



# **Session 5**

## **Modern Vernacular**

Moderator: Professor Pieter Sijpkes

# The periphery of modernism: the evolution of the Québec regional landscape: the case of route 112

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This paper proposes to examine the evolution of the regional landscape of a rural area on the outskirts of Montreal. In this study, we will examine the case of route 112 on the South Shore of the Saint Lawrence River that has been transformed over the last few decades from a low speed, two lane rural road into a regional highway. The goal of this project is to better understand the impact of modernist thought on the quality of the larger environment, and in particular the local landscape.

The landscape of the road is a good indicator of the quality of the regional landscape, since the road plays a central role in the definition of any landscape.

*"... the building of roads became a matter of national concern, and from then on it began to play a role in the landscape, until (as we all know) it is now the most powerful force for the destruction or creation of landscapes that we have. 1 "*

In the words of Guy Chevrette, the previous Minister of Transport of Québec,

*« La route fait partie intégrante de notre environnement social, économique et culturel. Plus qu'une simple infrastructure utilitaire, elle est une composante de notre histoire collective. 2 »*

## The place of landscape in Modernist thought

Throughout the modernist period, the architectural object has remained the focus of intellectual activity, and as a result, the landscape has been neglected. A series of conditions prevented the development of meaningful relationship with the landscape. The first factor, and perhaps most widely documented, is the rejection of history. In contrast, significant landscape thought, such

as that present during the Baroque period, and during 18<sup>th</sup> century England, was strongly rooted in historical reflection. Furthermore, the decidedly anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism that characterized much of modernist rhetoric was at odds with the landscape tradition that was dependent on a highly developed mythological consciousness, both in the observer and in the creator.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the modernist obsession with individual creativity meant that the most significant research was within the psyche of the artist. Movements such as surrealism, dada and later abstract expressionism had little use for the landscape, which depended by definition on external phenomena. The problem is that, like that of the rejection of history, landscape has traditionally remained strongly dependent on a collective and shared perception of the external environment.

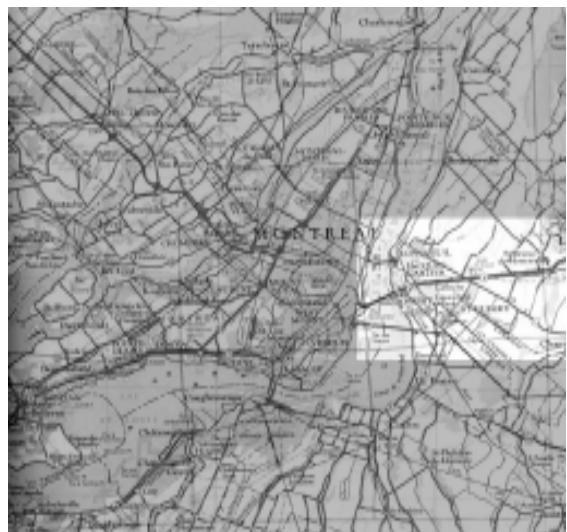


figure 1: route 112 –formerly route 1. Map source: [Le paysage canadien](#), Blair, C.L., R.I. Simpson, Editions FM, Montreal, 1970, P. 41.

As a result, modernists did not perceive the landscape as a realm of meaningful exploration, and concentrated their intellectual activity on the development of the architectural objects through space and material while treating the landscape as “ interstitial fabric”. In the words of Martha Schwartz, this:

*“ Elevation of the status of the building for space de-objectified the landscape, transforming it into a kind of connective tissue for the buildings” 4*

Landscape was thus de-intellectualized, and came to be understood as nature rather than culture. But even this seemingly non-esthetic choice was laden with meaning and historically dated. In fact, the “nature” that the modernist appropriated as the backdrop for their projects was actually the formal expression of the English Garden. According to Bernard Lassous,

*«... le choix d'un lieu comme naturel est déjà, de fait, une intervention culturelle. » 5*

Hence, in order to create a pristine nature as backdrop for the architectural machine, the mythical and symbolic dimensions that underpinned and leant meaning to the English garden were evacuated. It was as if the work undertaken by Capability Brown and later Frederick Law Olmsted of cleansing the landscape of any historical or

mythological references had finally been completed by the modernists.

There are some notable exceptions to this trend, that is modernist creators who continued to see and use the landscape as a meaningful receptacle for intellectual ideas and powerful forms. In the United States, firms such as Sasaki and associates, the architect Eero Saarinen, and the landscape architect Dan Kiley created work that was a clear statement of modernity. Painters such as Edward Hopper and sculptor Isamu Noguchi explored the expressive potential of the emerging landscape of their day. And yet, in spite of the brilliance of much of the work cited above, the approach of these creators remained strongly rooted in personal research and inspiration. Moreover, these projects, although prolific, had negligible impact on the greater territorial landscape that was taking form in the Americas, much of it a result of the rapid push towards urbanization and the consolidation of the infrastructure of the American Highway system that resulted from the “suburbanization” of the Americas.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the speed of technological advancement and the colonization of the environment outpaced the capacity for the appropriation by the intellectual, artistic or cultural actors.

Conceptually, we are far from the intellectual milieu that gave rise to the synthesis of 18th century English Picturesque garden. As a result, in the place of a landscape laden with meaning, modernists appropriated

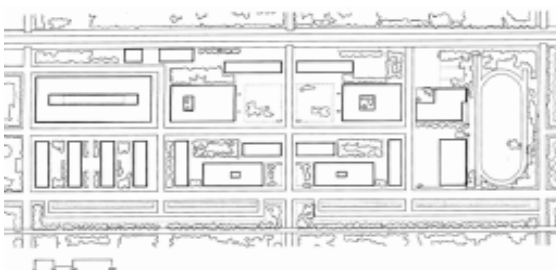


figure 2: IIT campus by Mies van de Rohe : Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review ed. by Marc Treib, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, P. 228.

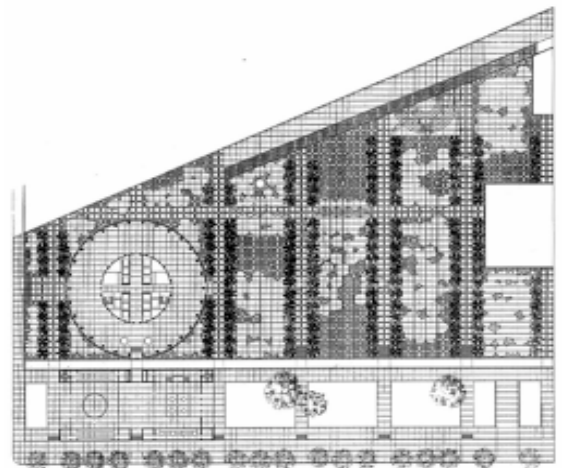


figure 3:: Plan of the garden of the North Carolina National Bank, Tampa 1988 by Dan Kiley, landscape architect, Harry Wolf, architect published in Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review , op.cit., P. 46.

what I call a “reactionary pastoralism” a natural looking green myth, a kind of culturally neutral background as a back drop for the avant-garde architecture.

*The norm of the building in a park implied .... that landscape comprised a passive and undifferentiated field of vegetation. ... In effect, ideas of landscape design as spatial or formal design withered and retreated in the distance. 7*

The paradox that authors such as Marc Treib and Martha Schwartz have identified, but by no means resolved, is that for Le Corbusier and other modernists, the image of technology that was so widely promoted in works such as Vers une architecture is no where to be found in the green salad that surrounds the meat and potatoes of architecture.

Simultaneously, there was an appropriation of the regional landscape by powerful figures of the American and Canadian economies. Engineers, developers, contractors, and politicians understood that the regional landscape remained a terra incognita that could still be exploited for great profit. Perhaps in response to this condition of abandonment by the modernist thinkers, this tabula rasa of the environment was filled by visions of progress that these groups promoted.

Hence, the landscape was being aggressively transformed and manipulated to become a neutral vessel

of economic activity. Each and every place could be interchanged with each and every other place, in such a way as to minimize the friction to the flow of capital, goods and later information. Global free trade is but the latest incarnation of this trend.

*“ Seeing and using space as a container at an architectural level merges with the awareness of geographical space as a surface or volume in which events occur....It means that events and space are conceptually separate and that one is only contingently related to the other. People, things and processus are not anchored to a place - are not essentially and necessarily of place 8. ”*

### The Montreal Regional Landscape

If we turn our gaze towards Montreal, we quickly realize that the construction of the Victoria Bridge, the maritime channel and the Metro had a much more profound impact on the regional landscape than did the various gardens and projects elsewhere on the Island of Montreal. Although the realization of Mount-Royal Park has forever greened the heart of the city, the gray edge continue to grow. The streamlined glamour of modernism reflected in art and architecture was ineffectual in deflecting the vector of industry that was covering the regional landscape with the infrastructure of transportation. For Benton MacKaye, an American regional planner and

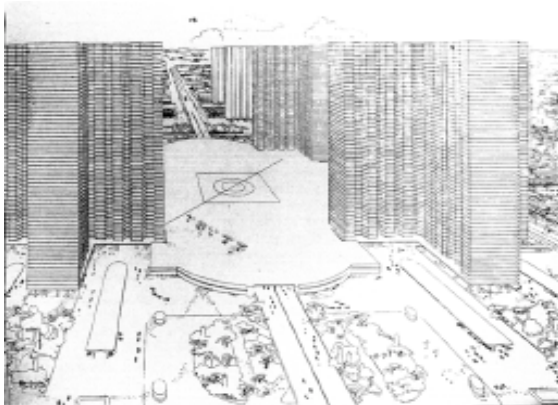


figure 4: Contemporary City for 3 Million Inhabitants, by LeCorbusier, from Le Corbusier, Ideas and Forms, by William J.R. Curtis, Rizzoli, New York, 1986, p.62.



figure 5: The construction of the Victoria Bridge, Piers and Works, looking towards the South Shore. Photograph by William Notman, 1858, from Triggs, Stanley G.. William Notman, The Stamp of a Studio. published by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Ontario, 1985, p.39.

author of the Appalachian trail, we were developing a new wilderness, what he called a new frontier.

*“in dispelling one wilderness ...man has created another...For the intricate equipment of civilization is in itself a wilderness. He has unravelled the labyrinth of river and coast line but has spun the labyrinth of industry. 9*

The road network constituted for MacKaye just such a wilderness, and as we shall see, it remains much the same today.

### A brief description of the particularities of the regional landscape.

Route 112 lies on the South Shore of the Saint-Lawrence river. It is situated on the floodplain of the Saint-Lawrence River, a flat terrain with a soil constituted by a thick layer of clay and sand that rests on the limestone bed rock of the Saint-Lawrence valley. This was the former sea bed of the Champlain Sea, a salty body of water about two kilometres deep that covered the area at the end of the last ice age, roughly 12,000 b.p. This region is traversed by the mountain chain of the Montérégiennes, or the Québec arc, that include the Mount-Royal and Mount-Saint-Hilaire.

The Saint-Lawrence valley was colonized according to the traditional model of the Québec rural landscape

using the range system. This system consists in the sub-division of land in narrow strips called “rangs” or “seigneuries”, with the narrow end fronting the Saint Lawrence River. Over time, this model was utilized along other water-ways, such as the Richelieu river, and quickly superseded other models for development such as the famous Trait Carré in the old town of Charlesbourg near Québec city. Subsequent development lead to the range system developing in a similar manner along roads that provided access deeper into the territory. It is important to note that this development system, although pioneered under the French regime, varied little after the Conquest and continues to characterize the Québec regional landscape today.

The origin of the transportation system of Québec is a relatively simple affair. The Saint-Lawrence river served as the first and primary access into the depths of Lower Canada. With the other major waterways, the Saint-Lawrence river was the principle transportation network during the initial stages of the colonization of Québec. The first roads, in name if not in fact, were called the Chemins du roi, and followed the shores of the Saint-Lawrence River just above the high water level. These were developed in order to allow for the towing of boats and the transportation of goods during the winter. Subsequently, secondary roads perpendicular to this primary system began to appear and were called “montées” in reference to the fact that they climbed up



figure 6: Aerial photo of Rang system along the South Shore of the Saint-Lawrence, near Candiac, Quebec taken from Le paysage canadien, op. cit., P. 38

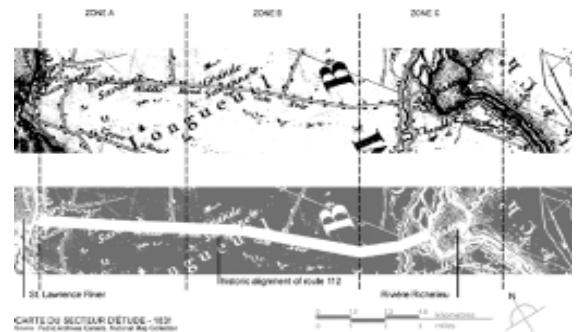


figure 7: La Côte Noire, later to become route 112, shown on a map dating from 1831 of the South Shore by Joseph Bouchette, in the National Map Collection of Public archives of Canada.



from the flood plain to the upper plateau of the Saint-Lawrence valley. Subsequently, roads parallel to the river developed in order to give access to the next generation of farms, and were called “Rangs”.

Politically under the French Regime, the building and maintenance of the road system fell under the jurisdiction of the Grand Voyer, an extension of the French institution of the time. Subsequently, after the conquest and later as set out in the Canadian Constitution, roads remained a provincial responsibility. Today, the administration of roads falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministère des Transports du Québec.

It is important to emphasize the fact that the foundation and maintenance of the road was historically a collective gesture. Although the intentions were set out by distant political entities, the road was established in accordance with local traditions. These developed according to a dynamic process of consultation with concerned land owners. As a result, the road was totally dependent on the local conditions of the landscape, and in particular the anthropomorphic, hydrographic and topographic context of a particular area.

La Côte Noire, which came to be known route # 1 and later 112, traversed an area that was referred to in early maps as a “savanne” or what we would call today, a wetland. The road originated in Longeuil and was later rerouted to the Base of the Victoria bridge in Saint-Lambert. It served to link the villages of the South Shore of Montreal with towns along the Richelieu and in particular Chambly, which gave access via Lake Champlain to the U.S., and other points east such as Sherbrooke. My study examined in detail the portion of the road from the South shore of Montreal to the Richelieu, a distance of roughly 30 kilometres.

The wetlands that the 112 crossed were subsequently drained by generations of farmers who worked the area. This became very productive farm land, as the soil was rich in organic matter. In general, the conventional farm catered primarily to subsistence dairy and vegetable farming, and small scale forestry. The form of the rang was fairly predictable, with the farm house and outbuildings clustered near the road, the garden nearby, the pasture in the middle of the deep lot, and the forest at the end back. The forest was used for wood, but also in the production of maple syrup. The homestead linked to the neighbors in a linear fashion along the road, rather than in clusters as it was in other rural areas in Canada and the United States.

