

# Log

The background of the entire page is a vibrant red. Overlaid on this is a complex, abstract geometric pattern. It consists of numerous overlapping circles of various sizes and orientations. Some circles are solid white lines, while others are dashed white lines. A network of thin, solid white lines crisscrosses the page, connecting various points and creating a web-like structure. Small white plus signs (+) are scattered throughout the design, often marking the centers of circles or intersections of lines.

SPRING/SUMMER 2014  
New Ancients

31

# The Shanghai Expo and the Rise Of Pop-Arch

*For discourse (and therefore, for man) nothing is more frightening than the absence of answer.*

– Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>1</sup>

*When one likes it, it is generally for the wrong reasons, and when one detests it, it is the same case.*

– Don Eddy<sup>2</sup>

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 111.

2. Don Eddy, "The Photo-Realists: 12 Interviews," *Art in America* (November-December 1972): 81.

3. My use of the word *contemporary* is important to the argument since its recent usage was a clear attempt by architects to borrow from art history a sense of present-ness. Bernard Tschumi said "Please, don't call it deconstructivist! Call it contemporary language of architecture, because at that time and today none of us would consider our architecture deconstructivist. We didn't even like the name. We wanted to be contemporary. We didn't want to be another movement, because movements come and go. They are born and then they die. But we wanted to be the present." Vladimir Belogolovsky, "Interview with Bernard Tschumi, January 2, 2004," accessed January 10, 2014, <http://curatorialproject.com/interviews/bernardtschumi.html>.

4. Representative architects are: Richard Cole (Australia); Project A01 Architects (Austria); Oscar Niemeyer (Brazil); Bjarke Ingels Group (Denmark); Gottfried Böhm (Germany); Planet 3 Studios (India); Matteo Casari (Italy); Rem Koolhaas, UNStudio, VMX Architects (The Netherlands); Snøhetta (Norway); Santiago Calatrava (Spain); Ron Arad, Zaha Hadid (UK); Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Frank Gehry, HOK, Eric Owen Moss, Saffdie Architects (US).

Download the UNESCO World Heritage app and take a look at the great historical monuments from around the world, cleaned up and purified for touristic consumption. There is more at stake than just preservation. A lot more. Then type the words "contemporary architecture" into Google Images and notice that the first hundred or so buildings – many by well-known architects – define an aesthetic of whitish surfaces, rectilinear or faceted shapes, elegant curves, big sheets of glass, and ultraclean environments.<sup>3</sup> Not a molecule of historicism or contextualism in sight.<sup>4</sup>

These two worlds, each with its own set of discourses and academic affiliations, could not be further apart. But the duality is a false one. Both promote an aesthetics that envisions a world in which architecture liberates us from the complexities of historical and cultural affiliations. UNESCO makes no disguise in this respect since its buildings are said to possess a quality known as "outstanding universal value." In essence, UNESCO wants us ("universally") to use the sites of architecture's sanitized history to build a new society elevated above both the presumed groundlessness of modernity and the cluttered realities of local politics. The very same ambition, one has to say, is implied in the aesthetics of "contemporary architecture." It too promises a metaphysical break, or at least a calculated reprieve, from the ugly reality that lurks just beyond the frame. Together they promise a symmetry of redemption.

It might be said that this way of talking about our

discipline is far too artificial, but one has to remember Jacques Derrida's truism that architecture is the last fortress of metaphysics. These two snapshots of reality make that all too clear. But whereas this might not be as scandalous as it seems (for the simple reason that metaphysics is here to stay, in politics as in architecture), we do face the continuing challenge of what architecture could possibly look like outside of the metaphysical mold and its associated regimes of enforcement. Only when one goes to the furthest limits of practice can one map out not only what is in between, but also, and more importantly, what is not there, even in the in-between.

How did we come to such a state? There are many ways to answer the question, but let me first point to Clement Greenberg's article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939). Though now roundly dismissed in art circles, it has had a particularly long traction in our field. Kitsch, "the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture," as Greenberg phrased it, was for the stagnant, weak-willed masses susceptible to "vicarious experience[s] and faked sensations." To protect us from this presumed terror, art had to be resolutely abstract, "most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors."<sup>5</sup> Today, kitsch-aversion (now expanded to include the unruly modern world) forms a veritable prison around architectural discourse, shaping the logic of preservation as much as the look of "the contemporary."<sup>6</sup>

Greenbergianism is, of course, only one element in a much larger intellectual and philosophical formation. Jean Baudrillard, for example, sees most of contemporary culture – and all of the United States – as a Disneyfied "spectacle of banality," forcing sensitive souls like him to retreat into something he calls "form," which he defines as a combination of "emptiness" and "intensity."<sup>7</sup> Sounds like Greenberg on steroids. Initially, the argument was a powerful one. Theodor Adorno was convinced that in our "late capitalist" world most art was little more than commodity fetishism.<sup>8</sup> It was created by a "culture industry," the aggregated world of film, radio, and television, which had no other purpose than to earn money while manipulating mass society into passivity. And from passivity, according to Adorno, we get to fascism. All of this forces authentic art into a squeeze. To preserve the limited reservoir of "spiritual content" (*geistiger Gehalt*), art had to accept the fate of autonomy, an illusory yet necessary quality that was to be key to its ability to ride out the storm.<sup>9</sup>

5. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *The Partisan Review* (Fall 1939), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments 1939–1944*, vol. 1, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 12, 9.

