



Volume

Francesco Jodice

Archis 2009 #1
Per issue € 19,50 (NL, B, D, E, P),
Volume is a project by Archis + AMO + AB + Design2context +

Shannon Mattern



Mark Jarzombek

Miguel Robles-Durán

Annelys de Vet

Regina Bittner

Gerlinde Schuller

Nader Vossoughian

Daniel van der Velden

Alexander d'Hooghe

Henry Jenkins

Regula Stämpfli

Edwin Gardner

Tommi Laitio

René Boomkens

Evert Ypma

David Barrie

Hector Torres Casado

Brendan McGetrick

Ergün Erkoçu and
Cihan Buğdaci

Herman Hertzberger

No Academy

ARCHITECTURE OF HOPE

ARCHITECTURE: A FAILED DISCIPLINE

Mark Jarzombek

According to Nicolai Ouroussof, architecture critic for the *New York Times*, the economic recession combined with the investment in new infrastructure that President Barack Obama has promised could potentially lead to a reassessment of architecture in the US. 'If a lot of first-rate architectural talent promises to be at loose ends, why not enlist it in designing the projects that matter most,' such as 'schools, parks, bridges and public housing?' (*New York Times*, December 21, 2008). I admit it is always good to remind architects of their obligations. And Americans could learn something from Europeans in this respect. But this is also an all-too-easy position and Obama or not the fact is that Enlightenment values are in disrepair along with its much vaunted ideal of the social contract.

Failed democracies, failed nations, failed banks, failed capitalism, failed socialism... It is a great moment to feel the pulse of history! Some might see this as an opportunity to renew our faith in the social contract, in justice, law and fair play. But though Enlightenment ideals are not dead, they are hardly alive either. Making sense of this will be a global challenge for the coming generation of thinkers and politicians; perhaps architecture can have a voice too, for if there is one discipline that can best be identified with both the Enlightenment and its failure it is architecture. Its failure was made clear by Georg Friedrich Hegel who argued in the 1820s that architecture simply could not keep pace with the needs of the Spirit after the Middle Ages.¹ Whether one agrees with him is irrelevant, for the point is that as a result of his position poetry, music, painting and the sciences were given importance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy whereas architecture was left in a philosophical limbo from which it has never recovered. But it was, perhaps, a blessing in disguise.

One has to remember that only a few decades before Hegel gave his lectures, architecture had a promising position in the philosophical project. Enlightenment thinkers sought to change it from an art that was the purview of elites into a discipline integrated in the structure of the social and natural world. Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand assumed that architecture could rid itself of subjectivism and arbitrariness; Benjamin Latrobe predicted that the age of the amateur, gentleman architect was about to end and that architecture would soon become a profession like medicine and law. The trouble was that Horace Walpole's papier-mâché Gothic at Strawberry Hill (1750) had decoupled the relationship between

architecture and materiality; and Giovanni Battista Piranesi's Campo Marzio (1762) had decoupled the relationship between architecture and knowledge. So by the time Hegel separated architecture from its presumptive philosophical legitimacy the serious damage had already been done. The Industrial Revolution went on to make a mockery of Neoclassicism's historicist models; John Nash's clients transformed Neoclassicism into an instrument of class superiority; and colonial plantations gave it a bad taste that no amount of Jamaican sugar or Indonesian coco could make palatable. The Neo-Gothic alternative never transcended its Romantic paternalism or its fussy attachment to craft and religion. The Beaux-Arts, of course, carried on with Durand's position, but its architectural extravaganzas were increasingly out of touch with the industrial era. Heavy doses of Functionalism, Constructivism, Brutalism and Contextualism could not put the truth back into architecture even though there were many who desperately attempted it: John Ruskin in the 1860s, Le Corbusier in the 1930s, Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin West in the 1950s, the architectural Heideggerians of the 1970s and in the 1990s, and the Lefebvre-ites who seemed so persistently fascinated with the elusive 'everyday.'

The call for a 'professional' architectural approach did not die, of course. In fact, once professionalism freed itself from its Beaux-Arts and Victorian Era cloakings to adopt the Modernist agenda, it reached out with increasing strength into academe in the form of the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB). NAAB's insistence on the legitimacy of the 'social contract' has made architecture's continuing disciplinary ambiguity

all the more obvious especially since NAAB blindly equates social contract with professional practice. In case you missed it, the NAAB is designed around a 'core values' model that is based on the principle of providing 'discipline and stability' to architectural education and the profession and the potential for 'innovation and change' in a rapidly changing world.²

The quotation marks were not added by me, but written into a recent NAAB document!

But since when have 'discipline and stability' been 'core values?' And what are core values when the last two hundred year of architectural history has proven that such values have been, if anything, shifting signifiers.

This is not a lament. We should not retreat to some phenomenological, neo-purist desire for authenticity and we should most certainly not presume that our precious subjectivity is in any way real. Instead we should celebrate architecture's disciplinary failure; we should acknowledge its post-Enlightenment status as a 'quote-unquote discipline,' work its failure into our theoretical frameworks and even – as I think is possible – engage it in our architectural practices, for just because something failed does not mean that it stops being relevant or – just as importantly – stops having a history.

Recently, advocates of Sustainability have taken up the cause of trying to return meaning and purpose to architecture. They want Sustainability to be architecture's new Enlightenment. But there is no way architecture – even if allied with, and supposedly purified by, the natural sciences, 'ethics' and eco-management – can live up to the demand that its agenda be transparent to social causes. And so it continues. Will the predicted death of star-architecture legitimize the call for architecture to pay more attention to social reality, as some seem to hope? Perhaps, but John Soane was onto something when he designed the Bank of England at a time when England was close to becoming a failed nation state, having spent almost all its resources fighting wars in Europe and buying tea in China on borrowed money. Although he designed it with admirable skill, in 1830 – a mere ten years after Hegel announced the death of architecture – he asked a friend and former associate, Joseph Gandy, to produce a rather amazing painting that showed the building as a ruin. It gives us an Hegelianesque, counter-view to the ideology of hope and optimism. And so, one hundred and eighty years later, the questions for us might be: What does the assembly hall of a failed democracy look like? A school for a failed educational system? A park for a failed public space? A housing complex for a failed social policy? A city for a failed urbanity? A court house for a failed immigration policy? These are some of the pressing design issues in our future.

- 1 'The Cunning of Architecture's Reason', *Footprint* #1 (Autumn 2007), pp. 31- 46.
- 2 Accreditation Review Conference 'First Critique – Emerging Model', Summary: http://www.naab.org/documents/home_origin.aspx?path=Public+Documents%5cNAAB+News