## The landscape of the 112 and its evolution

The traditional landscape of route 112 could be characterized as a public space for the rural community. Due to the particular linear form of development in Québec, the Saint-Lawrence river, and subsequently the road, constituted the visual and spatial connection to adjacent farmsteads. In this way, the road served as a vital and living link between the natural and man made environments.

The evolution of farming techniques led ultimately in the 1960's to the complete industrialization of farming activity. Henceforth, the Québec agriculture industry reoriented its focus to the production of cash crops such as corn and other mono-cultures such as spruce and pine trees. The result of this change was the transformation of the regional landscape from a diversified and richly textured pattern of farmland, pasture and private forests, to a single homogeneous field. Further transformations occurred as a result of the introduction of high performance farm equipment, thus enabling a single farmer to work several plots of land, thereby erasing the traditional markings that distinguished adjacent farmsteads. For example, the hedgerow that had acted as a kind of territorial scale since the origins of the colony began to disappear, and with it, the variety that characterized the rural landscape.

These transformations have continued to lead over the years to the abandonment of farm infrastructure such

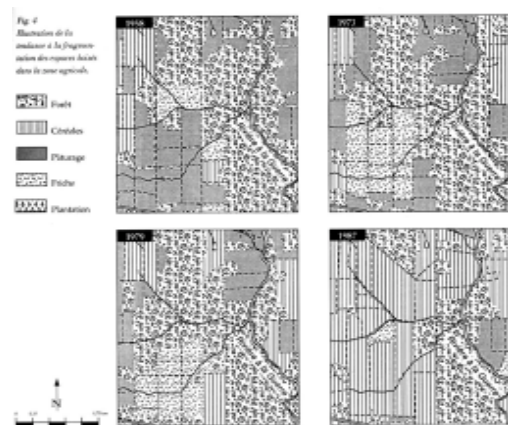


figure 8: An illustration of the changing land use pattern on the South Shore of Québec. Diagram prepared by Gérald Domon, for an article entitled “La transformations du contexte d’exploitations et l’avenir des paysage agroforestiers du sud du Québec” in *Trames, Revue de l’aménagement* Numéro 9, published by the Faculté de l’aménagement de l’Université de Montréal, Montréal, 1993, p.15.

as houses and barns, as the landscape changes from a rural, family based farming, to industrialized farming and bedroom communities. This has led to the reduction of the number of people required on the farm, and as a result, the abandonment and demolition of numerous buildings, private roads, and out-buildings. Other farms lie fallow. Set far back from the road, new farm structures are huge, windowless, metal clad building of a scale inconsistent with the traditional farmstead. The stench that emanates from them is nauseating.

The reduced need for laborers in the countryside has led to the demise of the traditional model of the habitat along the road, towards a more concentrated, low density sprawl of suburban sub-divisions isolated one from the next. The inhabitants work elsewhere, either in the Montreal and in adjacent towns. As a result, the traffic along route 112 has continuously grown both in terms of number of vehicles and speed, and has begun to exert great stress on the road itself, but also on the rural landscape.

The pressure was amplified as a result of the additional development in the area subsequent to the construction of the Victoria bridge in the mid nineteenth century and later, with the construction of the Saint-Hubert Airport, which has since become home to the Canadian Space Center. As with other metropolis in North America, the general urban growth of Montreal has also

lead to the sprouting of bedroom communities throughout the area.

In order to address the issues of safety and facilitate the flow of goods and people, the provincial government has intervened in order to accommodate the growth of the road. Elaborate and voluminous studies have been undertaken to insure that the appropriate decisions are taken, but, the model of the highway network developed in the United States is applied to this particular condition, with little regard for the local landscape.

Over the last fifty years, as a result of these transformations to the fabric of the road, the relationship of the road to the habitat has been fundamentally altered. New engineering infrastructure, such as sound barriers, service roads, access ramps, reduced number of intersections, increased scale of road furniture ( light posts, signage, etc) modified levels of the road vis-a-vis the context have detached the landscape of the road from the local landscape.

Furthermore, the new suburban subdivisions are unrelated to the local landscape, and are characterized by spatial isolation. The architecture of the housing is the kind of building pastiche that bears little relation to the vernacular construction. Likewise, both the private and public landscapes in these developments have more the allure of Laurentian forests than that of the agricultural landscape historically characteristic of the area. My research indicates that the local landscape is perceived as being banal, therefore the developers, in order to attract larger numbers of potential buyers, propose more seductive, but alien forms of environmental design. As a result, the new developments break the social, spatial, visual and vegetal patterns that link the community to the road and to the surrounding regional landscape.

The historical evolution of the area and the progressive isolation of the habitat from the space of the road has transformed the regional landscape profoundly. The cultural implications of this transformation are immense and the result is nothing less than the annihilation of the traditional structure of the rural community. The new landscape thus created is strictly the result of market forces, of which the architect is but peripherally involved, usually (as I am) in the role of observer. The decorated shed of Venturi has now become the decorated territory of the landscape, with no profound link to the community nor the ecology of the place.

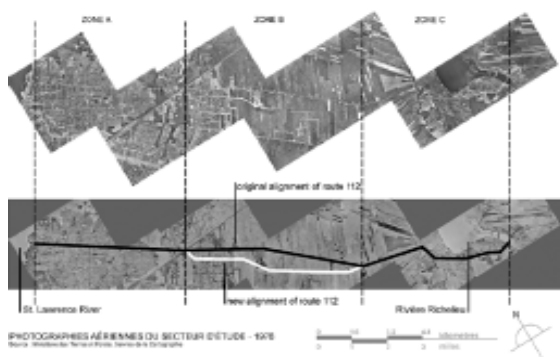


figure 9: Aerial photograph of the study area, a composite of image published by the Ministère des Terres et Forêts, Service de la Photogrammétrie et de la Cartographie, Photo-Cartotheque provinciale, Québec, 1976.

The problem described above is more than just spatial. On the one hand, the contemporary methodology for developing roads according to centralized decision making contrasts greatly with the traditional system whereby roads were essentially a local and collective gesture. And yet, in spite of the centralized nature of the decision making, the development of the road network continues to remain “spontaneous” to employ the words of a document published recently by the Ministère of Transport of Québec.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the loss of the qualities of the rural landscape of South-Eastern Québec is all the more serious due to the fact that we do not fully understand the phenomena that we see vanishing before our eyes. In the words of one of my colleagues from the Université de Montréal:

*Nous ne disposons pas d'outils véritable d'analyse de (la) dynamique (des paysages ruraux). Plus que paradoxale, cette situation est dangereuse puisqu'elle favorise le transfert de modèles d'intervention non adaptés à notre réalité. 11*

The break between the road and the surrounding environment that is the result of the new form of development further emphasizes the isolation and atomization of the individual, and the family from the larger community. From an ecological perspective, the loss of agricultural lands in the bread basket of Québec is a catastrophe for the longer term well being of the society. In addition, the new settlement patterns mean that car use is essential. Industrialized farming has led to the greater use of fertilizer, pesticides, and most recently, genetically modified organism of unknown impact on the environment. Sprawl and single family housing that this type of development promotes is significantly more energy and resource consumptive than traditional urban developments that one finds in the older urban fabric of Montreal or in the surrounding villages of St-Jean, Chambly, Saint-Lambert or Longueuil. From

an eco-systemic point of view, these detached and unrelated ecosystems are not conceived in terms of ecological notions of watershed management, wildlife corridors, etc. Finally, this uniformization of the biophysical quality of a place – straightened water-ways, drained wetlands, and artificialization of the environment - leads to the ultimate decimation of the quality of the local landscape.<sup>12</sup>

### Future research

I contend that it is only through the appropriation and cultivation of the emerging landscape that we as environmental designers can develop meaningful and healthy landscape appropriate to our contemporary condition. In the case of the regional landscape, the challenge is greatly amplified by the fact of that the development and road systems are what Keller Easterling calls “dumb” networks. Such systems are not conceived by a single artist or technician, but rather by many people over time. In her study of highway and other infrastructure, Easterling states that it is specifically this quality of forever absorbing new and unpredictable “wrinkles” into the system that has permitted the American interstate highway system to become the most extensive auto-route system in the world.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, an architectural system is most often the fruit of a few individuals with a great control over every aspect of the design in a limited period of time. Perhaps we as architects and environmental designers need to learn more about the qualities of these so-called dumb systems in order to better inflect their course.

Undoubtedly, in part due to the environmental catastrophe that forms the backdrop of recent history, our society has been obliged to re-evaluate the position of neglect in which the regional landscape has fallen. Perhaps the image of the Brown cloud over much of Asia, the continuing drought over Western Canada, as well as the recent flooding in Central Europe will continue to impose the topic of environmental degradation in the minds of our politicians. Also, the homogeneity of the emerging landscape of the suburbia with its Big Box



figure 10: Various photographs along the 112 taken by the author, 1996.



Stores and “ticky tacky houses” is forcing us as a profession to reconsider what has become the most prevalent form of regional development in North America. Finally, the emergence of a new generation of landscape thinkers, articulate communicators and controversial designers has pushed architects to reconsider the place that the landscape could occupy in vital work of environmental design. People such as Marc Treib, Martha Schwartz, Rem Koolhaas, and Adrien Geuze are forcing a re-evaluation of the place of the landscape in avant-garde thought.

In my opinion, appropriate development solutions do not reside in applying dusty old models of development, but rather in developing new models that address the specificity of contemporary conditions. Otherwise, we will continue to destroy the link that exists between community and the local landscape through the introduction of inappropriate development models.

Although much work remains to be done, several avenues of research must be explored in order to address the landscape in a meaningful way. The first step is to better understand emerging ways of seeing and using the landscape, and develop models that respond creatively to these conditions.

*« Aucun espace n'est vide de sens. Il ne peut y avoir d'absence d'identité, mais des identités nouvelles dont le sens est à découvrir » 14*

Next, we must identify the anchor points that will permit a renewed bonding to the local landscape. In this regard, the work of landscape designer Bernard Lassous on the French auto-route system presents some innovative, creative yet rigorous strategies. Two works by Lassus demonstrate that significant landscapes can emerge in

the future without a ill-founded nostalgia for a non-existent bucolic past. The first is a project for the auto-route A.837 ASF à Sainte-Rochefort, France, in the framework of the development of a project for the rest-area called « L'aire de repos de la pierre de Crazannes ». The second is a project for the development of landscape strategies for the auto-route A85 called simply « Paysagement de l'autoroute A85 ». <sup>15</sup>

The project for the rest-area on auto-route A.837 attempts to establish, through the particular context of the site, an intermediate space between the local landscape and the hermetic and generic landscape of the auto-route. Lassous proposes a mediating garden that is a splice landscape constituted by the immediate context and the larger landscape of the highway network. His stated goal is to qualify the normative environment of the auto-route, by introducing a « carnet » or embodied experience inspired by the abandoned quarries that he discovered near the site that was to receive the new infrastructure. The rest-area remains spatially detached from the local landscape, but also from the landscape of the auto-route, in order to initiate the visitor in stages to the particular qualities of the local landscape.

*« Véritables jardins entre autoroute et pays... ce seraient alors des lieux intermédiaires, des jardins de paysages des terroirs à découvrir. » 16*

In the second project, Lassous proposes different landscape strategies to transform the interface of the auto-route and the regional landscape. These interventions must balance the desire to offer views connections with the surrounding landscape and the need to insure the quietude and privacy of the residents of the area. Lassous develops a strategy that he calls

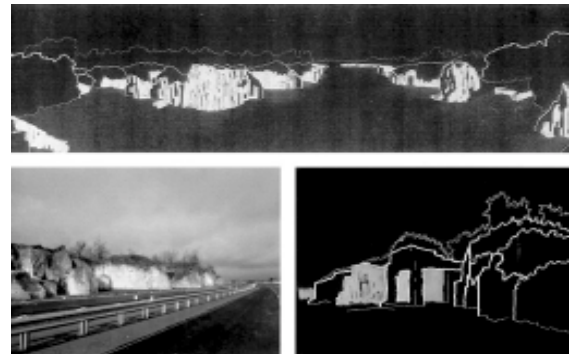
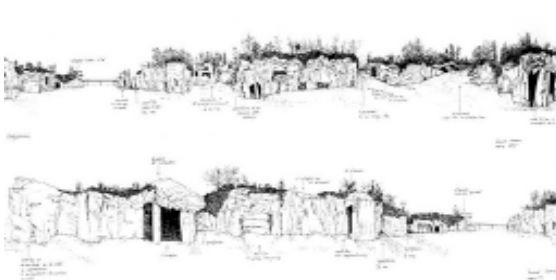


figure 11: The Crazannes Quarries, part of the project for the rest area along the A.837, drawings and photographs by Bernard Lassous, published in Landscape Architecture, The World of Environmental Design. Atrium International, Spain, 1997, p.59.

addition-subtraction that creatively engages the surrounding territory according to specific local condition. On a formal level, this approach requires dense planted zones of trees and shrubs, and the opening of lateral views on to significant elements in the local landscape.

. « *Le principe est de ne pas planter d'alignement d'arbres parallèles aux voies mais de constituer des fenêtres d'où ces profonds massifs qui s'enfoncent dans le pays*<sup>17</sup> . »

## Conclusion

Our research tends to support the hypothesis that the regional landscape has been left behind by modernist thinkers in the exploration of the architectural object, l'objet d'art. The result of this negligence has been the appropriation of these spaces by other forces of the society that are not sensitive to the ecological, esthetic and cultural conditions that give rise to the qualities of the local landscape.

Today, we as architects and environmental designers can no longer afford to ignore the daily building that is quickly obliterating the varied landscapes that surrounds us. Without being able to propose specific solutions, I imagine a few promising directions for future research. First, we must develop rigorous methodologies for studying the evolution of the regional landscape. Next, we must build multi-disciplinary teams capable of addressing the varied nature of the regional landscape in development projects, while maintaining an independence from the powerful industrial lobbies that continue to control the direction of road design in Québec and elsewhere in North America. Finally, we must identify long term development goals that address the regional landscape as a dynamic system. Like the plants, rivers, roads, fields and forests that constitute the landscape, the perception of the environment by a community is not fixed and evolves over time. This temporal quality is an integral part of the landscape.

Recently, Renzo Piano described how he approaches the issue of place in his work. He writes:

*"So, professionally you can become involved in everything, but in reality you have to become better and better at understanding the spirit of the place because architecture is about place. Architecture is universal in some ways of course because human needs are the same, but it is also very local and this is the real challenge. And how*

*you meet that is that you have to sit quietly in the place (I normally smoke my cigars...) and just spend time in it. You have to increase your capacity to listen and to catch the essence of the place."*<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps, through this kind of humility and ability to listen, we as designers can realize projects that engage in a more meaningful dialogue with local landscape. We clearly can no longer afford to leave this work to others.