6. Though kitsch is no longer quite the abject evil it once was, its associations remain negative. See the definition of Kitsch on the Museum of Modern Art's Web site to find the usual references: "self-congratulatory," "stock emotions," "association with the middle classes," "popular politics," "Nazi art," "crude imitation of modernist styles," etc. [http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme\\_id=10104](http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10104).

7. Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, trans. Ames Hodges, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 182, 77.

8. My criticism is far different from that of the various anti-intellectualists, neopragmatists, and postcriticalists, who have crowded around the coffin in equal measure. I still believe in the value of critical theory (though its potency in the field of architecture has been much exaggerated), but feel that it should abandon its long-standing adherence to the so-called avant-garde and the presumed transformative power of abstraction.

9. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. R. Hullor-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

But the late capitalist world did not collapse under the weight of the culture industry. On the contrary, it not only thrived, it went global. Rem Koolhaas should be credited for delaminating the liberatory ambition of abstraction from its traditional, political, or quasi-political pretenses. But the classical disgust with the world at large did not go away. On the contrary, we now face an even more dreadful and fully globalized “death of urbanism,” which Koolhaas famously proclaimed back in 1995. It is not just Adorno and Greenberg, it seems, who inhabit what Georg Lukács once jokingly called the “Grand Hotel Abyss,” the favorite haunt for disillusioned intellectuals.<sup>10</sup> Koolhaas lives there too.

Truth be told, architecture never really embraced the presumption of a “death of urbanism,” but it did use its spectral presence to hold itself purposefully remote from the toxic world around it. Today, the problem is obvious. Architecture, isolating – and exhausting – itself in its own calculations, is stuck in the self-imposed, dead end of form. An opportunity of rather significant proportion is being lost. To understand the scale of this phenomenon, compare “contemporary art” with “contemporary architecture” on Google Images. Whereas the one shows a lively and colorful blizzard of expressions (no doubt problematic in its own right), the other aspires to a dialectic of calmness. The buildings – neoclassical in their remoteness – are islands of reified sanity. The drive to produce the aesthetics of *geistiger Gehalt* is alive and well.

Architectural academe in the last ten years played a key role in promoting this outlook. The emphasis on computers, fabrication, and sustainability has produced a Cult of Seriousness. Also, more than one university has gotten rid of the standard “survey” – now cluttered by the crisis of a “global architectural history” – and replaced it with a survey that concentrates only on the modern era. In the same breath that architectural academe purified contemporary architecture from alternative realities, it outsourced architectural history to preservation. Today’s architectural schools have become so “respectful” of culture that they have actually become silent to its presence.

\* \* \*

Suddenly the architecture of Las Vegas, once pilloried as a symptom of the pleasure-oriented excess of advanced capitalism, looks promising. How cool is the roller coaster through “New York?” How beautiful is that indoor gondola ride at the Venetian? Just try to do things like that in an architecture

10. Lukács wrote of Adorno that he lives in “a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.” Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

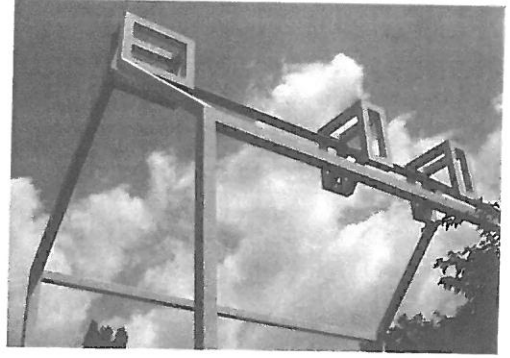
thesis! Perhaps we should rethink Michael Graves, who was still going strong in 1990 when he built a Disney World hotel with two 47-foot-tall swans on the roof.

This brings me to Pop Art, an art movement of the 1950s and '60s that emphasized exaggeration and that took its imagery from advertisements, news, and generic cultural artifacts. The realism of Pop, its closeness to familiar objects, images, and reproductions, stimulated a debate about the relationship between art and life. Though Pop is long since over in art, it has huge potential in architecture. So to coin a movement that does not exist (and that in all likelihood will remain just a provocation), let me call it Pop-Arch, a way of designing that removes the self-imposed burden of articulating and rearticulating a modernity-without-semantics. In the art world, Pop was criticized for its indifference and its reluctance to criticize the society that gave artists the elements of their visual inspiration. As Greenberg dismissively commented, "The best Pop artists don't succeed in being more than minor artists."<sup>11</sup> That standard elitist art-historical perspective does not translate into architecture, where Pop functions at the urban scale and thus avoids the issue of marketability.

Though Pop-Arch makes no claims about politics, it does need an environment of free speech. In this, its goal is more subversive than the usual detractors of "cultural flattening" have ever understood. Take, for example, the Egyptian government's attempt a few years ago to copyright the dimensions and proportions of the pyramids and force royalty payments from anyone who attempted a replica. The effort was for show, but it reveals the intertwining of architectural history as something Serious with the compulsion to enforce Respect at a global scale. There can be no possibility for "play." We might see the Egyptian attempt to freeze and control the historical as absurd, but we – the proverbial "Westerners" – have ourselves laid the groundwork for this by refusing, on theoretical principle, to see culture as a field of representational play.

