

## “Dear Architecture School...”

Have we become the antithesis of ourselves? Here are some general assumptions for debate, discussion or disregard...

Architects are now

disorientationalists.

Note: I say architects in the loosest sense of the word (aren't we all some form of architect, designer or engineer these days?), meaning anyone who believes they can construct a piece of the world by their hand. We now exist to create disjunctions, points of interest, social condensers, hubs of activity, clever kinks in otherwise-banal circulatory spaces and irregular floor plans- this is now what the world expects of us, thanks to the high media coverage and consumer desirability of various starchitects who shall not be named (which only leaves the mind to fill the blank with all those names we know off by heart, whose books we've all read and whose architecture we all secretly covet as precedents in one way or another). The products of our profession are dissected by magazines and graded by our peers, only to find that this is an unhealthy relationship we have between the maker and the made- by keeping our eyes on others we have subconsciously transposed them onto our own objects, inscribing a foreign identity into our own bodies. If you go walking in the city, pay attention and you will see the traces of their mark, blatant and shining scars across cities they have not yet visited but won't ever need to; their influence is automatically crystallised overnight. Just as blindly adoring fans yearn unfailingly for their stars of the silver-screen, students of architecture have eyes glued on screens all day, thoroughly captivated by the glittery prospects of one day attaining the premium status of starchitect. Producers of effects, rather than creators that affect. We are entering into a kind of show business in which we willingly condition ourselves to be directorial, curatorial, experiential, 4-dimensional (as a minimum, the more dimensions the better).

Cathedrals and shrines were once conceived as a common endgoal in the minds of thousands of dedicated labourers as they strived for built perfection. Now, architecture is now a means to a probably-commercial end.

Form does not follow function; form is function-style is now required for the building to exist in the minds of those funding it.

Visual impact and media recognition are the the last dying wishes of architects lying in graves dug by the hands (proverbial, of course) of a hyper-saturated society. Plug-in City was eerily prophetic, perhaps even a naive analogue prototype to today's instantaneous metropolises-in-flux. We live in a series of spectacles and unforgiving erasures. Living in the now has become literal, visceral, corporeal. What is (was?) body, is now corporate, is now real.

Only architects of the post-millennium would think of marketing sustainability as social events. We want to be trendsetters, pioneers at something, anything to suppress the deep fear that overcomes us as we lie awake at night (perhaps in that grave) thinking that everything in this world has already been invented. Neil Gaiman's 'fraud police' phenomenon continues to haunt us (and he isn't even an architect). Still, we remain optimistic, because it is in our nature. We are the glass half full. We want to stay relevant. In fact, we want that so much that we must offer at the very least the illusion of a full glass brimming over, no less, because to us if we are aren't full we might as well be empty. We blog, we trend, we make sophisticated multidisciplinary installations on the side (we install, and we stall), we provide a suite of ancillary non-architectural services (rendering, marketing, branding, decorating, selling, peddling, donating) to pad out what was once a specialised profession. These are ways of obtaining the fullness-illusion, creating jobs, building bridges and and securing a slippery future that at every turn threatens to forget us.

After all, we believe everything that modern society needs has already been invented. Design is no longer created but reconstituted: a vast archive of pre-existing ingredients at our disposal, carefully itemised, measured out, and blended together like a quick shake: quick to swallow, easy to digest, provides instant satiation, and disposable once the minute is over. Funny how we make only smoothies, having left the striated behind in the strain.

In light of this it can be said that architects and domestic appliances actually have very much in common.

### 1. BLENDER

For reasons stated previously. Architects whip up drinks-to-go: concoctions for every whim and fancy, budget and demographic. We unapologetically re-use leftover ideas and schemes when no-one is watching. There is no want for wastage. Unlike F&B perishables, architecture products have no use-by date. We throw in enhancements and boosters for additional fees. The additive has become addictive. Everything we touch seems to merge into a seamless, malleable, infinite pulp that never expires and never fails to satisfy a craving. What did the original ingredients look like? No one really knows. But then, no one really needs to know.

### 2. MICROWAVE

We can concentrate efforts at speeds and intensities unparalleled by any other profession. We overwork, we fixate, we obsess over the singular object spinning around on that glass tray, willing it to heat up: willing to make deals happen, doors to open, clients to agree. If we however happen to select an unsuitable object to place on that spinning tray, we might cause it to burn. Take aluminium for example (remind you of any icon of late?)- this object burns readily. But everyone is attracted to the flame; as the mesmerising sparks fly, the media frenzy is unquellable, only to subside and divert when something else catches fire.

### 3. WASHING MACHINE

Our mother industry has its hand on the settings, regulating social and financial pressures at every turn. But no matter the speed, the process is always repetitive and cyclical- an inescapable trait of the machine's purpose. We follow labels and succumb to discounted products, new technologies, and those darned convincing sales reps). We categorically sort our clothing (projects) to make sure no two strong colours are mixed (conflict avoidance), that the delicates are on the gentlest setting (public image preservation).