## Notes:

- 1 JACKSON ,J.B., *By Way of Conclusion , How to Study the Landscape* in *The Necessity for Ruins* (Universtiy of Massuchusette's, 1980), 122.
- 2 Guy Chevette cited by NOPPEN, Luc, *Du chemin du Roy à la rue Notre-Dame* (Québec, Ministère des Transports du Québec, 2001), 5.
- 3 See the work of John Dixon Hunt on this topic and in particular his book entitled *L'art du jardin et son histoire* (Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1996).
- 4 Martha Schwartz, " Landscape and Common Culture since Modernism" in *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review*, (Marc Treib, ed., Mit Press, Cambridge, 1993), 261.
- 5 Bernard Lassous, « Découvrir, s'arrêter », in *Autoroute et Paysages* ( LEYRIT, C. et LASSUS, B., editors, Les Editions du Demi-Cercle, Paris, 1994 ), 44-55.
- 6 See the work of Keller Easterling, *Organization Space Landscapes, Highways and Houses in America* (MIT Press Cambridge, 1999)
- 7 Marc Treib, "Nature Recalled" in *Recovering Landscape. Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*. (James Corner, ed., Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1999) , 30.
- 8 Enriken, op. cit., p. 44,
- 9 Benton MacKaye, cited by Keller Easterling, op.cit., 40.
- 10 See *Le réseau routier*, (Les publications du Québec, série "Aménagement et urbanisme; Le plan d'action: le plan d'urbanisme," Québec, 1991.)
- 11 Gérald Domon, «La transformation du contexte d'exploitation et l'avenir des paysages agroforestiers du sud du Québec », in *Trames* ( University of Montreal, Revue de l'aménagement, vol. 9, 1993) , 13.
- 12 Gérald Domon, op.cit. 16.
- 13 Keller Easterling, op.cit., 4.
- 14 Judith, Epstein, «Regard ethnologique sur la référence à la culture en design», in *ARQ, Architecture- Québec* (Art et Architecture Québec, Montreal, no. 90, Avril 1996.) , 10.
- 15 Voir Bernard Lassous, « Découvrir, s'arrêter », op.cit. See also BANN, Stephen, The landscape approach of Bernard Lassous: Part II, in the *Journal of Garden History*, Vol. 5, #2, April - June, 1995.
- 16 Ibid, pp. 44-45.
- 17 Ibid, pp. 40-41.
- 18 [http://www.architectstoday.net/editorial/homepage\\_june-july01.htm](http://www.architectstoday.net/editorial/homepage_june-july01.htm)

# “Why Does Modernism Refuse to die”

## Towards a post compositional architecture

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«One is an artist at the cost of regarding that which all non-artists call «form» as content, as «the matter itself.» With that, of course, one belongs to an inverted world: for henceforth content becomes something merely formal - our life included.» Friedrich Nietzsche

### Modernism or Modern Movement? Which one is more problematic?

First, one should distinguish between modernism, an all-embracing term, and the Modern Movement(s). They are not the same thing. Why wish for an end to modernism – are we not *all* implicated in its cause as a progressive force aiming at the betterment of mankind? I like the definition that Michel Foucault gives to modernism's ideal.

«la volonté de l'homme de penser rationnellement et de façon critique, sa liberté en rapport à ses capacités technologiques»<sup>1</sup>  
(*man's aspiration to think both rationally and critically, his liberty in relationship to his technological capacities.*)

Yes it is a very general definition, and one would like to define liberty, but it does give us a starting point from which we can begin to answer this question.

### *Why then wish for an end to the modern movement?*

Well, it seems to me that one could make a good case for the idea that the modern movement did not live up to the standards set by this progressive idea of the modernist cause. Any one particular building taken from the vast archives of the modern movement, may, or may not, correspond to Foucault's definition. But one may state, without fear of contradiction, that in the 1950s

and the 60s, modern movement architecture was perceived as being caught in *flagrant délit* of this same modernist ideal. There are many reasons why the MM was attacked from 1950 onwards. They all appear to me to be based on this same fundamental belief in modernity so elegantly stated by Foucault.

### A quick genealogy of the critique of formalism in the MM

The Modern Movement sowed the seeds of its own *dépassement* at its very inception. Essentially, the criticism of the MM seems to stem from two of its most heroic aims, one that could be called ethico-aesthetic, which concerned the correct way of representing ideas architecturally in a modern world, (and often included not only a belief in abstraction but also in montage following on from cubist concerns). The other is a purely ethical aim— how to provide a sane and viable environment for the population at large. These two basic premises seem to me to have been well defined by around 1917 in Chicago, Vienna, Moscow and London. Many writings of the period up to 1920 attest to a clear appreciation of what is at stake in these two ethical concerns.

The first aim, which wanted to explore the correct and modern representation of ideas, worked more often than not within the gestalt idea of a *form language*, and this idea seems to me to be the generator of the modern «crisis of architectural representation»<sup>2</sup>. Such a crisis of architectural representation begins with polemics such as that elaborated by Malévich concerning the end of figurative art, later placed in opposition to the strategy of montage, for instance of Loos's Chicago Tribune building or even Tatlin's *counter-reliefs*<sup>3</sup>. The latter project does indeed seem to fit into the gestalt theory's aesthetic aims espoused by the modern movement but manifestly Loos's does not. This points to the fact that

not only modernism is not *uniquely* an aesthetic formalist project but that the Modern Movement *was* to become just that.

The second aim of modernity, the ethical aim, has many ramifications in economics, politics and with globalisation, calls upon the international political will of the so-called «developed nations». It would be outside the scope of this short paper to develop this aim if it were not for the idea, developed notably by Adolf Loos, that one might be able to combine the two in an authentic aesthetic of the modern critical conscience. One may even call his idea an *anti-aesthetic* before this surrealist idea became well known. Take for instance the celebrated text «Architecture» where Loos argues against simple aesthetic considerations, calling them a «dirtying» of the landscape<sup>4</sup>. Modernism then is not just a bourgeois aesthetic movement<sup>5</sup>, a question of formal rhetoric, it did have an authentic ethical or political platform that was to be a force for good in the world. Most of the modern movements do not seem to me to be in the same category. Formalist aesthetics seem to be the common denominator here. In other words most modern movements were STYLES.

«What is the right way of building and representing architecture in the modern age?» This was the essential modernist question first posed by Loos and its ethical and aesthetic ramifications are still with us today. Of course if one was looking uniquely for a bourgeois aesthetic to make into the modern movement one would not be able to distinguish this strikingly prophetic question from the mass of discursive texts that Loos produced concerning the ethics of ornament. One would perhaps even make the mistake of reading the title of one of his most often published texts «Ornament *and* crime» as the more purist and polemic «Ornament *is* crime» which is of course a gross misinterpretation of his ideas on ornament. The correct modern expression of space, materials and simple human comfort had become his concept of ornament. His critique of the formalism of his colleagues from Van de Velde to Olmbrich were virulent.

Obviously the writings of Nietzsche form the intellectual background to much of the questioning of the formalist<sup>6</sup> approach to art. One can easily trace the influences of his writings from de Chirico to Magritte<sup>7</sup> and to many other artists involved in the emerging surrealist circles of which Loos was not at all a stranger. He built Tristan Tzara's house in Paris for instance – another work that cannot be explained by MM aesthetics

of pure form. If Loos was the first architect to frame these problems, he was not the last. Clearly the question of developing a «form language» or a compositional code of ethic, or a «*mécanisme de la composition*»<sup>8</sup> that is both appropriate to the modern age, and accessible if not *completely* intelligible to the common mortal, is a constant of avant-garde research in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If then, one does not attempt to separate these two forms of modernist human activity – the aesthetic and the ethic – Loos's legacy of an authentic modernist critical rationality becomes monumental in its importance to us practicing and teaching architecture today. Indeed I would argue that these two aims were addressed as one, on at least five or six occasions in very interesting new and synthetic ways throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Possible Loosien legacies

Firstly, and in spite of the obvious formalist preoccupations of a Van Doesburg, there are the dadaists and the surrealists who pioneered an anti-aesthetic, anti-rational way of thinking about artistic representation<sup>9</sup>. This legacy of surrealist experimentation was anti-rational and critical of all variants of bourgeois aesthetics. Neither Dada nor Surrealism were aesthetics styles, they had no other unity than the emulation of ever more daring artistic exploits practiced by a loosely organised group of people. To paraphrase what Gilles Deleuze has said while commenting this concept of anti rationalism within Nietzsche's work « its not because one is anti-rationalist that one stops being able to think». <sup>10</sup> Nietzsche shows us that it is therefore possible to envisage a rationality that does not rely on neo-platonic ideology. Surrealism, and other related groups explored this path throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Surrealism was to be the «hidden foundation» of pop art and architecture in the '50s and sixties as well as for CoBra and the Situationists International.<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s, the London based Independent group which included such people as the Smithsons, James Stirling and Peter Reyner Banham; not to mention, for the moment, the many other important members of this loosely attached group of individuals, was exploring the notion of Pop art and architecture. Even the second generation of architects formed by the writings and teachings of the Independent group, *Archigram*, seemed to have formulated a type of formalist critique in ARCHIGRAM 1. «*We have chosen to abandon decadent Bauhaus images, which are an insult to functionalism.*»

The period that we know as the Post-modern period in the 60s and 70s seem to have taken on board, one more time, the ethical premises of a modern critical rationality of architecture while criticising the inadequacies of the main stream Modern Movement. The aesthetic or formalist preoccupations of the MM architects and abstract expressionist artists, in vogue at the time, were clearly the target of postmodern or Pop artists and architects. If one leaves to one side, for the moment, the obvious accusation levelled at some postmodernism of «dull historicism», one can clearly see that the preoccupation of creating an architecture that is able to communicate to the masses and that represented their aspirations, was still as central a preoccupation as it was for Loos.

One may even remark that the first steps of the important careers of Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi in the 70s were made under the sign of surrealism<sup>12</sup>. However the justification of aesthetic formalism and abstraction given for instance by Bernard Tschumi, that they are «*inventions* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century», that they are therefore modern forms is a very dubious one. The metaphysics of pure form seem to me to go back to the ancients... the Egyptians, Pythagoras etc. One can of course easily point to the gestalt theory of the German *Kunstwissenschaft* movement of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a precursor of these modern forms (*Sichtbarkeit* in German or formalist aesthetic). With its emphasis on the scientific understanding of art, notably in its quest not only to understand the basic optics of artistic vision but to strip it of all emotional content, and to turn this knowledge immediately into works of art, it is not at all clear that the *Kunstwissenschaft* idea of *pure visuality* and Tschumi's *pure forms* are not one and the same thing. The Bauhaus was to formulate, as we all know, a coherent system of education on these very same 19<sup>th</sup> century notions in the early 1920s. Recently it has become clear that a direct inspiration of, if not the justification for, contemporary architecture (and in particular of neo-modernism,) lies in the recovery of critical practices found in contemporary art. Building on surrealist notions of desire and of the importance of *montage* techniques of composition, Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas, have familiarized us all with at least some of the subversive tactics of contemporary art. High modernist pure forms, mixed with dadaist and surrealist strategies of composition, have become common place in our academies.

And finally, recent deconstructive theory has aimed at destroying (or at least attacking) the philosophical foundations of architecture on the basis that they are metaphysical and do not represent an authentic critical or modern attitude to the art of building.

«The projects in this exhibition mark a different sensibility, one in which the dream of pure form has been disturbed. Form has become contaminated. The dream has become a kind of nightmare.

It is the ability to disturb our thinking about form that makes these projects deconstructive. It is not that they derive from the mode of contemporary philosophy known as "deconstruction."» *Mark Wigley*<sup>13</sup>

### **From the Smithsons to post-Duchampian aesthetics by way of Pop.**

Such ideas would have been very close to the hearts of the Smithsons, Richard Hamilton, James Stirling and Reyner-Banham in the early stages of their careers. They were involved in the early 50s in pointing out the discrepancies between the traditional theory of architecture and the cultural décor of mass communication and consumerism i.e., all the seductive attributes of our material existence that we have inhabited since the 1950s.<sup>14</sup> («*To evolve a form-language for the architecture of a machine-served society on a basis of the pleasures of common use is of course perfectly possible.*» Peter and Allison Smithson in: Without rhetoric. It is this Smithsonian link between contemporary art and our appreciation of the artificial environment of the city that I would like to explore further. Lets go back to the 1960s when the main ideas of the critique of formalism gave birth to the more radical ideas of a post-compositional<sup>15</sup> architecture. I will try to trace a clearer link between the anti-aesthetic ideas of Duchamp, Pop, and the aims of the surrealist critique of the world of mass production.

With the apparition of Pop Art in London, in 1960s, the specific nature of the North-American urban experience, the popular artefacts of its physical culture held great promise for an impoverished society exhausted by the second World War. In America, so it seemed, desires could be fulfilled, work in the household could even be glamorous if efficient appliances were purchased to create leisure time. In a post-war Britain beset by



austerity and rationing, the most ordinary American articles possessed a subversive glamour. Like the rest of Europe a culture of poverty offered no exotic excitement. In this context, in the 1950s, Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi produced an extensive number of ironic collage compositions from imported American magazines in the early years of post-war reconstruction. Paolozzi's *It's a Psychological Fact Pleasure Helps Your Disposition* of 1948 and Hamilton's *Just what is it that makes today's home so different so appealing* of 1956 are typical of this effort.

The *Independent Group*<sup>16</sup> as we have said was an informal grouping of artists, critics and architects that set out to fight against the British artistic establishment that Thomas Crow has called...

*«an endemically genteel, snobbish, and unadventurous artistic culture. (...) Protest against that culture, he goes on, gave rise to the first recorded uses of the term "Pop Art," (by the artist Richard Hamilton and the critic Lawrence Alloway) to name the aesthetic challenge to Europe posed by American industrial culture - by the flamboyance of Detroit automobiles or the engineer's streamlined utopias found in science fiction illustrations and films. This vision - though naive in retrospect - united an innovative collection of artists, architects, and writers who*

*opposed themselves to a narrow art of neo-Romantic longing promoted by an elite educated in the ancient universities. »*<sup>17</sup>

Their work, more importantly, contains a protest against the deprivation of Britain's working classes. It exalts the apparent freedom from drudgery and the pure sensual (if not outrightly sexual) excitement that the GI's way of life had shown them at the end of the war period. In the European context these collages represented a new direction to follow that built on the domesticated surrealism that then held sway in European intellectual circles.

«In 1952, they and a like-minded group of allies formed a loose association within the London Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), then a bastion of domesticated French Surrealism. The Independent Group (...) refused to recognize the normal confines of fine art; (...) their discussions accommodated Paolozzi's and Alloway's enthusiasm for American commercial culture alongside the harder matters of how the city's aging and battered fabric could be transformed without violating the actual networks of signs and everyday habits created by its inhabitants.»