Computationalists, abstractionists, traditionalists, nationalists, and UNESCO preservationists – odd bedfellows indeed – have produced, even conspired to produce, a self-dialectic that disavows the presence of a whole range of imaginaries. In that respect, Pop-Arch is more than just "play" precisely because it does not premise any dialectical purification-toward-modernity, or in the case of UNESCO, a purification-from-modernity. Either way, it is the same thing. Charles Moore stated it pretty well back in 1987: "It

11. "Clement Greenburg on Pop art," YouTube video, 1:40, posted by "A Chromatic House," May 5, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZN8uvz0JD5Q>.



FRANK GEHRY, CHIAT/DAY BUILDING, LOS ANGELES, 1985–91. PHOTO: BOBAK HA'ERI. RIGHT: VENTURI, SCOTT BROWN AND ASSOCIATES, INC., FRANKLIN COURT, PHILADELPHIA, 1976. PHOTO: BEN FRANSKE. ALL IMAGES COURTESY WIKIMEDIA COMMONS UNLESS NOTED.

would all be so much better if everyone would relax a little. We don't even have to learn to love kitschy things; we just have to get over the stark and debilitating fear of being tainted by the ordinary."<sup>12</sup> A quarter century later his admonition seems even more appropriate. My only caveat is that Pop-Arch is not about the ordinary. On the contrary, it aims to produce a specific tension between differently scaled reals, a rupture within the world of expectations. Instead of offering up indifference, it accepts the ready-made nature of cultural production.

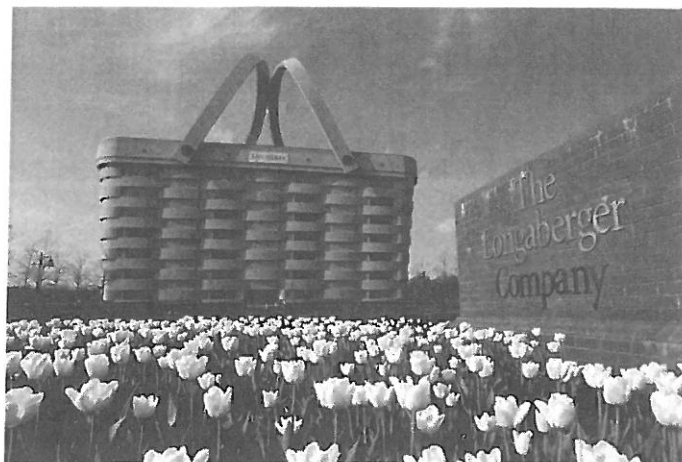
\* \* \*

Unfortunately, there is very little history to Pop-Arch, since most design schools today would see an argument in its favor as preposterous. There are precedents, of course, such as Frank Gehry's Chiat/Day Building (Los Angeles, 1985–91) with its rather amazing binoculars designed by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. Dramatized – staged – these exaggerations and aesthetic crossovers still today escape the shadows of determinacy. And if the Oldenburg/van Bruggen tactics are not enough, one is struck by the oddly aligned sticks holding up Gehry's roof (he has made a bit of specialty of it these days). But Gehry has now turned away from semiotic references, and his buildings, though purposefully "artistic," are basically "modernist" and not particularly different from buildings by Mies van der Rohe. That he might be considered a "postmodern expressionist" – cast as such by Hal Foster – or sometimes a deconstructivist, is based on a narrow art-historical perspective that obscures the obvious: his buildings are not made with titanium, but of Teflon. Nothing sticks. His buildings are not messy, they are clean, and in this I see no difference between him and Mies.

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown might seem a more natural place to find resonance with Pop-Arch, but

12. "A Conversation With Charles Moore," *Cite Magazine* 17 (Spring 1987): 16.

NBBJ AND KORDA/NEMETH  
ENGINEERING, LONGBERGER  
COMPANY HEADQUARTERS, DRESDEN,  
OHIO, 1997. PHOTO COURTESY THE  
LONGBERGER COMPANY.



13. 39° 56' 58" N, 75° 08' 47" W

14. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown,  
*Architecture as Signs and Systems – For a  
Mannerist Time* (Cambridge: Belknap Press,  
2004), 25.

15. *Ibid.*, 63.

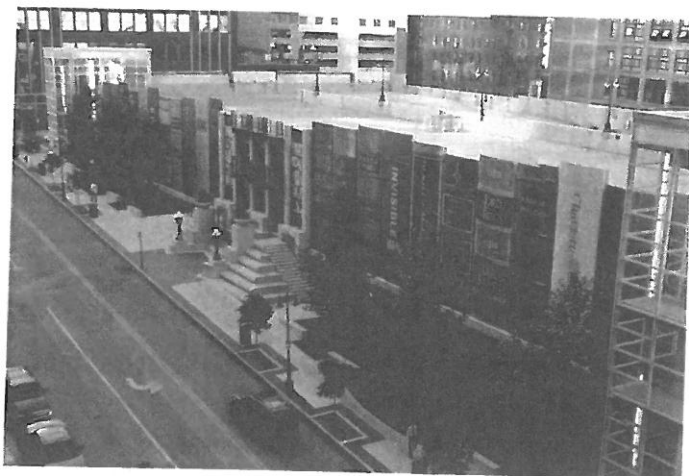
here too we should be cautious. Admittedly, Franklin Court (Philadelphia, 1976) is an amazing building, starting with the enigmatic “ghost shell” of Benjamin Franklin’s house and the rather meaningless “excavations” within it.<sup>13</sup> Below, once past the brilliantly disorienting but hokey “hall of mirrors,” one comes to the astonishing telephone bank where visitors can call the answering machines of dozens of Franklin’s friends and contemporaries. Try dialing Immanuel Kant! Hilarious and thought-provoking.

