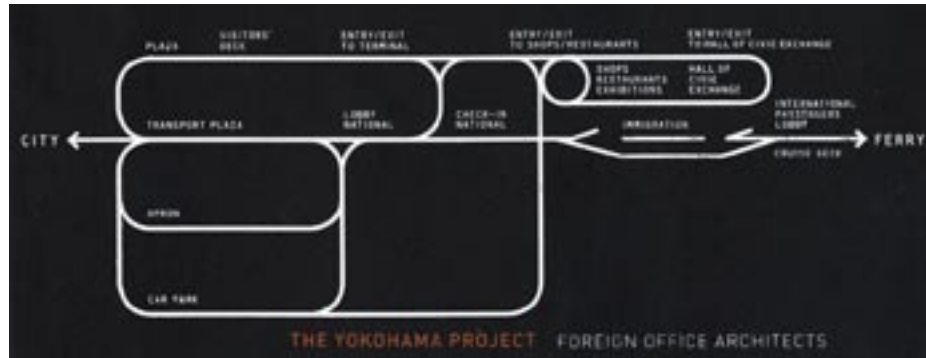
FIGURE 2

Yet, it is through the deliberate *slowness* of architectural theory by which we must question this 'emergent commercial reality'. What Speaks, echoing management guru Peter Drucker, calls 'the knowledge society', Gilles Deleuze, following William Burroughs, dubs 'the control society', where dispersed, oscillating patterns of control can suggest freedoms but, in effect, demand results. ('We are taught that corporations have a soul,' Deleuze warns, 'which is the most terrifying news in the world.'[11]) A perfect example of how these 'oscillating patterns' obfuscate reality appears in FOA's organisational diagram of their Yokohama terminal project. Despite the intent to 'reorganise multiple economies, ecologies, information systems, and social groups', as Somol and Whiting would have put it, Yokohama evinces a very specific break: the discontinuity of customs and immigration from the otherwise infinite loop of programme (fig. 2).[12] (Anyone having applied for an American visa after 9/11 knows what this means.) In Yokohama, as elsewhere, the architectural idealisation of global flow founders against the hard reality of 'control'.

We cannot, however, remain confined to debunking this mania for diagrams. Rather, we are obliged to ask how Speaks's 'emergent reality' takes shape in Somol and Whiting's suggestion of 'multiple economies, ecologies, information systems, and social groups'. Who, exactly, are these social groups? What do they look like? Where do they live? Let us take a stab at it. The 'multiple economies, ecologies, information systems, and social groups' operate and live in the global city, however amorphous. It is the site of their most contested interrelations, and it has an architecture that may really fulfil the maxims of 'instrumentality' and 'pragmatics'. A form of it exists in the genuinely 'digital' architecture of call centres

and tech parks outside New Delhi and centred in the hubs of outsourcing throughout India. These replicas of 'front offices' in Silicon Valley may well be the most 'pragmatic' expression of the marketplace (fig. 3). The implications of this have been described by urban geographers Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin as processes of 'splintering urbanism' – that is to say, the city is increasingly marked by networks and infrastructures targeted to specific 'high value' users and spaces that are, more often than not, intensively international and global in their operations (i.e. they are involved in the co-ordination and distribution of multi-national flows of capital).[13] The urban scape is thus perceived as nothing more than *hubs*, *links*, and *portals* that are effectively *tunnelled* into *networks*; the contents of a city become concentrated within these atomised spaces, thereby bypassing their broader social need and significance.

FIGURE 3

If, in the language of Speaks & Company, the most interesting *effects* are those detached 'from the logic causality', then exactly what kind of architecture is suggested here? Or, rather, what does it look like? Let us address this by asking the post-critics about 'projection, performativity, and pragmatics'. We are helped by Robert Somol. Somol's advice appears in *Content*, Rem Koolhaas's recent compilation of his 'extra-large' reach. In asking us to 'get back into shape' Somol substitutes 'shape' for 'form' and 'mass'. Apparently, *form* is linked to things 'contemplative and potentially critical' while *mass* has 'ambitions to the spectacle'. *Shape*, however, is 'illicit, easy, expendable, graphic, adaptable, fit, empty, arbitrary, intensive, buoyant', and – unsurprisingly – 'projective' and 'cool'. Somol wishes to liberate architecture from any constraint, be it formal, social, or even political. The *graphic* nature of shape, according to Somol, 'frees it from the obligation to represent architecture at work'; 'shape never appears as a definitive object itself'; 'shape exists in the material world but refuses its limitations'; 'shape requires no special pleadings; it simply exists'. With a kind of historical impertinence, Somol describes the recent OMA design for the Porto concert hall as a 'Melnikov Worker's Club in reverse'.[14] Koolhaas embraces this reverse engineering – minus its constructivist lucidity – as a welcome 'cynicism'. [15] His 'cynicism' stems from his discovery of 'Junkspace' or what he calls a 'People's Architecture' of endless conditioned space in airports, casinos, lobbies, malls, and the like. If, as Somol assumes, the OMA project has a 'volume' that 'exponentially outstrips surface area', then its *shape* is simply the aestheticisation of the anesthetising *effects* of Junkspace.