The idea surfaced then that architecture should identify its foundations within the cultural body of the city. Pop projects, just as their surrealist and Loosien precursors had, transcended the whole idea of bourgeois aesthetic invention in many ways. They are thinly veiled critiques of aesthetic formalism. Richard Hamilton is the link between the London manifestation of Pop, the American versions, and the inspiration of Marcel Duchamp. It is in the work of Marcel Duchamp that one sees more clearly what has been developing in the more radical areas of contemporary art and architecture since 1960.

### Duchamp's legacy.

It was in October 1963 in Pasadena that, astonishingly, Duchamp's first museum retrospective took place: *By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy*. The retrospective was the first opportunity for American and indeed British artists to see for themselves the full range of Duchamp's work. Perhaps most important were the so-called readymade sculptures from the first wave of Dada in the 1910s - ordinary "man-made things" like combs, snow shovels, and urinals simply nominated as works of art.



Figure 1. Richard Hamilton *Just what is it (...)* 1956

With the ready-made, the industrial logic of serial repetition and impersonality had broken through, for the first time, the barriers of cultivated fine art. Along side the replicas of these early works the exhibition featured a scrupulous reconstruction, in transparent Plexiglas, of the shattered Large Glass of 1915-23, with its allegorical sexual drama of compulsive, unsatisfied repetition - the observer taking his place in that drama when seen through the Glass from the other side.

This event became itself a kind of «magnifying glass» enlarging and unifying the dispersed knowledge of the artist that had been cultivated in isolated sectors across America and Europe. Two separate strands emerged from this retrospective of Duchamp's thought. They were both to become important actors not only in Pop art circles, but in the development of a radical approach to critical theory in contemporary art. One strand was led by Richard Hamilton of the then defunct Independent Group in Great Britain. The other was a group of young west coast figurative artists amongst whom one should mention Edward Ruscha, Dennis Hopper and even Andy Warhol, a fellow New Yorker, who was engaged in his first major exhibition at the Ferus gallery in California at exactly this time in 1963.

So it was that Duchamp's retrospective became the occasion for Hamilton's first visit to the country he had so vividly imagined in his art. He flew with Duchamp

himself the long leg from New York to Los Angeles en route to the Pasadena exhibition opening.

The Duchamp retrospective also reinforced directions that the young Los Angeles, and San Franciscan artists were beginning to take. In 1963 Edward Ruscha's books of photographs, documented the local LA landscape. Starting with *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* of 1963, and followed by the fold-out book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), his treatment of an urban district as a *readymade*, its descriptive accuracy, his surrender to serial accumulation in place of composition, absence of commentary and its potential distribution through cheap photo-copies, all constituted a fresh application of Duchampian stratagems.

The underlying structural level of such work was its account of the city, « man made things that we see in the harsh California light» as one of these artists said. Ruscha, like many other artists at this time, had come to grips with an architectural environment that would have previously been thought of as kitsch. And brought it into the realm of subversive artistic endeavours. One should situate Robert Venturi's work in this context. (Venturi's *Complexity and contradiction in architecture* was also published in 1966.)

Further retrospectives of Duchamp's work in London and Philadelphia within the decade took place. Duchamp was now seen as a master of nominating unaltered



Figure 2. Edward Ruscha, 1963

objects into art. For half a century he had been offhandedly harrying emerging Modernist beliefs in the pure visibility of the art experience. He was the first to critique the older classical German and French aesthetic notions of what he calls *l'art rétinien* i.e. the critique of easel painting as a purely visual exercise in describing by illusionism the physical appearance of the world. And if at first he seems to have been aiming this critique at the theory of Impressionism, contemporary artists now thought of his stratagems as effectively undermining modernist beliefs in the neutrality of pure form and other heroically modern precepts coming from German gestalt theory. He inaugurated the critique of the institutional role of galleries and of the art market in the making of art by his use of montage and the readymade. He had pioneered the ironical use of serially produced objects as figures or types of our modernity to criticize so-called «legitimate» art. And finally these ideas lead him to experiment in serial like objects of a technical and optical nature carrying an allegorical message. He had used his series of «Glasses» to introduce the notion of the basic *opacity* as Rosalind Krauss has put it<sup>18</sup>, of human vision in deference to the gestalt idea of the visual transparency of the environment. We could now understand that he was the first to criticize emerging modernist ideology based on late 19<sup>th</sup> century German psychological aesthetics.

These ideas were not a quest for the new or the shocking – they were more an early understanding of a change in the epistemological grounds of the modern observer. Essentially, as Jonathan Crary<sup>19</sup> tells us, the older artistic episteme dealt with art as vision, as a basically photographic phenomenon. As Descartes in the *Dioptrique* explains vision within the eye and the brain were envisioned as a *camera obscura* dealing in the reception, on the retina, of linearly propagated rays of light. Duchamp realises that what goes on in the process of seeing is not just a question of the projection of colours or rays of light onto the retina but more a question of what happens behind the eye, in the brain, in our bodies, in our libidos. He realised that the retina was not the neutral canvas so important to modern movement dogma.

Duchamp gives us the notion that the exterior world is not neutral, that it is made from human desires, from myths and that no purely visual or optical exercise in representing outside reality can reveal *la vie intérieure*. Instead of calling for pure forms he used «impure» objects of desire and memory as critical tools without shying

away from the thorny questions of the consumption of manufactured goods.

In spite of their references to surrealist strategies, the recent upsurge of neo-modernism is then partly based on art theory dating from the late 1800s that seem to ignore this major epistemological change in the way we see art. Aesthetically pleasing as these works may appear, seen from the perspective of Duchamp's ideas - neo-modern musings are outdated and lead to endless repetitions of the same mute forms celebrating pure visibility, treating human perception as something quasi mechanical taking place somehow outside of, or indifferently to our bodies. Desire and memory are lost in this 19<sup>th</sup> century vision of the ends of art. Whatever one may say about the technical inability of modern architecture to build a viable city it seems to us that the modern movement's loss of any capacity to speak of desire and memory, are the major causes of the impasse in the art of building and the understanding of cities.

## Conclusions

The formalist nature of Modern Movement discourse, the abstract language of form, *purified* of all emotion or historical references, should be compared to the modern idea of the dialectical image that Walter Benjamin<sup>20</sup> gives us, in order to better understand his notion of an authentic work of modern art. One can then understand the modern project as a *dépassement* of neo platonic classical notions of beauty as a *revelation of the truth*. The authentic work of modernity goes much further than this framework of the purely *visual*. This particular critique of modernism's formalism has not been understood or at least it has not been exhaustively explored. The reason that modern movement pure aesthetics are not «dead» (and probably why Mick Jagger is still dancing) is that some architects have not grasped the epistemological changes that took place in the last 50 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I suggest that with the death of the original gestalt ideals of the MM a renewed modernism is not only possible but entirely viable. Why wish for the death of *modernism* when it is already undergoing a profound epistemological mutation?

Notes:

- 1 Michel Foucault in : Revue Littéraire, l'édition sur l'œuvre d'Emmanuelle Kant.
- 2 To borrow the title of a very interesting article by Dalibor Vesely - *Architecture and the conflict of representation*, AA Files, no 8, 1982.
- 3 For a good over view of this polemic see for instance Dora Vallier in: *L'Art abstrait*, France, Collection Pluriel, 313 pages, 1980.
- 4 Adolf Loos, *Architecture in Spoken into the void*.
- 5 See on this subject, TAFURI, Manfredo, *Project and Utopia from the avant-garde to the métropolis*, (my version is in French) Paris, Espace et Architecture, Dunod, 1979.
- 6 By formalist approach to art I mean the idea of the unique consideration of pure visuality (*Sichtbarkeit*) as generator of form.
- 7 Consider the often quoted statement that Magritte made «de Chirico showed us the way forward» in the light of the latter's well documented debt to Nietzsche's writings.
- 8 Expression utilized by Durand the celebrated precursor of the idea of the autonomy of form.
- 9 Tafuri explores this question in *Project and Utopia*, «*Il n'est donc pas étonnant qu'à partir de 1922, l'anarchisme dadaïste et l'ordre néoplasticien puissent se rencontrer et se rejoindre, sur le plan théorique aussi bien que pratique, quand il s'agit d'élaborer les instruments pour une nouvelle syntaxe.*»
- 10 Gilles Deleuze, in : *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Quadrige presses universitaires de France, 1962.
- 11 See Dalibor Vesely in: *Surrealism and Architecture*, *AD profiles* volume 48, nos 2-3, 1978. I am borrowing from Vesely's notion that «Surrealism is the underground strata of modernity»
- 12 *ibid*
- 13 Mark Wigley in the introductory text to the celebrated «Deconstructivist» exhibition at the MoMA in 1988.
- 14 Most remarkably the book that Banham published in the mid 20th century, *Theory and Design in the First Machine age*, which was one of the first works of criticism to identify the Beaux arts formalist legacy operating behind the scenes, as it were, of the modern movement.
- 15 I use this expression to include all works of contemporary architecture that do not propose harmonies of pure form - surrealism, deconstruction, urban architecture, etc., etc.
- 16 We should note here that besides such influential people as the architects James Stirling and Peter and Allison Smithson and Cedric Price, were the architecture critic Reyner Banham the Scottish artist Eduardo Paolozzi (b. 1924). Alloway was later to become curator at the Guggenheim at New York. Their major collaborative work was the exhibition, *This is tomorrow*, held at the Whitechapel art gallery in London in 1956.
- 17 *The Rise of the Sixties*, Thomas Crow. The Everyman Art Library, " 1996 Calmann and King Ltd. London.
- 18 Krauss, Rosalind E, in : *The optical unconscious*. «An October book.» MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. c1993. 353p.
- 19 Cray, Jonathan, in : *Techniques of the observer : on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*. «An October book.» MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. : c1990. 171 p.
- 20 On the idea of dialectical images see DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, Collection Critique, 209 pages, 1992 and on dialectical images in the work of Rem Koolhaas see of Marie-Josèphe Vallée, «*Abstraction et figuration dans l'œuvre de Rem Koolhaas*», masters thesis Faculté de l'Aménagement, Université de Montréal, August 2002.

# Rust Never Sleeps

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## A Critique of Transcendent Materialism

Let us...make up our minds to place no obstacle or stumbling block in (the way)...nothing is impure in itself; only, if anyone considers something impure, then for them it is impure."

Bible; Paul's Letter to the Romans, ch. 14, v. 13-14.

*The king is gone but he's not forgotten*

*This is the story of Johnny Rotten*

*It's better to burn out than it is to rust*

*The king is gone, but he's not forgotten*

*Hey hey, my my*

*Rock and roll will never die*

Neil Young, My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue)  
from *Rust Never Sleeps*

### *The Sound of Rust*

In Neil Young resides a voice of rust. A nasal, slightly Canadian twanged tenor and composer of popular songs for almost forty years; he has defied trends and continued to explore sound and word. It is difficult to imagine how he would find value in the late Johnny Rotten of the 1970's punk rock group, the Sex Pistols, but it is obvious from his words that he appreciates the additional attitudes, sounds and verve contributed to popular music by Mr. Rotten. He accepts them side-by-side with his folk influenced roots. He wants more available, not less, to consider for appropriation into his own world. I think what Young is really advocating is that the staying power and relevancy of rock derive from the way it has accepted and engendered multiple influences over the last fifty odd years. What is implied is that unless a "way" is critical of itself, unless it imports, opens, creates or in Heidegger's terms, "unconceals" additional possibilities,

it becomes static or formulaic; it rusts in the face of new possibilities (1).

Young uses rust in its conventional sense as material degradation, a negative phenomenon of loss apart from the initial or ideal. I wish to use the term as a compliment to him, as well as to the unselfconscious way that the vernacular develops apart from prevailing concept based ideology. Like Neil Young, I also claim Johnny Rotten (and Neil Young), but without losing Josquin des Prez, Arnold Schoenberg or Ornette Coleman. For my students I want Mies and Corbu and our heritage of the Europeans, but I also want the work of the Native American/First Nations peoples and equally importantly, I want access to our entire current built world, including the contemporary vernacular. I see nothing as unclean. I do not want a *tabula rasa*, but a *tabula plenitatis* as grounds for the work to emerge.

### *Meta-Quantum-Physics and the Fading Machine*

Engagement in an experiment, according to the latest quantum physics, changes the things and/or processes under study.(2) Constraints dictate possible ends. We are confronted with simultaneous realities; adjusting sciences that evolve and replace paradigms vs. contribute to one accumulated reality, and mathematics of change vs. statics. A "fact" based methodology increasingly offers little in this environment. A flexible pragmatic and phenomenally based one, which recognizes interchange and flux of realities may be more useful.

This is a different background than the one of the larger early modern movement, which, while deconstructing the Christian doctrine of religious metaphysics, reconfigured it as a science in search of an underlying measurable single scientific reality structure. Philosophically, much of the early modernist thinking in architecture seems focused on replacing a



humanist representational system of visually dominated construction, searching for what Hartoonian has called an “ontology of construction” (3). In some ways however, this was still a representational effort- the real was still a representation of a kind of conceptual, organizational or rational perfection, cleansed of past communicational conventions. It included negation of or at least remaining apart from what was known as the natural. Systems technology would create new internal climates apart from outside contagions, heat and cold. Steel technology negated the traditional role of the wall and freed the ground plane. This project begins with the celebration of a new utopian sense of “man”: futurism, constructivism, and other ideologies present alongside Corbu’s “machine for living”, and borrowings from advances in the ship and airplane.

A universalized “modern” aesthetic was popularized in the press. But with time, the industrial as paradigm of progress was displaced with a new image of aging industry; a necessary but unsightly entity. Mumford noted “Our industrialization has been other-worldly; it has blackened and defaced our human environment, in the hope of achieving the abstract felicities of profits and dividends in the industrial hereafter...” (4). Pittsburgh burned its lights during the day due to the effluent of the factory. The formerly noble factory hidden in the smoke of production had begun literally and figuratively to rust; one could hear it. As Tschumi notes: “Architects generally do not love that point which resembles death: decaying constructions-the dissolving traces that that time leaves on buildings are incompatible with both the ideology of modernity and conceptual aesthetics.” (5).

### *Mies’ Watch and Corbu’s Watch*

Perhaps no single modern concept is as pregnant with hermeneutic possibility or as problematic as that of time. Each paradigm carries an implicit model of time. The modernists had differing working definitions of time, but most seem to dwell on a removal from traditional concepts of time, to the point of fixedness, immediacy or transcendence. It is as if the idea of time complicates their new agenda, or, as Kwinter notes “...what is it about time’s relentless fluidity, it’s irreducible materiality, that the modern mind finds so impossible- or repellent?” (6).