But as with Gehry, Venturi and Scott Brown’s contribution to the theoretical issue here is limited. For them, practically anything can be a sign: the facade of a French cathedral is “a three-dimensional billboard”; baroque ceilings are “religious iconography”; sgraffito is a “friendly” scaled urbanism; the Zen garden, a “stylized landscape”; Russian constructivism, “political iconography”; American billboards, “commercial vernacular”; fascist architecture, “graphic propaganda”; etc. If all architecture becomes a sign or something like a sign, does this not evacuate the force of the argument?<sup>14</sup>

The same problem applies to Charles Jencks, who regarded semiotics as a fundamental science that was both descriptive (all architecture is a sign) and proscriptive (architecture can be designed to produce certain effects). The result was a predictably empty search for some elusive, quasi-teleological meaning. “If one wants to change a culture’s taste and behavior,” Jencks argued, “or at least influence these aspects, as modern architects have expressed a desire to do, then one has to speak the common language of a culture first.”<sup>15</sup> But there is no such thing as a “common language.” Jencks went a mile where he should have gone a foot.

The fallacy of Venturi and Jencks is that they saw

DIMENSIONAL INNOVATIONS,  
COMMUNITY BOOKSHELF, KANSAS  
CITY LIBRARY PARKING GARAGE,  
KANSAS CITY, 2006. PHOTO: JIM BAKER.  
IMAGE COURTESY THE ARCHITECTS.



abstraction as a symptom of what they presumed to be modernity's muteness in the face of culture's narrative richness. But this was a mistake. Abstraction is not mute. It is saturated with metaphysical promise. It is not an empty signifier but *the* signifier of teleological cleanliness. It is not a void but a solid. It is not the absence of narration but the most powerful form of narration ever conceived! No wonder Gehry and UNESCO seem almost interchangeable as dialectical statements against the messy world. My argument, therefore, is not about signs or not signs, nor about modernism-versus-vernacular. The focus instead should be on the source of the imaginary so that one can point to the theoretically inflected, inferior position that cultural imaginaries have; these can be tactically enlarged and, in essence, injected into the body of architecture. This is why Venturi and Scott Brown's critique of "the duck" pointed the arrows of our conversion in the wrong direction; they saw "the duck" as a metaphor for modern architecture, which they held in low esteem as a "cynical and expensive distortion of program and structure."<sup>16</sup> It is precisely these "ducks," the architecture of the literal, that need to be liberated from their modernist and institutional repressions, but both the modernists and the postmodernists.<sup>17</sup>

There is a long history of such structures in the US, though most examples belong to a road-side culture of advertisement and promotionalism.<sup>18</sup> But to focus only on the curios and limit the discussion to the aesthetics of commercial vernacular, or to see them as kitsch versions of modernism à la Venturi, is to miss the point. Remove the embarrassment, ignore the overstimulated anxieties about the threat of "populism," dismiss as overdetermined the humorless struggle for high against low, and see instead the design

16. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 163

17. *Ibid.*

18. See, for example, the patented hotdog stand from 1928, <http://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/pages/USD78662-0.png>.



possibilities inherent in the dialogue with cultural imaginaries; the doors of architecture now open to a world in which even the literal – the much-maligned “duck” – is in fact the key to a different way of thinking.

A particularly impressive example is the headquarters of Longaberger Company in Dresden, Ohio (1997).<sup>19</sup> This company, which makes baskets, represents itself as a “basket,” seven stories high. The nails that attach the “handles” to the “basket” are actually functional. There is probably no building quite like it in scale and bravura in the modern architectural firmament.<sup>20</sup> The Community Bookshelf that lines the south wall of the Kansas City Central Library’s parking garage (2004) is another compelling example of Pop-Arch.<sup>21</sup> The design is a series of 25-foot-high book spines, 11 to each side of the garage’s pedestrian entrance. The structure was the brain child of the client, noted Kansas City banker Jonathan Kemper, and not of the architect. The first architects who worked for Kemper wanted to take his idea and resolve it with abstract forms. But Kemper insisted on the literal and brought in a different firm, Dimensional Innovations, to design and detail the project. Community members and patrons were asked to nominate titles to be displayed, and the ones chosen reflect a wide range of famous literature, including *The Lord of the Rings*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

The irony that the three-story-tall book spines are basically a decorative mask for a garage speaks to the liminal status that books now have as ornament. Furthermore, with digitalization now calling the very future of books into question, the building magnifies our contemporary ambiguity toward bound volumes. This building challenges the compulsion to equate monumentality with power and heroic deeds. And for those various reasons, the building represents architecture’s dialogic possibility, one in which culture is not an empty signifier but a multivalent one – magnified to the scale of architecture. The building gives new meaning to a world of trashification and recuperation.

Should architecture not be a place where we discuss and expose the thematics of our times, and could literalism not be an important part of how that can be done? Not all architecture need accept the challenge, but at least some architecture should. In that sense, Pop-Arch becomes a supplement that “plays” between presence and absence. It is an embarrassment to the field of architecture, which will continually attempt to discredit its legitimacy, and yet, as a force within a

19. 40° 3' 49" N, 82° 20' 48" W.

