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Crisis! What Crisis?

Suburbia After the Crash

An Anti-Pragmatic Manifesto

by Mark Jarzombek

Let's face it, except as a survival mechanism in some parts of academia and in the profession, contextualism is finally dead. Maybe this is for the best. Its early promise never really materialized and it only made architecture invisible and bland, a pawn for the status quo used to extinguish the imaginations of young designers. In more recent decades, the turn to sleek neo-modernism has contributed to the death of context; this has created a welcome historical 'break'. Modernism comes to the rescue again! But is it enough?

There once was a presumption that contextualism – code-word in the US for 'history' – required *eo ipso* a foundation of knowledge and thus a sense of intelligence. Sadly, that equation was too ambitious and perhaps, in fact, flawed. History turned out to be too complicated to integrate into design studio education. Design found sustained reading on modernity (e.g., Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida) difficult and balked.

For a while 'theory' became a viable host for the discipline's intellectual energies and ambitions, but now there is a battle for design's life and soul. It is facing the same problem as did 'history', dying slowly before us – in studios, in halls, and in our universities! It has become a style, a way for students to get a job.

Given its important role in the interrogation of architectural purpose, theory needs to be saved before it goes down with the ship – before its emptiness is revealed to itself, and

before our heroes are made hollow. We write words like flow, diagram, and critical large on a page, but without sub-text, without sub-sub text – texts without erudition – without even a modicum of psychoanalytic reflection – an episteme without epistemology. Soon even S.O.M. will be doing 'folds'.

I predict a new fascination with carelessness, a new tolerance for 'whatever' in a 'whatever generation' – an architecture that prides itself on neither history nor theory, to put it bluntly. This generation will take over the mantle of the 'avant-garde' and demand that it vacuate itself of purpose and thought.

Although not the cause of this crisis, computation will float through it unscathed. It has already proven that it survives best in arid landscapes, squeezing an infinite variety of possibilities out of nothing, so it seems. There are some efforts to guide the ship according to 'parametric reasoning', but will it work? Is it not all 'too difficult'? Will computation ever meet abjection?

The challenge of the immediate future will be to get past the inevitable disillusionment. Academia needs to free repressed pedagogic values. There was a moment when this seemed possible with postmodernism and the attention given in architecture schools some 10 years ago to so-called marginal spaces, fuelled by the desire to make architecture – and architectural explanations – difficult.

When will we reclaim the unmar-

ginal spaces? When will we reclaim the center that is also rightfully ours?! What happened to our search for the impossible, for the impossibly big?

The process has begun largely in the new global phenomenon of museum design. What famous architect has NOT designed at least ten museums – in ten different countries. But let's face it, this is an *Ersatz* architecture associated as it is with the commercialization of culture. These great museums are ALL a type of anti-center of the center that still waits to be claimed. We have reclaimed the right to make 'objects', brilliant objects for sure, but objects nonetheless. Everything else be damned.

It is worth recalling that Central Park in New York is completely man-made; it was created over a tree-less garbage dump. Four million cubic yards of soil and rock were imported to the site. Five million trees and bushes were planted. Rocky outcroppings were 'sculpted' into place, vast amounts of water pumped in, etc. etc.

We are being forced by the possibilities in China and elsewhere to think big again, but we can think big EVERYWHERE. Thinking big does not mean that one must make big things. It most certainly does not mean that one becomes a problem solver. One must avoid the siren calls of the professionals and the pragmatists. Utopia can still excite!

When will we reclaim utopia for our discipline? When will we reclaim the possibilities and depth of our discourses? 🏠