Mies can be seen as advancing the idea of beauty and perfection within the rational, and abandoning the semantic (7). His liberation of the wall in favor of a

columnar order opens the opportunity for a dialogue with nature, but there is not convincing evidence in the work that this is more than a visual relation of opposition of man-made to nature. It is striking, but in its contrast vs. engagement. Mies’ work, in opposition to nature, is conceptually designed not to acknowledge age or the processes of time against its quiet “timeless” materiality. If we look at Mies’ watch, it would appear to be set to zero.

Similarly, Corbu’s whiteness, while acknowledging the passage of strong (always Mediterranean) light stands against the idea of surface deterioration. While he greatly admired vernacular constructions of whitewash surface, *his* whiteness was supposed to be permanent, apart from aging or seasonal maintenance/ renewal as corollary of concept. As Leatherbarrow states: “Corbu’s understanding of the white building is a finality that manifests itself upon the completion of construction...the duration that is to follow the completion of a building- the life of the building- is conceived as a subtraction from the ideal condition...” (8). Tschumi points out: “While the Puritanism of the modern movement has often been pointed out, its refusal to recognize the passing of time has rarely been noticed” (9). If we look at Corbu’s watch we cannot tell the time, because the dial, hands and numbers are all white.

It is a gross oversimplification to characterize two of my favorite sources as I have above. I only wish to point out their (and the dominant variants of) modernisms in architecture offer for the most part reductive strategies, which, while liberating or “unconcealing” in certain ways also imply “concealment” or the closure of valuable doors, especially specific engagement with time. The fine arts in the west before, parallel to their time, and since have traveled some of the same media territory as architecture with wildly divergent, but sometimes richer results acknowledging experience of time and material.

## **Art Engaged: Phenomena and Material**

### *Turner’s Wet Head*

A companion once described the difficulties of traveling with the great English painter Joseph Mallord William Turner. His companion watching in wonder, he stuck his head out of the window of their speeding train for over ten minutes during an afternoon deluge. He returned to the seat and began an exhaustive series of notes and

sketches. They became the basis for *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844). While Turner is positioned by some as the height of romanticism in landscape painting, especially in his later work he is more preoccupied with the phenomena of light than narrative. His titles alone, such as *Snow Storm-Steamboat off a Harbor's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water and Going the Lead* (1842) point to a concern for the engagement of subject within a world, not of ideal optical clarity, but of changing light and often in the extreme. His light studies, modeled after color theories of Goethe, presage the impressionists and speak to time of day, direction of compass, and other qualities of the specific. Unlike his contemporary Constable, who dwelled in the everyday beauty of nature, many of Turner's paintings describe the embeddedness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century early industrial-made *in* and *with* the natural, the character of one indispensable without the other.

#### *From the Fountain (head) and Readymade*

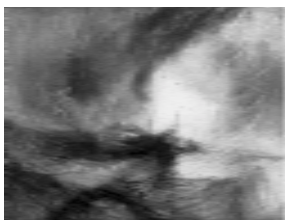
Duchamp did not get his sculpture *The Fountain* accepted for a supposedly open show. The fact that it was a urinal was the objection of the show's committee; the fact it was a urinal was the reason he had submitted it. Duchamp wanted to make a statement about the criteria that art is judged by. Rather than material conventions of skill or craft he was interested in pure concept. Yet, his concept requires one to maintain the convention of "urinal" for one to "get" the concept. He continued these

explorations with other "readymades" of common objects. One result of this conceptual breach with past thinking was the advent of Dada, and the will to shock based on symbolic content and juxtaposition. The other was not intended by him at all: a deeper appreciation of the ordinary.

Some saw more to be gained in compositional relation than in conceptual reduction and isolation. Schwitters and Tatlin, among others, experimented with collage in the early part of the century. Schwitters collected trash paper for inclusion, placed in relation with other items unmodified. Tatlin produced reliefs of mixed media that included rods and cable.

#### *Lost and Found: From Collage to Assemblage to Environment*

Following the Second World War, a new generation of artists was drawn to exploring the seeming detritus of modern times. While collage was still explored, more spatial compositions were experimented with. Initially referred to as "Neo Dada", the work rather than being centered in conceptual shock was determined- and assembled. "Assemblage" soon came to refer to art "...indifferent to the clean, modern designs of the internationalists...prefer (ring) broken, cast-off, rubbish, awkward, ugly, rusty..." (10). This return to thingness was based on qualitative aspects of the work, with formal, conventional and symbolic aspects downplayed. What the Assemblage artists of the 1950s used as source



L: Turner, *Steamship in Snowstorm*; M: Schwitters, *Merzbild 31*; R: Tatlin, *Relief*



L to R: Chamberlin, *Velvet White* and *Madam Moon*; Di Suvero, *Isis*; Smithson, *Amarillo Ramp*; Kaprow, *The Yard*

material was the whole city: “the city as-is: (an) assemblage of animated gasoline displays, screaming billboards...graveyards of twisted and rusting scrap, lots strewn with bedsprings and cracked toilet bowls.”(11). Stankowitz’ found metal pieces were the first to be exhibited as “assemblage” but were followed by the recycled auto parts of Chamberlain and salvaged building components of Di Suvero.

This movement from two to three dimensions had an inevitable evolution into two offspring: site based environmental art such as those works of Smithson, and Serra, and the four dimensional experiential environments and “happenings” of artists like Kaprow. In that vein Kaprow stated “(we) must become preoccupied with and even bedazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life...not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses. We shall utilize the specific substances of site, sound, movement, people, odors, touch...”(12). Art was now approaching the media of architecture and perhaps doing a better job of recognizing the power of the media of time, space and material, if not able to be as sophisticated in technique.

#### *Vernacular as Construction Without “Concept”*

Concepts, often unrecognized or unchallenged, delimit architectural judgment and choice. Works without “high concept” but that provide example of material, space and time in construction are valuable to the architect, and especially the architectural student. As Dreyfus has noted,

*Are there two fundamentally different ways we make sense of the world, or does all understanding consist in using concepts to think about things? The philosophical tradition, has generally assumed...that there is only one kind of intelligibility, the unified understanding we have of things when we make judgments that objectify our experience by bringing it under concepts. But there have always been others – painters, writers, historians, linguists, philosophers in the romantic tradition, Wittgensteinians, and existential phenomenologists — who have felt that there is another kind of intelligibility that gets us in touch with reality...(13)*

Vernacular architecture has always been placed in a realm of radical pragmatism and narrow functionalism, but usually as little more than a curiosity. Despite the groundbreaking work of Rudolphsky with *Architecture without Architects*, and the lifework of J. B. Jackson, vernacular architectural studies have become usurped as a branch of cultural, or more specifically, ethnic, or popular studies. I do not contest the value of those disciplines as my own research has been within them; culture stands as a major contributor to the construction of reality. But, in an era of seductive virtual space, unlimited quantitative information, proprietary and increasingly toxic process, and previously unknown fears of terror/sabotage, contact with a full range of the dominant culture’s built work is limited. The contemporary vernacular, the “other” lineage of the modern, is a potentially most viable source of spatial and material study, when freed from its functional origins. As Rorty (in quoting James), said at the Museum of Modern Art:

*What really exists is not things made but things in the making. Once made, they are dead, and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them. But put yourself in the making by a stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing and, the whole range of possible decompositions coming at once into your possession, you are no longer troubled by the question of which of them is the more absolutely true. Reality falls in passing into conceptual analysis; it mounts in living its own undivided life—it buds and burgeons, changes and creates.* (14)

#### **An Unofficial Tour of Four Alternate Realities**

##### *Grain Elevators: Swan Lake, and Downey, Idaho*

The scale of the regional grain crops and their resultant apparatus for collection and storage awaiting rail shipment make the elevator the civic statement for many parts of the American grain belt. Typically breaking the long horizon of the plains, they are the dominant construction of their locales.

Designed for the movement of the commodity, they transpose large volumes of sheeted area with tubing and distribution lines. The additive nature of parts defies easy description and forms complex relations of spaces and



volumes. The accretion over time causes juxtaposition of constructional techniques and materials as well as weathering of surfaces.

*Nimpkish Development Company 'Namgis (Nimpkish) First Nation, 'Yalis (Alert Bay), BC*

Cormorant Island was the Nimpkish burial ground prior to the arrival of the Europeans who established a fishing village. The English settlement, named Alert Bay, nominally respected the burial grounds. The Band runs the operation as a corporation with shared docking and processing facility for the Band's fishermen. The main processing pier is active. Across the street from the

waterfront at the old schoolhouse resides the ceremonial war canoe for the Band.

The port includes a number of docks in various stages of being reclaimed by the tides and sea. The strength of the tides and shifting seabed tend to displace the axis of the pilings, which then torques the walkways. The wood itself is in varying stages of decay but is generally serviceable for the fishermen. Patches are inserted/applied to walls, roof and walkway as needed.

*T'iskw'et Fishing Camp, Sliammon First Nation, Powell River, BC*

The traditional hereditary rights of the Coastal Salish peoples include exclusive use of certain portions of



certain waterways. This private boathouse grouping on the Powell River reflects those rights. T'iskw'et means "wide riverbed", and what was a rushing downhill passage with fishing from stream banks has become a deeper lake-like area suitable for boats due to construction of a downstream dam.

The individual floating enclosures use corrugated metal siding for closure and translucent fiberglass panels for maximum light penetration over wood frame. The walkway also floats and gangplank is hinged for seasonal changes in level. A new pier unit is being renewed in the photo and has yet to receive its frame surround.

*Bethlehem Steel Shipyard, Inner Harbor, Baltimore, Maryland*

The port of Baltimore was established by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Baltimore Clipper, the working boats of the Chesapeake and ships of the new American navy were constructed in the Fell's Point or Canton area waterfronts. The Inner Harbor was home to the shipping to rail depots that served much of the country's Midwest for many years in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

South Baltimore, home of Fort McHenry became a massive shipyard for the 20<sup>th</sup> century needs. As a part of the shipyards, several drydocks were constructed. The massive steel hulls were able to be immersed for ships to enter directly off of the shipping channel, and then sealed and pumped dry for repairs to be made to the captured ships hull. The shell and infrastructure of services is readily apparent. Processes of metal plate attachment, welding, grinding and painting left numerous traces in time along with weathering of the drydock walls and floor themselves. The functional language of depths, lengths, and heights measured in graphics on the wall attest to the silence of the empty chamber. The walls focus attention to the sky and open end of the chamber. To the author oversprays recall the color field work of Rothko.

The port gradually lost shipping tonnage and ship construction and repair contracts to the Virginia ports. The shipyard was sold to developers in the early 1990s who demolished the yard and drydocks for high rise and mid rise condominiums. The first such major high rise structure went into receivership, and forced the rethinking of construction of all the others.

## Two Modest Proposals for Unconcealing through the Vernacular

### Polytechnic Setting 1: Third Year Practice Lab

Objects seem to have lost contact with silence. ...why does modern man dread those moments of silence upon which the presence of a thing depends?... In the noise of the modern world things seem to be hidden. A thing can be so engulfed in the velocity of information that its presence can be forgotten- or, even worse, thought inessential. *Scott Poole, "The Construction of Silence" (15)*

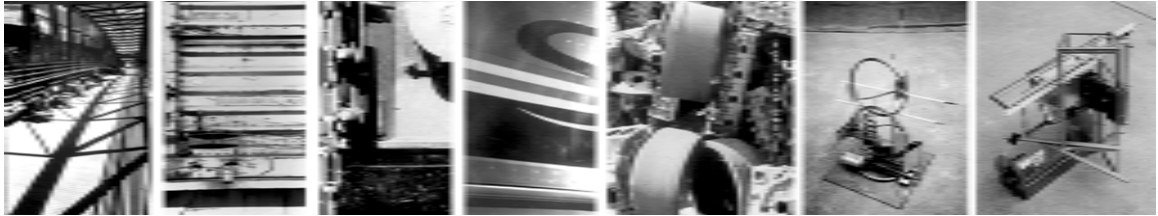
In contrast to a structural performance and calculations method, manufacturer's transformational process method or other text driven pedagogy with a quantitative prejudice, a phenomenological model was adapted for the course. Maurice Merleau-Ponty was advocated in the syllabus: *"To return to things themselves is to return to the world which precedes knowledge...and...re-achieving a direct contact with the world...which bases the possible on the real."* (16)

Students were asked to "re-materialize" the familiar, by on-site, hands-on discovery and attention to surface and physicality of construction. Methods to involve the students with the settings included actual field dimensioning, collections of materials and rubbings and extensive timed sketching. Each on-site three-hour immersion was then followed two days later by a reciprocal in-studio three-hour charette.

*Setting 2: Mission San Miguel (1791).* This active church was originally constructed from a variety of masonry materials. Students were asked to do a series of rubbings of surfaces in addition to sketches and measured drawings. The goal was a focus on the sensual aspects of the situation and material; as Heidegger said "that which gives things their constancy and pith is also at the same time the source of their particular mode of sensuous pleasure—colored, resonant, hard, massive—is the matter in things" (17). The corresponding exercise involved transfer of a rubbing into a figure-ground, expansion of a portion of the rubbing into a ten times enlargement and the creation of a three-dimensional relief model.

*Setting 3: Harford Pier, Port San Luis.* 1890's commercial/sport fishing pier. Foot and wheeled traffic has created a sculpted planking surface and tidal areas below deck show a collection of starfish and attaching to the piles. Students observed and recorded wood





member types, sizes, coatings, and attachments. The in-class exercise involved the design of an architectural workstation of wood components within a larger space. Steven Holl's arbor like enclosures at Seaside and Frank Israel's "Architecture Tomorrow" installation at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis were introduced as cues.

*Setting 4: San Luis Obispo Amtrak Yard.* The emphasis was on recording the truss structure of a 1998 CorTen bridge and surface comparison of the bridge, stainless steel skin of passenger rail cars and painted steel of freight cars. The companion charette was the design of a blind for the observation of water birds on a site close to their primary design lab site, constructed solely of steel fabrications.

*Setting 6: Salvage yard.* Students were asked to sketch items in situ and purchase a minimum of five objects of their choice. The final charette involved assembling the chosen pieces into a relationship based on their characteristics in a similar fashion to the "found object" discoveries of the 1950s.

Following field trips and responses students were then asked to analyze the works of several contemporary architects in terms of evidence of an attitude toward materiality. The final weeks of the course brought the students back to a focus within their individual design lab projects and a tectonic study important to the design lab final project. The results were that these final projects had a more sophisticated idea of material development with models and drawings richer in conveyance of materiality.