20. Another example is the Oakley Headquarters in Foothill Ranch, California (33° 40' 16" N, 117° 38' 46" W). Another is the Business Centre in Kaunas, Lithuania. The gently convex facade is formed of 4,000 glazed glass tiles that make the image of a bank note, the 1000 Litas (54° 55' 01" N, 23° 59' 14" E). Another building is Fortress Storage in Boston Massachusetts (42° 19' 36.8" N, 71° 03' 31.6" W).

21. 39° 06' 09.1" N, 94° 35' 05.5" W.

broader understanding of architecture its legitimacy as a theoretical other cannot be disputed. Pop-Arch is not an inversion of the classic, Euro-centric dualism of avant-garde and kitsch. It does not epitomize some fantasized eruption from below. That dualism, though enforced explicitly or implicitly in regimes of pedagogy and practice, has little theoretical legitimacy anymore. Pop-Arch allows for a whole new set of epistemological experimentations to be figured forth.

\* \* \*

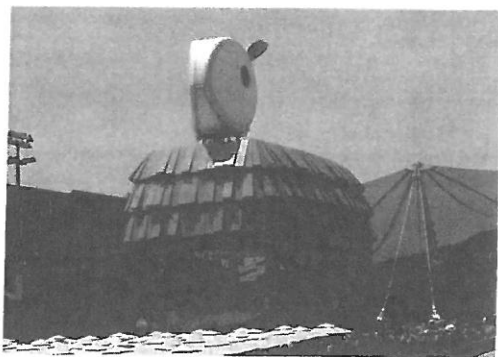
A good place to discuss the contemporary anxiety of cultural appropriation was Expo 2010 in Shanghai. Most pavilions tried hard to reflect a stabilized modernity-as-purified-abstraction in one way or another; here the Europeans and Scandinavians excelled (Portugal, Denmark, Germany, France, Sweden, Finland, Luxemburg, and Italy), but it was clearly an international aesthetic that could be found at the pavilions of the UAE, Canada, Chile, and New Zealand. Take the hulking, faceted German pavilion by Schmidhuber + Kaindl GmbH, which was meant to show Germany as a progressive and engineering-oriented nation. It was as self-infatuated with its antiseptic, masculinist, offend-no-one-modernity as a building could be. The most extreme example was the French pavilion by Jacques Ferrier, which was little more than a screened-in box that could just as easily be covering a garage. If it said anything, it was – unintentionally – how hollow, if not how desperate, the ideology of abstraction has become.

Expo 2010 revealed that this type of detachment was a thousand times safer than cultural engagement. Nonetheless, several buildings referred to a form of “culture,” some in a more literal way, including Thailand, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, India, China, and Morocco, many by a purposeful, self-orientalization of the building’s skin through an appliqué of decorative motives, as did Russia and Poland.

What we saw in these buildings is the core of an Asian resistance to pure abstraction that needs to be probed more deeply, even if it is driven more by recalcitrant compulsions of national pride than by an attachment to cultural fluidity. The Asian resistance sheds a powerful light on abstraction’s ideological association with European secularism. In other words, there is a reason Asia is the home of a “literalist moment.” Instead of learning from Las Vegas it is now “Learning from Asia.” After all, nothing can compare to the Tea Museum in Meitan, the Chinese county known for its



SCHMIDHUBER + KAINDL GMBH,  
GERMANY PAVILION, EXPO 2010,  
SHANGHAI. PHOTO: BERND GROSS.  
RIGHT: CARLOS MARREIROS, MACAU  
PAVILION, EXPO 2010, SHANGHAI.  
PHOTO: BENCMQ.

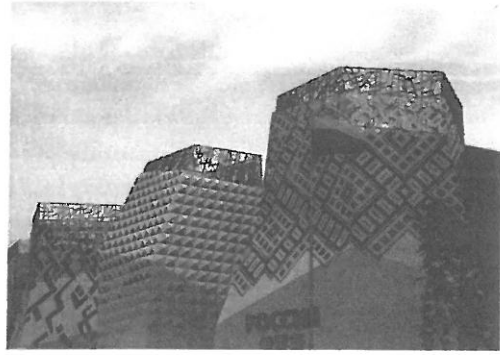
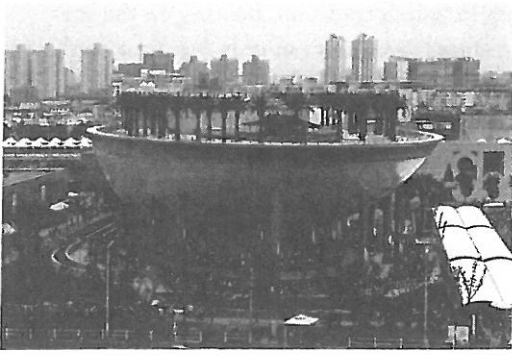


fabled green tea. The building is nine stories high, shaped like a giant clay teapot, and accompanied by a smaller building shaped like a teacup. The pot and cup, both in red, are sited prominently on a hilltop at a bend in a river, a place where one might once have put a shrine.<sup>22</sup> One could compare the teapot to the 13th-century Sun Temple of Konorak in India, designed as a massive “chariot” in stone. Literalism, in other words, has a strong premodern history.