But there are some articles whose stains cannot be erased (just read the opinion section of the news, or better still, walk down the street).

There is even an economy setting (budget cuts). If the house is a machine for living in, then today's profession is a washing machine for purging stains and softening hard sites (but at the end of the day all machines are closed systems that eliminate surprises- what you put in is what you take out). At the end of a cycle, clothing is naturally wrinkled and unpresentable- it must now be pressed before anyone can wear it (photographers, photoshop, press). Sometimes, often due to a last-minute decision to do the laundry, we forget to distinguish the brights from the whites, and to our dismay end up with a full load of dull clothing cast in a muddy tinge. This is otherwise known as mixed-use. Undecided building zones that bleed into each other programmatically tend to be the most dieted and generic of them all. We only notice the loss of colour in post-occupancy use, seeing people tentatively move through 'multi-functional' zones or skirt its edges in apprehension, unsure of what to do with themselves in these over-designed vacuums of under-assigned space. Which leads to our next appliance.

### 4. VACUUM

Architects live in a vacuum, a bubble of glorious oblivion. We only hear each others' voices, read each others' books, critique others' architecture, give each other knowing glances as we bask in total literary enlightenment. We talk about ourselves to ourselves. The world stands outside, only ever coming into contact with us for monetary transactions, excluded from the jargon-filled witty banter punctuated by superfluous buzzwords of articulation and dualisms and phenomenology. And all that name-dropping, too- we are indeed worse than insecure socialites at a fundraiser. Now there is also no creation in a vacuum cleaner; only accumulation. Once the dirtbag is filled up, it is discarded and granted a clean slate. A vacuum cleaner is not sentimental; it takes pride in self-renewal. It is, in a way, metabolistic, like Ashihara's Tokyo: imbued with an amorphous hidden order. Consume to saturation point, purge, repeat.

## LESS IS NOT MORE.

Less and more are friends with benefits. They coincide, manipulate and compete on the same plane, wrestling at the visible surface. Less needs more for juxtaposition, to appear as the dominant gene. More needs less to show everyone what they're missing out on. Symbiotic or parasitic, one will never know. Schools are divided. The only time less and more work together in the 21st century is in trying to avoid becoming a bore. If we imagine Mies and Johnson in the schoolyard as boys (yes I know, why are they the same age- just run with it), making a blood oath never to compromise themselves to the other through the course of making history, united in decided difference. For us all watching this scene in impossible retrospect, we know that Mies needs Johnson (he would never admit it). Johnson needs Mies (he would shout it from the rooftops).

The language of today thrives on contrasts and post-'s and contradictions. After all, lukewarmth is a bore. No one wants to be mainstream. We look instead for the extreme (anything extra to the main stream); the bolder the manifesto and the louder the voice of conviction, the higher the perceived rate of success.

Here is another curious puzzle. Why are the most transparent of towers, foyers and lobbies so impenetrable and secretive, while the most intimate of dwellings are splashed in unnerving detail across the pages of magazines to remain permanently embalmed in glossy hard copy? What happens when we design for the page or the screen?

The hero shot is a mandatory one-hit K.O. that is to distill with great clarity a total understanding of the project.

Which is to say something about how much content there is to understand in the first place, since the architecture was designed with its final render in mind.

Heideggerian dwelling is no longer in effect. We must not and cannot  dwell on anything for too long or we become irrelevant and fall behind. What we haven't realised is that while we aren't participating in acts of dwelling we are still clearing. Moving relentlessly forward, we have left in our wake a completely razed site: the more ground we cover, the more we actually seem to uncover. The earth is naked under our feet. We decide to embrace this by making it a public event. Everyone gathers to pay tribute to what is being lost through televised mourning. While we can't and won't stop clearing, we can teach others to gaze upon the now-ground

(and here the architectural figure-ground is born: there is nothing perceived but the object and the clearing). We can erect milestones, memorials and markers to remind everyone of what could have been done better, to act as yardsticks for measuring improvement. But let's face it, we never revisit these tombs (unless profitable to do so). Our feet can only glide forward, we are programmed toward a wholly new yet wholly predictable future. Does no one find it alarming that our future lies in palimpsests of proposals? Rewriting the future is an unthinkable task, yet we do it every time a project changes hands. Novation and innovation are two very different words, depending on whether or not the original creator is *in*.

As the old adage goes, too many masters spoil the plan.

Due to copyright reasons we have been unable to reproduce Koolhaas' original text 'Junkspace' for the purposes of comparison. Visit <http://lensbased.net/files/Reader2012/rem+koolhaas+-+junkspace.pdf> to read the essay 'After Junkspace'