#### *Polytechnic Setting 2: Poly Canyon "Modular House" Reclading*

The University maintains several dwellings in an adjacent canyon, part of the campus. In 2001 it was decided that the exterior needed reclading. The student caretaker, John Moyer, petitioned our Dean to acquire surplus and discarded road signs from the state highway department as the new exterior surface. With the help of freshman work crews as part of "Introduction to



Modular House setting and "new" galvanized sign shingles

Environmental Design”, the project was undertaken and continues. The exercise provided the students with hands-on opportunities for working in actual conditions, a highly pragmatic series of functions and purposes associated with detail and a different, broader attitude of grounds where solutions may emerge.

Notes:

- 1 Heidegger's concept of *Ereignis* suggests events in Being simultaneously open up or unconceal new possibilities while also concealing previous aspects of Being. The problem lies in that each age feels it has unconcealed all and nothing is left hidden or becomes hidden again. See Guignon, Chas., ed.; *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*; NYC: Cambridge University Press, 1999. pp. 18-19.
- 2 In particular, the work of physicist John Wheeler, recently interviewed in: “Does the Universe Exist if We’re Not Looking?” by Tim Folger, [http://www.discover.com/june\\_02/featuriverse.html](http://www.discover.com/june_02/featuriverse.html); 8.30.02.
- 3 Hartoonian, Gevork; *Ontology of Construction*; NYC: Cambridge U. Press, 1994. p. 76.
- 4 Doezenia, Marianne; *American Realism and the Industrial Age*; Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press, 1980. p. 83.
- 5 Tschumi, Bernard; *Architecture and Disjunction*; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997. p. 74.
- 6 Kwinter, Sanford; *Architectures of Time*; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001. p. 4.
- 7 Hartoonian, p. 73.
- 8 Leatherbarrow, David, and Mohsen Mostafavi; *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time*; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993. p. 82. Leatherbarrow also shows Corbu's transition from early emphasis on form at the Paris Salvation Army Building to external solar strategies in North Africa.
- 9 Tschumi, op cit
- 10 Sadler, Irving, *The New York School: Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*, NYC: Harper and Rowe, 1978. p. 143.
- 11 Seitz, William; *The Art of Assemblage*; Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1961. p. 76.
- 12 Sandler, p. 197.
- 13 Dreyfus, Hubert; “Todes's Account of Non-conceptual Perceptual Knowledge and its Relation to Thought”, [http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/html/paper\\_todes.html](http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/html/paper_todes.html); 8.26.02
- 14 Richard Rorty, MOMA Address 10/2000, [www.moma.htm](http://www.moma.htm) [www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/moma.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/moma.htm), 8.26.02
- 15 Poole, Scott, ed., *The New Finnish Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1992; from “The Construction of Silence,” p. 41.
- 16 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (translation Colin Smith). *Phenomenology of Perception*; NYC: Routledge, 1995. pp. ix, vii, xvii.
- 17 Heidegger, Martin; *Poetry, Language, Thought*; NYC: Harper and Rowe, 1971. p.26.

# Modernism is Going Away as Urbanism but not as Architecture

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As an architect, planner and teacher of urban architecture, I am very much attracted to the architecture of individual urban buildings on the one hand, and, on the other hand, I am very much interested in the structure of the city, in which an urban building is located or the design of a building will be placed and built. It is the relationship, dialectic and sometimes dichotomy and opposition and occasionally also harmony of the individual building (or complex of buildings) with the urban structure, which is one of the central themes we study, teach and research at the Portland Center for Urban Architecture.<sup>1</sup> One of the big questions of the relationship of the individual building and the city - for most of history - was (and still possibly is) a relation of functionality, consistency, harmony, wholeness and fit. But we also know that the relation of these two elements, the individual building and the city, changes in our perception over time according to mainstream theory or philosophy of the time or according to the structure in dominance to use a term from political economy.

Modernity provided the last integrated and coherent theory of architecture and urbanism which, at the same time, also gave us a consistent practice according to which we could design and build urban areas, individual buildings, and even whole cities. Based on a clear break with tradition and the traditional city, modernism provided us with the new dictum of functionalism and the metaphor of the machine. However, modernist architecture and urbanism were criticized and rejected in the sixties and replaced by other theories and practices in the seventies and following years of the twentieth century by what is generally referred to as and subsumed under the term post-modernism. Since then it seems to me that modernist urbanism is going away but that modernist architecture is continuing to be alive and well and even developing. Modernist urbanism is dying but modernist architecture refuses to die. How can we

understand the continuing success of modernist architecture and the failure of the modernist city?

First it is important to understand the unity of modernist architecture and urbanism which is what made it the last overarching and unified architecture and urban theory in history but also - and that is more relevant - to an overall accepted model for practice. Here I am first concerned with the relationship of the modernist urban building to the modernist city or urban structure, which was expressed prominently in Le Corbusier's vision of the 'Ville Radieuse' in the first part of the twentieth century. In this modernist city the modernist building was an isolated little city in itself standing in the middle of a park like setting and being connected with freeways to other island buildings. This vision of the 1920ies and other visions of the modernist city of the same period, such as Hilbersheimer's vision of the modern city, were realized much later in various forms and settings.

## Unified modernism: architecture and urbanism

I still remember the late fifties and early sixties, when the idea of the modernist building was closely related or even deeply married to the idea of the modernist city. It was also the time when the two most important complete modernist cities were built, Chandigarh in India and Brasilia in Brazil. This was probably the high time of unified modernism as functional unity. The buildings were mostly as mono-functional as the mono-functional areas of the city demanded - prescribed by the Charter of Athens from 1933 -, which divided the city into four major and clearly divided functional zones: working zones, housing zones, transportation zones, and recreation zones. Apartment buildings were apartment buildings, shop buildings were shop buildings and office buildings were office buildings. It was at this time that all over the world new large scale housing settlements were built such as the Nord-West Stadt in Frankfurt and many of

the East German socialist city developments. New office cities were started such as the Office City Niederrad in Frankfurt or the more well known La Defense Office City' outside Paris. And apartment buildings were built which were like machines and little cities in themselves such as the apartment complex by Le Corbusier in Marseille. Modernism was a full success, and architecture and urbanism were well integrated, developed, designed and built according to a coherent and well thought out modernist plan which was based on repetition of apartments and buildings which were built with industrial mass production, based on modularity and the open plan. It was even assumed that the modernist city would eventually completely replace the traditional city, so that urban renewal all over the world (but mostly Europe) destroyed large amounts of traditional urban buildings and numerous valuable urban structures and districts. Modern architecture and modern urbanism seemed to conquer the 20th century not only by designing and building new buildings, cities and neighborhoods but also by destroying old cities and classical buildings, which some people still considered to be very valuable places. This development contributed to the downfall of modernist architecture and urbanism. But at the core of this downfall was a fundamental rejection of the simple minded kind of modernist scientific functionalism.

### **Critique of modernist urbanism and architecture**

In the late sixties and the early seventies the dominant structure of modernist architecture and urbanism came under serious attack. While there was early criticism about the objectives of the modernist city with its monofunctional zoning, it was in particular the results of modernist urbanism which by now were visible in many new modern urban settlements and which could be studied and evaluated. Overall it seemed that the modernist city had not applied the industrial mode of production and machine imagery toward producing a universally more satisfying city for a more egalitarian society. Instead it appeared that cities and settlements were created in the name of modernism, which were equated with desolation, inhumanity, loneliness and devastation and vandalism. Fueled by critical theory, the student movement and also self-criticism, modernist architecture and urbanism were in a crisis. The modernists conceded that the ideas of modernist urbanism had not succeeded in creating a viable city, and modernist architecture itself with its rigid boxes often floating in space came under criticism. European reaction

to high modernism, which had dominated most new urban developments after the war, was a rejection of modernist urbanism and architecture alike (at least in the early phase of criticism), which created a volatile field for all kinds of new directions in architecture and urbanism. While in Europe this reaction led to a renewed study of the classical and traditional city, in the US the reaction to high modernism resulted in popular architecture and urbanism.

For me the question at the time (middle of the sixties and early seventies) had to do with the relation of modernist architecture and the modernist city or urban structure. At the time I learned and practiced modernist architecture in my father's office. I must admit that I definitely liked modernist architecture when it was well placed within the landscape or well juxtaposed to traditional buildings within the traditional city, which describes some of the architectural work, we were doing. On the other hand I was not happy at all with the modernist settlements, which were built outside of the traditional towns and cities, or which were sometimes replacing bombed out inner cities such as for example the cities of Kassel or Cologne. I had to agree with the critics of the modernist city that these new settlements mostly felt alienating, cold, inhuman, and uncomfortable and certainly not a place one wanted to be. However, it was not so easy for me to dismiss modernist architecture under certain conditions. For me the question was:

How could one explain the success of modernist architecture when placed well in the landscape and when placed well within the context of the traditional city, on the one hand, but its apparent inability to create a living city by itself, in which people could be comfortable and feel happy, on the other hand? It seemed like modernism had failed on two accounts, first, it apparently did not work as a city with its one dimensional zoning, and second, its architecture when placed together as buildings in large numbers apparently was not capable of creating a comfortable city either.

This situation asked for studies in urbanism looking new ideas and principles, which could generate a comfortable and human city and studies in architecture in which architectural principles could help to generate a comfortable city. (Given the volatile situation, at the time, I was drawn to urbanism, believing that architectural questions might be more easily understood and resolved by looking at it from the point of the larger perspective of the city. But the matter had to be researched from the perspective of architecture as well

as urbanism.) This situation resulted in a series of reactions and consequently new directions in architecture and urbanism. "... European urban designers began turning to the pre-industrial past for inspiration and legitimization. The closed book on ancient, medieval, renaissance, baroque and vernacular townscapes was reopened and closely studied".<sup>2</sup>

In the period roughly between 1965 and 1975 most of the new theories were developed and presented. I cannot discuss all these new directions in architecture and urbanism, but let me just refer to the most important ones, two from Europe and two from the United States: 1. Open Architecture (and Urbanism). 2. Neo-rationalism. 3. Postmodernism. 4. Pattern Language. I will also include a fifth reaction which might be considered an extension of the pattern language approach but which is actually based on a different and more general concept of centers: 5. A New Theory of Urban Design.

### **Reaction to modern urbanism and architecture**

Open Architecture (and Urbanism): Based on some criticism of modernist architecture a very early extension of modernism came from the Dutch structuralist school of architecture, which included such architects as Aldo van Eyck, Hermann Herzberger, and others. Together with a socially oriented architecture, based on the idea of participation, which is mostly associated with the work of the Belgium architect Lucien Kroll, an architecture emerged which is referred to as 'open architecture'. Here it was in particular Herman Herzberger who made this architecture well known, recognized and accepted. The basic idea of open architecture is simple. Rather than trying to provide complete buildings and urban settings to people, one provides only an open and incomplete architecture, which then could and would be finished and personalized by people. Herzberger demonstrated this kind of participatory open architecture in various housing projects and other kinds of buildings. Especially his 'central beheer' office building in which he tries to make a little city out of an office building was quite convincing with regard to this conceptual approach.

Another important contributor to this kind of design is John Habraaken, who developed architectural support systems which provide personalized mass housing projects, including technical support systems for working with users. The approach, which worked quite well in the domain of housing projects, however, was not exactly convincing on the urban level. It is not clear how a modern city would practically grow in this fashion (despite semi-

successful urban attempts in the developing world). Overall, the concept of open architecture was quite influential and successful in the sixties and seventies in Europe. Later, Habraaken and Herzberger continued to teach, research and develop this approach in the US at MIT in Boston, where it still has considerable influence.

Neo-rationalism: The most interesting and promising of these attempts has to be seen in the neo-rationalist approach. In the sixties a group of architects from Italy and Spain started to attempt to see the relationship of the building and the city in terms of type and typology based on the writings of G. C. Argan on Quatremere de Quincy (1795-1825). These European architects and theorists tried to recover the city in terms of typology and morphology and considered buildings and cities also as "theaters of memory. The neo-rationalists were trying to recover the structure of the city by investigating the fundamental elements of the city, such as buildings, streets, squares, etc. Their main means of doing so was the type in contrast to the model of the modernists.

The most influential of the neo-rationalist architects and theorists by far was the Italian writer and architect Aldo Rossi. With his book 'The Architecture of the City' he investigated the relation of the individual urban building to the city in a way which not only rejected modernism but also opened up new insight and new possibilities for architecture and urbanism.<sup>3</sup> Rossi rejected the modernist idea of functionalism as the main determinant of form because of its inability to deal with the complex situation of the city and probably more important because it could not explain the persistence of certain forms of buildings once its function changed over time, (such as for example an amphitheater becoming a housing complex and after that its interior space becomes a public plaza). (While the rationalists were looking for an 'autonomous architecture' which would transcend culture and history and would communicate nothing other than itself Rossi was more specific and subtle in that he was looking to account for the rational and the irrational in historic architectural elements).

This is why it is very important to understand that Rossi's conception of type is very different from the canonical classical and stricter one originally proposed by Quatremere. Rossi's type is a highly personal one, relying on one's own memory, impressions personal experience, preference and autobiography and other ephemeral experiences. In addition Rossi did not see context or the urban context as a very critical factor but



the architectural urban monument was the more important factor to him: cities need monuments in order to be dignified, recognized and remembered. But again, as with type, the question of what constitutes a monument stayed undefined.

Rossi's work was highly influential in Europe, and later also in the United States and other countries. Rossi was credited with having saved architecture and urbanism from its modernist functionalist crisis. Rossi's contribution was significant because it not only opened up a new theoretical perspective but it also opened up a range of new possibilities for architecture and urban practice. But overall it was an architectural approach that works with and within the city. It did not attempt to create a new city. Only when neo-rationalism migrated to North Europe was it also formulated in more urbanistic terms. These efforts became known as the 'reconstruction of the European City'. The most comprehensive statement of neo-rationalist urban thought can be found in a publication by Leon Krier and others, which is called 'Architecture rationelle: Temoignages en faveur de la reconstruction de la ville europeenne.'<sup>4</sup>

Postmodernism: Robert Venturi is considered the American counterpart of Aldo Rossi in Europe. With his book 'Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture'<sup>5</sup> (published the same year as Aldo Rossi's book) he started to initiate what is now known and referred to as architectural post-modernism, with a more inclusive architecture, derived from popular culture as exemplified for example with his 'Guild House' apartment building in Philadelphia. In contrast to modernist design and building ideals of simplicity, Venturi was interested in the complex, the messy, the not so clear. He tried to incorporate into his design elements from popular culture, cultural symbols, advertisement, movies, industrial design and even cliché and kitsch. While Aldo Rossi drew from the long history of the European City, Venturi drew from the mass culture of the American City. His influence was as wide in the US as Rossi's was in Europe, opening up new possibilities for architectural theory and practice in America.