The Macau pavilion at Expo 2010, designed by the precocious architect/businessman/artist/humorist Carlos Marreiros, went all out with literalism. The 20-meter-high “toy rabbit,” replete with four-meter-high red wheels, is steeped in an ancient mythology about the moon that plays an essential role in a midautumn, citywide festival in Macau. Children play with colored lanterns, which come in various sizes, from small toys to huge, luminous floats. Like Mickey Mouse or recent Japanese cartoon characters, cuteness is increasingly the key factor. In a world where tradition is ever more driven by the pretense of authenticity, the Macau pavilion was a brilliant counterstatement and even its politics were not unambiguous: the rabbit’s head, ears, and tail were made of air-filled balloons.

Semantically, the most complex pavilion was Saudi Arabia’s. A giant white rice bowl with a decorated rim, it was supported by a ring of columns. Some said the building was meant to look like an oil tanker and thus reflect the political and material connection between Saudi Arabia and China. And indeed, a large stage in the pavilion was used to unveil joint Saudi-Chinese business deals, including a new railway between Mecca and Medina, which will be built by a Chinese firm. But tankers do not have shiny, white hulls. Others claimed, given that the design was the combined effort of Chinese and Saudi designers, that the building was meant to represent a half moon – but the moon is not oval.

22. 27° 45' 50" N, 107° 29' 03" E

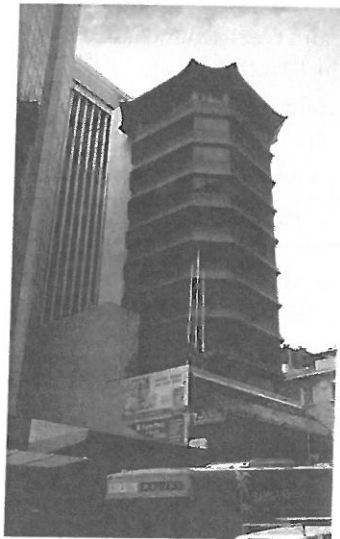


SAUDI ARABIA PAVILION, EXPO 2010, SHANGHAI. PHOTO: KIMON BERLIN. RIGHT: TOTEMENT/PAPER, RUSSIAN PAVILION, EXPO 2010, SHANGHAI. PHOTO: CARSTEN ULLRICH.

Regardless of its representational ambiguity, the bowl was not meant to be perceived as hollow, but rather as “filled to the brim,” and not with rice but with sand. The upper surface was planted with a “garden” of palm trees around a black tent to evoke the image of an oasis. The building was literally a floating signifier of modernity’s failure of resolution.

The pavilion was, of course, designed with no irony in mind, but that is the funny thing about playing with culture. It inevitably is funny. In other words, this building becomes Pop-Arch precisely because the more serious a designer is about cultural and national tropes, the more likely the signifiers will slip from the designer’s grasp. The same was true for the India pavilion, a bamboo-domed replica of the fourth-century stupa of Sanchi (now a UNESCO site). The original building, however, is not a dome but solid stone through and through. The emptying out of the solid is unintentionally brilliant. After all, Buddhism may have been founded in India, but it famously “left” India for East Asia. Does not the “emptying” of the stupa point to the historical paradox of presence and absence? The *chatra* (a type of umbrella in stone) on top of the stupa completes the inversion. Normally indicative of the building’s connection to the divine, here the *chatra* became something that looked like Wi-Fi antennas. I loved it, but it was easy to see why European architects in particular have come to avoid such plays with “culture” like the plague, precisely to avoid the risk of unintentional consequences. And, as we have become more ostensibly global, Culture Avoidance Syndrome has spread to ever more architects, all eager to avoid making a mistake. Who would not get a chuckle out of the Russian pavilion by TOTEMENT/PAPER, its white towers with embroidered edges looking like grocery baskets left out in a snowstorm.

What we see with all these pavilions is not a self-orientalizing retreat from the modern, but a play on the tropes of



SANG ARCHITECTS, ORIENT TOWER, AUCKLAND, 1985. PHOTO: INGOLFSON.  
TOP: C.Y. LEE & PARTNERS, TAIPEI 101, TAIPEI, 2004. PHOTO: SHAJKSD.

self-orientalizing in which tradition, floating on the surface of culture, refuses to sink. It not only refuses to sink, the imaginary has been magnified. But this literal-writ-large is not a *cri de coeur* filled to the brim with vigor and alienation, but the presencing of cultural tensions that are particularly strong in Asia and Africa. Contemporary architecture as the self-proclaimed, epistemological embodiment of modernity simply fails to recognize this tension as a valid theoretical space, given its deep, philosophically reinforced projection of how “culture” should behave. Thus, from the traditional postcolonial perspective, such buildings would be dismissed as representing the weak-willed attempt by various locals to bend to the orientalist mandate already imposed on the non-West during colonial times. In this scenario, the attempt to construct identity through the medium of aesthetics produces only a faux authenticity that is just as pernicious to the non-West as kitsch is to the West. The two are basically the different offspring of the same parent. Though the rise of nationalism in the proverbial non-West needs to be addressed, one has to accept the fact that these buildings reduce the national imaginary to a set of clichés to more effectively play out for both external and internal audiences the demands for difference on the global stage.