What unites Somol's 'exponential outstripping of surface area' with Speaks's 'desire to adapt to instability' with Koolhaas's 'Junkspace' is an aesthetic of superfluity. It is an aesthetic conjured in the apparition of the China Central Television tower on the cover of *Content*. It is an aesthetic of extreme mimesis which gives its form an aura in excess of the models it copies. Its superfluity not only refers to the surplus capacity of shapes to hypnotise, but also to the expendability of peoples and things.[16]

If the mantra of *Content* is to 'Go East' and explain 'the architect's ambiguous relations with the forces of globalisation', if Junkspace is Koolhaas's replacement to his own Manhattanism, if *shapes* are simply substitutes for form and mass, then these transitions will crystallise with very real consequences.[17] With Manhattanism irrevocably changed, not least following 9/11, Koolhaas's journey to the East insists that we ask what is left in his wake. Whether it is Ground Zero or CCTV, the fetish for the mundane context of the global city is inevitably confronted by the profane facts of alienation and commodification in everyday life. Koolhaas may have the uncanny ability to make neo-liberalism perfectly 'cool', but we are under no obligation to accept his regime of '¥€$'. Consider the construction boom in Dubai, one of the global hotspots on the current architectural radar. In March 2006, at the site of the Burg Dubai – the world's tallest building, designed by the Chicago office of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) – migrant workers, largely from the Indian subcontinent and the Philippines, staged protests and strikes against their abysmal pay and working conditions.[18] All of sudden, construction halted. The supposedly seamless flows of globalisation – of 'going east' – became bottlenecked at the building site, perhaps one of the last manifestations of our industrial inheritance (another being the mine shaft). The *aesthetic form* of architecture was confronted by the *social form* of its own modernity – an architecture *shaped* – that is to say, *built* – by a very real global workforce living in very real states of exception.

As the events in Dubai disclose, any global flow inevitably crosses other itineraries, other cultural imaginaries moving past or against it. How, then, to imagine architecture as capable of restructuring social relations in the nooks and crannies of global movements? Take, for example, the work of Teddy Cruz along the San Diego-Tijuana border. Based in San Diego, Cruz has developed a prototype aluminium frame equipped with preassembled adjustable footings to participate in the phenomenon of organised occupations of vacant land in Tijuana (fig. 4).[19] These 'invasions' result in the construction of ad-hoc housing settlements after which the municipality is obliged to provide infrastructural services such as water and electricity. The resources used in the informal housing – like wooden palettes or discarded tires for retaining walls – originate in San Diego but are brought to Tijuana for recycling. Cruz's frame – designed for production in the *maquiladoras*, or manufacturing companies operating in Tijuana to take advantage of cheap labour and low tariffs – is thus 'conceived as a "hinge" to facilitate and strengthen the connection to the variety of recycled materials and systems.'[20] The origins of

FIGURE 4

the frame are found in the use of steel supports by Tijuana builders to lift bungalows off the ground and acquire more space underneath; the bungalows are also imported from San Diego where they were slated for demolition.[21] Echoing N.J. Habraken's concept of 'supports' advanced in the 1960s, the 'frame' is 'the first step in the construction of a larger, interwoven and open-ended scaffolding that could help strengthen otherwise precarious terrain, without compromising the temporal dynamics of the self-made environments.'[22]

Out of Cruz's engagement with the space relations of San Diego and Tijuana appears the possibility for practical but no less prophetic architectural intervention. To borrow an analysis from Fredric Jameson, Cruz's project pinpoints (and exploits) 'conditions of possibility' found 'first and foremost, in the uneven development of world history, and in the existence, elsewhere, in the Second and Third World, of projects and constructions that are not possible in the First: this concrete existence of radically different spaces elsewhere (of whatever unequal realisation) is what objectively opens the possibility for the coming into being and development of "counter-hegemonic values".'[23] Cruz – and, by extension, the 'frame' – responds in deliberately *dialectical* terms to specific cultural and material conditions found along the

border. In conceptualising a deployable frame through the effects of transhipment and reuse of bungalows between San Diego and Tijuana, Cruz further calls into question the stability of values associated with any ideal images of agrarian or metropolitan settlement.