Venturi also became regarded by many as the father of postmodernist architecture and urbanism. While in his first book he did not refer much to the American city or the city at all, in his second book on the topic with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour 'Learning from Las Vegas', he propagated that architects should learn and get inspiration from popular vernacular urban structures such as commercial strips, main street and

suburbs.<sup>6</sup> It seems obvious from this short description that there was no more place for modernist architecture and urbanism within Venturi's framework. 'Less is more' was ridiculed by 'less is a bore' and later replaced by 'more is more' (Robert Stern).

Pattern Language: A different kind of American response was provided by a group of architects in Berkeley California, who reacted to the modernist mode of production as well as the products. The pattern language architects rejected modernist alienating mass production and developed principles, which could be implemented from a grass root or bottom up approach. Their two most important and successful principles were that of participation and pattern. These two principles were seen as two sides of the same coin. Patterns were necessary to guide the process of participation.

Patterns are considered archetypal examples of good environments, which can be applied repeatedly but are used and adapted to local conditions. Historically, pattern languages express the local or the regional building culture in a given community or society, such as the feng shui patterns in Chinese culture or courtyard houses in Egypt. Historical vernacular building followed set building patterns and traditions that resulted in a common language of building shapes, materials, details and colors that were explicitly or implicitly known and understood by builders and townspeople.

But repetition alone is not enough to define a pattern. More specifically, a pattern in this approach is a general planning or design principle or rule, which first states a clear problem which may occur repeatedly in the environment, then states the range of contexts in which this problem will occur, and finally gives the general features required by buildings or plans, which solve this problem.<sup>7</sup>

In the book 'A Pattern Language', the traditional use and idea of patterns has been developed into a modern system which can be used by designers and builders today. It is a collection of 253 patterns that range in scale from large regions and towns to construction details. A pattern can be defined as a generic solution to an environmental context problem, derived from functional arguments. And a pattern language can be defined as a coherent set of generic solutions which can be used in various combinations - almost language like - by architects, craftsmen, users and clients for creating their own particular spaces and environments. A Pattern Language' provides a general reference and point of departure for creating new pattern languages for various

types of projects in different locations. The simplest form of applying a pattern language to a given project is to select a set of patterns - for example a residence -, and use these patterns as a starting point for a design and building process. These archetypal patterns cover three major levels of scale of the built environment: First, regions and cities, second, urban areas and neighborhoods, and third, buildings and gardens.

The theory of the pattern language approach has been presented in another book 'The Timeless Way of Building' by Christopher Alexander, who is also considered to be the most important theorist of this direction in architecture.<sup>8</sup> Further arguments have been made in other publications and the practicality of this approach in architecture and urbanism has been shown in projects such as the Oregon University Campus Plan, which continues to work until this day with patterns.<sup>9</sup> In general, patterns and 'A Pattern Language' have become very important tools for many architecture and urban projects which develop in a democratic fashion from the bottom up rather than top down.

**A New Theory Of Urban Design:** While the Pattern language provided a set of patterns from the large scale regional to small scale construction, it did not provide a set of methods, principles and procedures for designing and building a city or urban area or even an urban building. In the book 'A New Theory of Urban Design, a process oriented vision of how to build a particular kind of contemporary city or urban area was worked out.<sup>10</sup> This theory essentially consists of a set or system of principles with detailed rules for developing, designing and building an urban area in a dynamic growth process. What is relevant to note here is that the principle of pattern is not an explicit part of the principles in this urban theory. Instead the principle of pattern and pattern language has been replaced and subsumed by the new and more general principle of 'centers and fields of centers'.

In the San Francisco waterfront project, near the bay bridge, this theory was tested experimentally, for the first time for a mixed use urban area 4-6 stories high. What is fascinating about this theory and the San Francisco project is that the urban structure develops according to a system of rules and the plan is embedded in the system of rules. There is no overall master-plan at the beginning of the project, only a set of rules which generate the urban structure - like an invisible hand - in a surprising fashion and formation. It is also a fascinating integration of architecture and urbanism in that every single building

design plays an important part in creating the structure of the city in a rather unpredictable and dynamic fashion - hence a new theory. The relation of the individual building and the urban structure is unusually intricate and even intense because it is the individual building, which creates the urban structure in the urban growth process.

### **Structure in dominance: postmodern urbanism**

After investigating these four - five different reactions to modernist urbanism and architecture (which, at the same time, form their own new directions in architecture and urbanism), we can see certain similarities but also some differences with regard to the emphasis of their reaction to modernism and the emphasis of their own direction. The three key categories of first, modernist urban zoning, second, modernist architectural industrial production and construction and third, purity of form derived from functional considerations, will help to clarify the picture.

None of these four directions is supporting the Charter from Athens with its one-dimensional zoning of four main functional subdivisions of the city; they all tend towards more mixed urban settings, the traditional or popular city. And they tend toward experimentation with regard to a more humanistic city (open architecture, new theory of urban design). With regard to modernist industrial production and construction as the major means of production, we also do not find strong supporters. The open architecture approach may be the only one of the four, which works with the industrial modernist system in its open support structure but not necessarily in its in-fill structure. And with regard to purity and simplicity of modernist form derived from purely functional considerations, we probably find the least support rather than almost extreme opposition.

However, it is also to observe that none of these four new directions excludes modernism altogether. But modernism loses its dominance. And modernist urbanism loses its influence more than modernist architecture, which is why modernism is going away as urbanism but not as architecture. None of these new directions supports the one-dimensional functional modernist city. All of them support a more multi-cultural open city, perhaps best illustrated in 'pattern number 8' from the Pattern language which is called 'mosaic of sub-cultures'.<sup>11</sup> And the modernist city might be part of this mosaic of sub-cultures - as one sub-culture.

Modernist urbanism lost its structure in dominance and becomes one of several directions in urbanism. But modernist urbanism loses not only its structure in dominance it also loses its appeal altogether. There are very few new urban structures which are being built according to modernist principles and the ones which are already existing are being changed, remodeled and face lifted (or even partially eradicated as is the case with some of the Eastern socialist modernist cities). In other cases the modernist city, it seems, serves as the open or support structure for other kinds of architecture to be placed, superimposed, stuck in as in-fill structure.

### **Modernist architecture and the contemporary City**

For modernist architecture, the picture is very different compared to modernist urbanism. Rather than being rejected and almost completely disappearing, modernism as architecture actually continues to flourish at least in Europe and also to some degree in the US and other countries like Japan. There are several reasons for that. First, of course in Europe most architects were educated in modernist architecture and they continued to do their architectural works in this mode. But they also became more free, playful and experimental in their modernist form language and started to interpret modernism in different ways, thereby possibly also developing it further. This is what Charles Jencks refers to as 'double-coding', I believe.

One interesting example is the German architect Gunter Behnisch, who first became well known and recognized for his Olympic tent structures in Munich. His organic modernist architecture is very fascinating, because he was able to combine German modernist expressionism with modernist organic architecture, calling it the 'Organwerk'. And in addition he combined these two aspects with a third element which he called democratic architecture - similar to Frank Lloyd Wright's ideas. The architecture had to be light, easy and relaxed, and the building started to be completely dissolved, whereby inside and outside were only divided by glass and steel structures resulting in a refined and elegant modernist architecture as we can observe in many of his buildings including the Parliament building in Bonn and the Post museum in Frankfurt.

It was also realized that modernist architecture in its pure simplicity of form (as geometry and materiality) often worked very well in contrast with the more elaborate forms of the traditional architecture in the European City. Especially in the reworking of the East German cities

after unification in 1990, this idea was quite heavily applied in the partially still bombed out inner cities of the East, which in addition quite often had been ravished by socialist urbanism and architecture. (Leipzig and Dresden, Berlin). But the question remains how long modernist architecture can live on the merits of the traditional city.

Possibly the most important factor in the resurgence of modernist architecture (as form not necessarily as substance) is the high technological development in glass and steel and other material over the last ten years. This latest technological development made it possible to design and build buildings which the modernists had envisioned and dreamed about in the early phase of modernism, but did not have the technology to actually build buildings which could be almost translucent. Mies van der Rohe's building vision of glass tower high rise buildings, conceived in the early part of the century for the Friedrichstrasse in Berlin could only be realized 70 years later in such buildings as the 'Bibliothèque Nationale' in Paris by Dominique Perrault, the 'Fondation Cartier' by Jean Nouvel or the Louvre pyramid by the American architect Pei. In that sense it is only at this point in history that modernism in its pure form and dissolution of materiality can be fully realized. This latest development based on new technological possibilities is also referred to as supermodernism which also emphasizes architecture in an age of globalization reminiscent of the international style.<sup>12</sup>

### **Final remarks**

After the opposition, rejection and dismissal of modernist architecture and urbanism in the sixties and early seventies and the corresponding reactions and new developments, alternative approaches, theories and practices, which replaced high and orthodox modernism, it seemed that modernism was dead as urbanism as well as architecture. The traditional and the post-modern city (i.e. new urbanism) have replaced the idea of the modernist city. Predominantly does the city grow according to its own forces and inner reality, which we are supposed to understand and accept as architects (Koolhaas). And within this reality there is abundant space for all kinds of architecture including modernist architecture and even small pockets of modernist urbanism. Modernist architecture has become an architecture without its own modernist city, but that is exactly why it can continue to thrive, flourish and shine.<sup>13</sup>

Notes:

- 1 The urban architecture program in the city of Portland is a special two year architectural program of the University of Oregon. The UoO architecture department and the main campus are located in Eugene.
- 2 Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). P. 10.
- 3 Aldo Rossi, *Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982) translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman' originally published in Italy in 1966, introduction by Peter Eisenmann.
- 4 Robert Develoy (ed.), *1978 Rationel Architecture/ Rationelle Architecture 1978: The Reconstruction of the European City*. (Brussels 1978).
- 5 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. (New York: Moma 1966).
- 6 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).
- 7 C.Alexander, S. Ishikawa, M. Silverstein, et al. *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). 'A Pattern Language' is also one of the most successful and recognized books of architecture of all times with more than 120,000 copies sold just in the US alone. It has been translated in various languages, including Japanese, German, Italian and Chinese.
- 8 Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- 9 See for example: C. Alexander, M. Silverstein, S Angel, S. Ishikawa, D. Abrams, *The Oregon Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- 10 C. Alexander, H. Neis, A. Anninou, I. King, *A New Theory of Urban Design* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 11 C.Alexander, S. Ishikawa, M. Silverstein, et al. *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 42-50.
- 12 Hans Ibelings, *Supermodernism- Architecture in the Age of Globalization*. (Rotterdam: NAI Publsiher).
- 13 When one visits new urban areas like the new Media City in Duesseldorf, Germany, one wonders however, if there might be a new tendency of modernism being resurrected as supermodernist urbanism.

# Modernity and Urbanism Revisited: Baudelaire and the Boulevard

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"By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is eternal and the immutable." — Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*

"A town such as London, where a man might wander for hours together without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the inference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing. This colossal centralization, this heaping together of two and a half millions a hundred fold. . . And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing stream of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honor another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space."—Friederich Engels, "The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844"

The postmodern critique of architecture may be varied and internally contentious, but one of its unifying tenets is that modernism failed miserably when it came to urbanism. Challenges to the modern movement have varied in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the common ground they held was that the modern city is a mess. The demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri in 1972 hailed the seminal moment which marked the official failure of modern architecture's urban vision. Whether it was the typological theories proffered in the late 1960s by the School of Venice or in

the decades that followed in the United States by Colin Rowe's collage city and DPZ's new urbanism, it was clear that one needed to look to beyond the modern in order to reestablish good urban design. Despite divergent prescriptions, postmodernists rallied around Rowe and Fred Koetter's claim that "the city of modern architecture...has not yet been built. In spite of all the good will and intentions of its protagonists, it has remained either a project or an abortion."<sup>1</sup>

This paper takes an historical look at the origins of modernity and its relationship to the city in order to reevaluate the belief of the unilateral failure of modern urban design. Specifically, this paper draws upon the intellectual work of Charles Baudelaire and Marshall Berman in order to relocate the design of modern urban space in its historical origins of the nineteenth century, instead of the more commonly recognized (and lambasted) efforts of the twentieth century wrought by the likes of Le Corbusier and Robert Moses. Within the nineteenth century discourse of modernity, Paris and Baron Haussmann reign as both the earliest manifestation and paragon of modern urban space making. This paper will argue that the innovation in the modern urban type was, in fact, in nineteenth century London: Regent Street. That the significance of London as the site of the first truly modern space should be overlooked is surprising; so too is the fact that the success of both Nash's Regent Street and Haussmann's boulevards have been overlooked in the postmodern critique of modernity and urban design.

## **Baudelaire and the Boulevard**

Charles Baudelaire is famous for his early articulation of the slipperiness of the concept of modernity. In fact, his definition of modernity is inextricable from his writing—full of tensions and contradictions, constantly shifting in meanings. When Marshall Berman hails Baudelaire as

the first modernist it is not only because he has defined what it means to be modern, but also because he is modern. For Berman, Baudelaire and his contemporaries have yet to bifurcate the modern into the physical (i.e. modernization) and the mental (i.e. modernism); a split which will characterize the modernity of the twentieth century. While, then and today, a strict definition of the modern remains elusive, it is this elusivity which characterizes the modern and Baudelaire's writing. Nevertheless, Baudelaire does ascribe specific material elements to the modern world; and, Baudelaire sites his conception in the space most pregnant with modernity: the city.

Baudelaire makes explicit, in *The Painter of Modern Life*, what is modern about the human element in the city: the crowds and the flâneur (with the latter being dependent on the former). The flâneur is the modern artist/philosopher who finds Truth in the ephemeral. In order to "distill the eternal from the transitory" the flâneur searches amidst the crowds of the city.<sup>2</sup> "He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call 'modernity'..."<sup>3</sup> The flâneur must, at once, be a part of the crowd while also being distant from it. To plunge into the essence of modernity, he places himself physically at the middle of the crowd while still maintaining a psychological distance therewithin. To find eternity in the passing moment he must remain the passive spectator of the visual spectacle; detached emotionally from the "immense reservoir of electrical energy" he finds as he enters the crowd.<sup>4</sup>

Because what is so evocative and striking about Baudelaire's portrayals of modernity is his concretization of it, this leads Berman to elevate the status of Paris—and specifically the Paris of Baudelaire's time—into the archetypal physical representation of modernity. The mid-nineteenth century Paris that Baudelaire knows is one wrought by the will of Napoleon III under the guidance of the Baron Haussmann. Haussmann used the imperial mandate of Napoleon to create Paris anew via a system of boulevards which were blast through the slums of the city in order to bring air, grandeur, and ultimately people into the light of day in Paris. Berman marks Baudelaire's *The Eyes of the Poor* as exemplar of the modern psyche situated in this modern physicality. It is in the urban space of the boulevard that the nexus (of the meeting of new people, of new modes of transportation, of new fashions, of new lighting apparatus, of new stores types, of new storefront windows, of the newly combined private

amidst the public) of what is the modern occurs. As Berman claims:

... the new Parisian boulevard was the most spectacular urban innovation of the nineteenth century, and the decisive breakthrough in the modernization of the traditional city. . . . The new boulevards would enable traffic to flow through the center of the city, and to move straight ahead from end to end—a quixotic and virtually unimaginable enterprise till then.<sup>5</sup>

Berman is correct in celebrating the boulevards of Haussmann as remarkable artifacts of nineteenth century modern urban design which brought together in large (in fact, overwhelming) numbers these divergent classes of people. These boulevards operate in the aesthetic, social, economic, and political realms simultaneously; a simultaneity which preferences that which is continually new; a simultaneity which leads to the shock characteristic of the modern condition. Berman is among a long line of those who have paid homage to the Parisian boulevards, and thus to Haussmann:

"Let it be said to Baron Haussmann's eternal credit"—so wrote Robert Moses, his most illustrious and notorious successor, in 1942—"that he grasped the problem of step-by-step large-scale city modernization." The new construction wrecked hundreds of buildings, displaced uncounted thousands of people, destroyed whole neighborhoods that had lived for centuries. But it opened up the whole of the city, for the first time in history, to all its inhabitants.<sup>6</sup>

While Berman is correct in assigning Haussmann's boulevards as the cited precedent for much urban design world wide, the breakthrough in this nineteenth century urban street type did not originate in 1850-60s Paris, but in London forty years earlier.