These buildings are thus a form of, “lite” resistance, where both sides of that term have to be kept in mind. That is perhaps the difference between Pop Art and Pop-Arch. Whereas Pop Art often started with caricature and brings it to the scale of the museum, Pop-Arch starts with real-world things, such as books, embroideries, stupas, and baskets, and enlarges them to a scale that approaches caricature. The results, when discussed outside the realm of their respective champions, are rarely clean. In fact, by definition they have to be messy given the core paradox of scale

Mistakes happen regardless, even to the abstractionists, who can produce kitsch precisely because their buildings purport to make no demands on the audience apart from the visual impact. The German pavilion by Schmidhuber + Kaindl looked downright militaristic. Could it be a stealth-bomber of the future? In some cases, architects lose complete control of the image altogether: the Lipstick Building (New York), Dildo Building (Barcelona), and Gherkin (London). The risks of abstraction are huge, but they pale when compared to how nationalism has co-opted much of the conversation about culture. Taipei 101 (2004) might be a good example: a skyscraper that was intended to be pagoda-like, with eight

23. Lee also designed the extraordinary and over-the-top Fangyuan Mansion in Shenyang. The building was designed [looks?] like a coin because the owners work with money. On January 10, 2012, CNN classified the structure in the top ten of the ugliest buildings in the world. I would certainly debate that (41° 48' 51" N, 123° 26' 15.71" E).

24. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 108.

25. *Ibid.*, 110.

26. Caryl Emerson, "Shklovsky's ostranenie, Bakhtin's vnenakhodimost' (How Distance Serves an Aesthetics of Arousal Differently from an Aesthetics Based on Pain)," *Poetics Today*, 26, no. 4 (Winter, 2005): 637–64, 655.

"pods," where eight is a lucky number. It was designed by C.Y. Lee, who was even photographed sitting Buddha-like on a big rock with the building in the background.<sup>23</sup>

But is playing with culture so traumatized by the practices of cultural instrumentalism that it cannot even be on the table? There has to be at least some way to move past the deadlock, and here I rely on the always refreshing theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, who, when discussing the question of metaphysics, pointed out that a person's "real external aspect can be seen and understood only by the other person, thanks to their spatial exotopy, and thanks to the fact that they are other."<sup>24</sup> The word *exotopy*, translated from the Russian *vnenakhodimost*, means something like "finding oneself outside." It describes an approach that rejects the lure of ontology, where the Self is identical with its own voice, and the lure of empathy, where the Self becomes perfected as the "other." Understanding, according to Bakhtin – and, I would add, design – is a difficult and risky operation. "Past meanings . . . can never be stable (completed once and for all, finished), they will always change (renewing themselves) in the course of the dialogue's subsequent development, and yet to come."<sup>25</sup> The self-sufficient, healthy-looking classical body of metaphysics is revealed by Bakhtinian thought as too brittle, as a body with too much to lose. All it needs is a mirror – and a good photographer.<sup>26</sup>

Bakhtin, writing in the late 1950s, is not defending Pop Art (his favorite author was Dostoyevsky), nonetheless, his thinking adds theoretical resonance to my discussion about how to get outside the boundaries of architecture's metaphysical compulsions. Whereas modernists, computationists, preservationists, and abstractionists all share an unforgiving and now naturalized rigidity to that which is presumably "below" (redeemed only here and there through nationalist clichés or cultural tropes), Bakhtin accepts a base discomfort with authorial privilege, and even accepts disfunctionality as basic to self-understanding. Indeed, Pop-Arch ultimately points not just to "play," but also to a rupture in the presumed logic of semantics. This rupture does not liberate the author, but rather ties him/her to the contingencies of expression. It speaks not to an arbitrary multiplicity of voices and scales, but to a specific intervention that frees language from its functional requirements while at the same time parroted it. The result of the scaling-up is a potential doubling of the semantic profile – and the production of an alternative, contingent monumentality.

Compare Taipei 101 and its pretensions with the infinitely more satisfactory, 12-story Orient Tower in downtown Auckland, designed by Auckland architect Ron Sang.<sup>27</sup> It was not the architect who came up with the design idea but the client, the Chan family, who wanted a tall Chinese “pagoda” building. But the architect, to his credit, did not try to refine that aesthetic to fit the demands of acceptance, and the result is a hostel-office building that brilliantly engages the thematics of “Chineseness” while parodying the claim for modernity-at-all-costs, or, in this case, at very little cost. It is basically a conventional modernist building with horizontal, red bands that flare along their bottom edges to represent something akin to a pagoda. Here, too, it was the client who insisted on the form. Whereas Taipei 101 bears no evidence of architecture caught between cultures, the Auckland building is clearly associated with the New Zealand Chinese, who endured even into the late 1990s various forms of political discrimination. Today New Zealand is one of the prime destinations of many Chinese students and young professionals. To place Sang’s building in the category of kitsch is to falsify its political position. Its presence demonstrates a global openness and yet it is also a “lite” monument to difference.

\* \* \*

Is architecture a force that silences the noise of culture, or does it participate – elastically – in its messy realities? Does architecture place culture in the Platonic Cave and prescribe the bitter pill of transcendence, or does it say that we probably never began in a cave to begin with? In questioning the implicit metaphysics of the current state of architecture (and preservation), I am not saying one side is better than the other, but that architectural academe should embrace both sides of the debate. I am also not talking about a liberalist attempt to be inclusive or to be respectful, precisely because those two values have returned us full circle to metaphysics. Taipei 101 is “respectful,” whereas Orient Tower has no such ambition. It is perfectly dialogic. So, too, the building for the National Fisheries Development Board in Hyderabad, India (2012), which is in the shape of a silvery, four-story-high fish! And why not?<sup>28</sup> I admire architects who embrace semantic otherness and tease into the open the productive excess of meaning.