Cruz's project operates as both an act of criticism and as a practise of design. Cruz is clearly 'pragmatic' about the realities of social, cultural, political, and economic exchange along the San Ysidro crossing (a line indelibly marked in the sand as the border fence stretches right into the Pacific Ocean). Yet in the deployment of the aluminium frame there is also a wilful assertion to provide possibilities for better but *open-ended* futures based on the use of current technologies – perhaps indicating a partially utopian spirit that seeks to fix the future in the present. Thus by revealing or intervening in places of 'uneven development', whether through acts of design or criticism, we realise our critical-ethical capacity to confront the false consciousness of any aesthetic based on new media and market technologies which promise undreamed-of possibilities of access and connectivity on a global scale.[24] The examples of San Ysidro and Dubai indicate how quickly 'multiple economies, ecologies, information systems, and social groups', to borrow from Somol and Whiting, are shorn of any virtual, diagrammatic guise and instead crystallise in definable spaces of social,

material, and architectural exchange. If the obsession for 'flow' provides anything, it indicates the degree to which globalisation is nothing more than a coherent theory for periods of relative peace and prosperity.[25] If we in academic architectural culture wish to meet the challenges posed by the global city, we must continue to reveal the historical ironies of what it means to live in our times.

NOTES

[1] George Baird, 'Criticality and its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (Fall 2004/Winter 2005). Baird notes the 'post-critical' debt to the influence of 'critical' thinkers like Peter Eisenman and K. Michael Hays, and their own syntheses of figures such as Colin Rowe and Manfredo Tafuri.

[2] Eve Blau, 'Architectural History 1999/2000: A Special Issue of *JSAH*', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (September 1999): p. 278.

[3] Ibid, p. 279.

[4] Ibid, p. 280. Emphasis added.

[5] K. Michael Hays and Alicia Kennedy, 'Introduction', in *Assemblage* 41 (April 2000), p. 6.

[6] Sylvia Lavin, 'Theory into History; or, The Will to Anthology', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (September 1999): p. 496. Curiously, the 'new materialist thinking' appears, for Lavin, in the 'self-theorising of the architect' in 'the context of teaching design'.

[7] Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism', *Perspecta* 33 (2002): p. 77.

[8] Michael Speaks, 'Design Intelligence and the New Economy', *Architectural Record* (January 2002): p. 74.

[9] Michael Speaks, 'Design Intelligence', *Architecture+Urbanism* (December 2002): p. 16.

[10] Michael Speaks, 'Tales from the Avant-Garde: How the New Economy is Transforming Theory and Practise', *Architectural Record* (December 2000): p. 75; p. 77.

[11] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on Control Societies', *October 59* (Winter 1992): p. 6.

[12] I am grateful to Reinhold Martin for this analysis of the Yokohama diagram.

[13] Stephen Graham and Simon Martin, *Splintering Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[14] Robert Somol, '12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape', in *Content*, Taschen, 2004, p. 86.

[15] Rem Koolhaas, 'Copy and Paste', in *Content*, Taschen, 2004, p. 302.

[16] Achille Mbembe, 'Aesthetics of Superfluity', *Public Culture* 16 (Fall 2004): p. 374.

[17] For a peculiarly celebratory view of 'Junkspace', see Fredric Jameson's 'Future City', in *New Left Review 21* (May-June 2003).

[18] Hassan M. Fattah, 'In Dubai, an Outcry from Asian for Workplace Rights', *The New York Times* (March 26, 2006): p. 3. The protesting workers numbered around 2,500. More recently in early November 2007, about 40,000 Asian workers struck the Burj Dubai worksite, demanding, among other things, a $55 (USD) rise in their pay. Their current monthly salary is $109 for unskilled workers and $163 for skilled ones. The action has led an unprecedented acknowledgement by the UAE government that it may have to grant a minimum wage. Approximately 700,000 South Asians work in Dubai's construction industry. See: 'Asian workers' strike prompt Emirates to start considering minimum wage', *International Herald Tribune* (November 5, 2007).

[19] Teddy Cruz, 'Tijuana Case Study – Tactics of Invasion: Manufactured Sites', in *Architectural Design* (September-October 2005): pp. 32-37.

[20] Ibid, p. 35. Cruz notes that *maquiladora* companies are located in close proximity to informal communities of workers in Tijuana and thus avoid investing in transportation infrastructure.

[21] The migration of workers or the export of building technologies from back and forth between Tijuana and San Diego occurs along a site marked by the most uneven of global 'flows': the San Ysidro border crossing, where 24 lanes of car traffic enter the United States while only six leave it for Mexico.

[22] Cruz, 'Tijuana Case Study', p. 36.

[23] Fredric Jameson, 'Architecture and the Critique of Ideology', in Joan Ockman (ed), *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1985, pp. 72-73.

[24] Sheldon Pollack, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Cosmopolitanisms', *Public Culture* (2000): p. 577.

[25] David Rieff, 'Globalisation 2.0', *The New York Times Magazine* (26 March 2006): p. 13.