The innovation in modern urban typology which brought together the public and the private, the mixing of social classes, the celebration of the wedding of commerce and industry amidst a never-ending milieu was, in fact, the first and only boulevard to be designed and created in nineteenth century London: Regent Street. That the significance of London as the site of the first truly modern space should be overlooked is surprising. In 1851 the British census declared the country as

officially urbanized (in other words, more people now lived in the cities than in the country) and Britain alone held this distinction through to the end of the century.<sup>7</sup> In addition, countless authors starting in the nineteenth century portrayed the vicissitudes of modern urban industry in Britain from Friederich Engels to the novels of Charles Dickens. But if neither of these gave evidence enough to go searching for the nascent urban modernity in London, the fire of 1666 might have provided a clue. The fire of 1666 in London fortuitously wiped out the plague, but it also destroyed nearly the entire physical fabric of the city and left 80,000 people homeless.<sup>8</sup> While Paris remained mired in narrow, filthy, and dangerous streets which segregated the squalor of the lower classes from the opulence of the aristocracy, “London was the first to embark on a comprehensive program of reconstruction and embellishment.”<sup>9</sup> By 1852, critic Théophile Gautier, someone not predisposed to preferring the city of London over Paris, asserted in his *Caprices et zigzags*:

The general aspect of London has something which astonishes, and causes a sort of stupor—it is in truth a capital in the sense of civilization...all is great, splendid, disposed according to the last improvements. . . . Paris, in this respect is at least a hundred years behindhand, and, to a certain extent, must always be inferior to London.<sup>10</sup>

The design of Regent Street is the quintessence of building patterns set by landlords and builders throughout London after the fire. As Donald Olsen explains in *The City as a Work of Art*:

The existence of large landed estates permitted the establishment and enforcement of coherent plans of development for extensive chunks of property. The Earl of Bedford had, in the Piazza in Convent Garden in the 1630s, given London its first residential square. A succession of building acts had imposed a degree of uniformity on all new streets, while classical taste encouraged the subordination of the individual house to the terrace that contained it. Bedford Square, laid out in 1776, established the fashion for the square designed as an architectural whole. The Bedford estate and others were laid out in wide, uniform streets, punctuated by frequent squares which,

from about 1790, were adorned with landscaped central gardens. Such squares were reserved for use by the occupants of the surrounding houses, but the royal parks had long been open to the public and contributed to the leafy spaciousness of the metropolis.<sup>11</sup>

This leasehold estate system, active in London from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, allowed for the early development of an urban infrastructure conducive to establishing modern public space. Thus what was remarkable about Georgian London was not aristocratic monuments but “the extent and decency of the districts that housed the middle classes, and the splendor and variety of the shops dedicated to their wants.”<sup>12</sup> Regent Street marked the paragon of the achievement of Georgian London as a modern space:

Intended to link two royal palaces, the existing Carlton House and a new pleasure pavilion in Regent’s Park, it combined the functions of a triumphal way with that of a street devoted to the luxury retail trade, where the elegant frivolities of shopping and promenading could take place against a background of architectural grandeur unequalled, in London at any rate, before or since.<sup>13</sup>

Designed by John Nash in 1811, under commission by the Prince Regent, Regent Street encouraged a myriad of functions: it obliterated the unsanitary and overcrowded slums; stimulated both trade and new housing; encouraged wider commercial and leisure activities for longer hours; provided a stage for the display of fashion; served as a means for incorporating and extending sewer lines and other urban infrastructure; relieved congested traffic within the city by providing a clear route; served as a processional thoroughfare; and, encouraged real estate speculation for multiple classes.<sup>14</sup>

Thus while not containing the monumental aristocratic edifices of nineteenth century Paris, London was clearly modern in its commitment to paving, lighting, cleaning, sewers, and other urban infrastructure; the necessary foundation upon which the visual modern spectacle was laid. While Paris still concentrated on the aesthetics and iconography of the individual building or art object, London designed the city as a whole and the concrete material conditions of life in the city—what was to become modern life. And while Paris continues



to receive accolades for the development of the archetypal modern street, the boulevard, in fact, Regent Street serves not only as the precedent to the Parisian boulevards, but also, it could be argued, in a richer and more complex form. For while Haussmann cut rational diagonal swathes through the medieval labyrinth of the Parisian fabric—clearly diagramming Baroque notions of movement, the infinite vista, and the universal extension, Nash designed a holistic street which was still idiosyncratic—capturing both the ideal of the universal grand gesture while still integrating the particulars of the local and framing picturesque views along a constantly changing journey. Nash's more Romantic formal conception of the boulevard is then, perhaps, more appropriately modern in a Baudelairean schema (containing both the "contingent" and the "immutable") than the static, autocratic permanence of Haussmann's boulevards.

### **Baudelaire, Poe's London & The Man of the Crowd**

While it is natural to contextualize Baudelaire and his work in mid-nineteenth century Paris (he, after all, deals explicitly with the city and its depicitors like French painter Constantin Guys), it is equally—if not more—appropriate to situate Baudelaire and his definition of modernity in early nineteenth century London. Adding to the development of Regent Street as the Romantic/Modern ur-boulevard, is Baudelaire's fascination with the work of writer Edgar Allen Poe. Baudelaire sees Poe as a kindred spirit—as another writer defining what it means to be a modern poet (although this is not Poe's self-stated agenda but Baudelaire's). Written before Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* (1859-60), it is Poe's tale *The Man of the Crowd* (1840) which typifies Baudelaire's conceptions of modernity both materially and psychically.

Set in London, *The Man of the Crowd* contains many of the physical elements set out by Baudelaire as being peculiar to modernity: the large glass windows on the street, a principal thoroughfare (which Poe does not name, but can be assumed to be Regent Street, London's only boulevard), gas lights, the crowd, and, of course, the man of the crowd (a.k.a. the flâneur). Walter Benjamin would contest the inclusion of the flâneur in this list as he claims:

Baudelaire saw fit to equate the man of the crowd, whom Poe's narrator follows throughout the length and breadth of nocturnal London, with the flâneur. It is hard to accept this view. The man

of the crowd is no flâneur. In him, composure has given way to manic behavior. Hence he exemplifies, rather, what had to become of the flâneur once he was deprived of the milieu to which he belonged.<sup>15</sup>

While Benjamin asserts that the man of the crowd is not a flâneur in Poe's tale, he has been thrown off by the equation of the title and persona of this unnamed man and Baudelaire's same named chapter title which discusses the flâneur. It is true that not all men in or of the crowd are flâneurs. The crowd is just one element crucial to the characterization of the flâneur. The flâneur in Poe's tale is, however, the narrator.<sup>16</sup> As Benjamin himself poetically notes, "Let the many attend to their daily affairs; the man of leisure can indulge in the perambulations of the flâneur only if as such he is already out of place. He is as much out of place in an atmosphere of complete leisure as in the feverish turmoil of the city."<sup>17</sup>

This is Poe's narrator, who sits, "at the large bow window of the D\_\_\_\_\_ Coffee-House in London. . . . I had been amusing myself for the greater part of the afternoon, now in pouring over advertisements, now in observing the promiscuous company in the room, and now in peering through the smoky panes into the street."<sup>18</sup> Poe's narrator—a flâneur—is a man of leisure who is both a spectator to the urban milieu and a participant in the milieu when he chooses to follow the man of the crowd. But he is also a participant disinterested and removed when amidst the crowd and thus is able to register the cacophony, the shock and tumult which is integral to its modernity:

This latter is one of the principal thoroughfares of the city, and had been very much crowded during the whole day. But, as the darkness came on, the throng momentarily increased; and, by the time the lamps were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door. At this particular period of the evening I had never before been in a similar situation, and the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me, therefore, with a delicious novelty of emotion. I gave up, at length, all care of things within the hotel, and became absorbed in contemplation of the scene without. . . . At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregation relations. Soon, however, I

descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance.<sup>19</sup>

Poe's narrator proceeds to engage in urban botanizing by which he classifies the types of people in the street both by their manner as well as by their fashion. In some ways Poe's narrator's descriptions are similar to the physiologies popular for a short time in the early 1840s (when Poe writes his tale). The physiologies were tiny volumes containing sketches of all the types of people likely to be encountered in the city (classified in a manner analogous to naturalists' categorization of plants and animals). As Benjamin notes, "The leisurely quality of these descriptions fits the style of the flâneur who goes botanizing on the asphalt."<sup>20</sup> The descriptions also read in parallel to Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* in which Berman notes, "... here modern life appears as a great fashion show, a system of dazzling appearances, brilliant facades, glittering triumphs of decoration and design. The heroes of this pageant are the painter and illustrator Constantin Guys, and Baudelaire's archetypal figure of the Dandy."<sup>21</sup>

Poe does not embellish his descriptions to such a high level of pageantry as Baudelaire. He captures the more everydayness of modernity—the new and the now of the entire crowd, which Baudelaire himself is unable to do. Poe's narrator describes all manner of men in this urban crowd—including "the Eupatrids and the common-places of society"<sup>22</sup>—both from the window and with the man of the crowd as his guide. Poe's narrator fits Baudelaire's definition "For the perfect flâneur... To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world..."<sup>23</sup> When he comes face to face with the man of the crowd he is invisible to him. The man of the crowd does not see him. This is when Poe's narrator leaves the tumultuous crowd for the calmness of his view from the hotel coffee shop, because he has realized that to truly be the man of the crowd—to be one with the shock, the chaos, and the ephemerality of modern life—leads to madness. Benjamin concurs, stating, "Empathy is in the nature of the intoxication to which the flâneur abandons himself in the crowd."<sup>24</sup>

Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* highlights the paradoxes of Baudelaire's modernity in its conflation of the material and the spiritual betwixt the fugitive and the immutable. This new urban space—the modern city—encourages

a freedom of movement heretofore never experienced, but the movement can be endless. In the end all Poe's narrator (and Engels' perception of the people of London) can do is go nowhere and everywhere. They just go. They are subsumed physically and mentally by the shock of the ever-changing modern condition. It is the inextricable relationship between this material reality with the concomitant psychological tensions which make both Poe's tale and Baudelaire's writings inherently unstable; and, which permit multiple readings and confusions as to who the flâneur, the archetypal modern man, really is. He is the man (in)separable from the crowd; he is the (un)common man. He is a singular everyman and it is in him that Baudelaire hopes to find the eternal within the fleeting and contingent.

## Conclusion

It is a semantic argument (best left for academia) to determine whether Paris or London exemplifies the quintessential early modern urban space. But what is significant—and bears reminding particularly in the studios of architecture schools—is that the modern extends beyond the confines of the twentieth century, beyond the narrow rubric of design, and outside the oeuvre's of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Urbanists need not return solely to the preindustrial city as source material in order to salvage the contemporary one. The historical lessons of modernity are as diverse, complex, conflicting, and protean as those of the postmodern.

## Notes:

- 1 Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978). Rowe and Koetter's design strategies begin with Rome with an emphasis on figure-ground analyses and Nolli plans. Architect Leon Krier uses typology in a different manner than as the repository for collective memory advocate by Rossi. He looks to the preindustrial city and constructs a taxonomy of building types and spaces which he hopes can be rehabilitate the public and private realms of the city. New Urbanists proscriptive code writing for America's greenfields borrows from the study of the same preindustrial cities that Krier prefers.
- 2 Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 12.
- 3 *Ibid*, p. 12.
- 4 *Ibid*, p. 9.
- 5 Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 150.
- 6 *Ibid*, pp. 150-151.
- 7 In 1900 Great Britain was still the only urbanized society in the world; urbanized here defined as a larger population residing in cities than in rural areas. Kingsley Davis, "The

- Urbanization of the Human Population," *Scientific American* (1965), from *The City Reader*, eds. Richard LeGates and Frederick Stout (Routledge: London, 1996).
- 8 Charles II anxious to redesign the city solicited design proposals from prominent architects and engineers such as Christopher Wren, John Evelyn, Robert Hook and Cpt. Valentine Knight. All of these designs did away with any medieval tangle of streets and squares in favor of rationality and orthogonality (some even embellished by Baroque diagonal boulevards). These designs were important not only for spurring on the redevelopment of London, but served as precedents for the creation of urban design in the New World colonies, specifically Philadelphia, Savannah, and Washington D.C. A more detailed account can be found in A.E.J. Morris, *History of Urban Form* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), pp. 216-220.
  - 9 Olsen, *The City As A Work of Art*, p. 12.
  - 10 *Ibid*, p. 34.
  - 11 *Ibid*, p. 12.
  - 12 *Ibid*, p. 12.
  - 13 *Ibid*, p. 16.
  - 14 A comprehensive history of the design and development of Regent street and its consequent effects can be found in Hermione Hobhouse, *A History of Regent Street* (London: Queen Anne Press, 1975).
  - 15 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 172. See also Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1973), p. 48.
  - 16 A close reading of Baudelaire chapter "The Artist, Man of the World, Man of the Crowd, and Child" reveals that he himself considers the narrator most akin to being a flâneur; surprising Benjamin would miss this reference. Baudelaire, p. 7.
  - 17 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 172-173.
  - 18 Poe, *The Man of the Crowd*, p. 507.
  - 19 *Ibid*, p. 507
  - 20 Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 36.
  - 21 Berman, p. 136.
  - 22 The editor of Poe's *Collected Works* notes that Eupatrids refers to persons "belonging to the noblest families."
  - 23 Baudelaire, p. 9.
  - 24 Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 55.
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