Though the repression of semiotics allows us to revisit that project as a site of resistance, I am not interested in returning to the error made in the 1970s, when theorists

27. 36° 51' 03.25" S, 174° 45' 54.38" E. A perhaps more complicated situation is the Elementary School of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, (44° 29' 47.4" N, 88° 12' 04.28" W) located about 10 miles west of Green Bay and constructed in 1994. It is in the shape of a turtle. The turtle is an important mythological creature for many First Society people including the Oneida, for whom it represents the North American continent. Somewhat similar is the Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn, that measures 250 meters from head to tail and 30 meters across the belly. The crocodile's jaws frame the hotel entrance, which leads to an expansive marble foyer designed to represent a cool, green pond. The reptile's body houses the guest rooms, which overlook a central courtyard with a shaded swimming pool, designed to represent the crocodile's heart. (12° 40' 13.34" S, 132° 49' 57.55" )  
28. 17° 20' 30" N, 78° 25' 14.3" E. Though this is an example of *architecture parlante*, I am not arguing for a some ethical mandate to make architecture accessible. Pop is not “voice” in opposition to the muteness of modernism. It is a supplement that partially deflates the metaphysical aspirations of the discipline.



TAKESHI HAZAMA, NAHA HARBOR DINER, NAHA, JAPAN, 2005. PHOTO © JORDY MEOW.

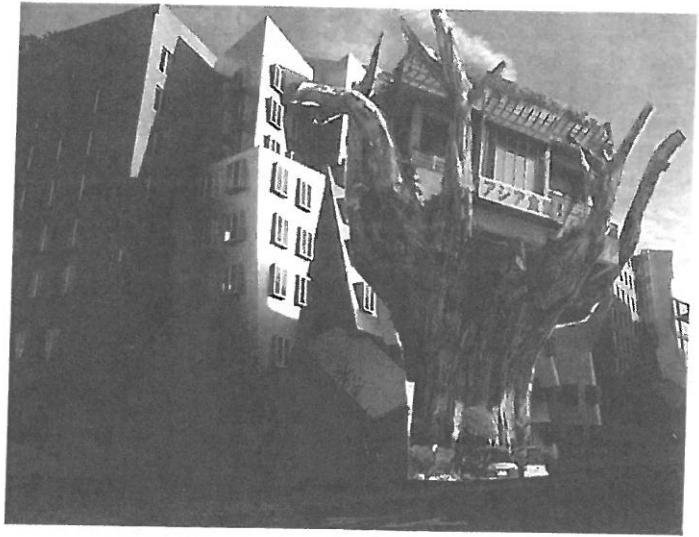
29. 26° 12' 25.8" N, 127° 40' 28.8" E. I thank Norihiko Tsuncishi, who interviewed Hazama for me and made the necessary translations. Takeshi Hazama is a registered architect in Japan, although he never trained as an architect. He considers himself a designer not an architect. Hazama lived for many years in Italy where he worked as an assistant art director for the movie director Federico Fellini. He was an art director for 20th Century Fox in Los Angeles for several years, then went on to produce TV commercials in Japan. Now he bases his business in Japan as a designer-producer. He was part of the team that came up with themes for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Atlanta Olympics. The client for Naha Harbor Diner was Kiyoharu Kakazu, former head of Ryutou Inc., which used to be Ryukyu Seito, a local sugar manufacturing company. It was built by the engineering firm Kuniken Ltd.

wanted semiotics to uncover the secret “code” of architecture. I am not interested in semiotics as a tool of sociological analysis and formal control. I am concerned with an architect’s right to use and abuse cultural signifiers. I am talking about cultural signifiers as bullet holes in the hermetically sealed institutionalities of architectural abstraction.

If the Saudi Arabia pavilion in Shanghai was a test case, albeit in the context of over-determined nationalist imaginaries, then a more satisfying example is represented by the Naha Harbor Diner in Naha, Japan, where Takeshi Hazama designed a truly provocative building.<sup>29</sup> The intention was resolutely positive. According to the architect, the site, located between the city of Okinawa and the airport, lacked good *ki*, or “quality.” The tree he introduced was meant to compensate for this. It represents the gajumaru tree (*Ficus microcarpa*), which grows in the region and is called *Gokujo Kokage* (the Best Shade under the Tree). Hazama envisioned that the tree would be at the center of a small commercial village. But the “tree,” of course, is completely man-made, a three-dimensional trompe-l’œil. The bark is assembled out of painted fiberglass-reinforced panels supported by light-gauge steel frames. Small cracks were made in the panels so that moss could grow from the branches. Eighty thousand small lighting fixtures were also installed on the tree’s skin



MARK JARZOMBEK, NAHA HARBOR  
DINER ON VASSAR ST., CAMBRIDGE,  
2014. PHOTOMONTAGE. IMAGE COUR-  
TESY THE AUTHOR.



and restaurant facade. At night, they illuminate in a fantastical way to define the shape of the tree. The building points to the complex interplay of the “natural” with the “manmade.” But the kicker of the design is the house/restaurant up in the branches. It is not some cutesie tree house but a typical, strip-mall, concrete building, seen from below! The design does not hide the restaurant in the tree but launches it implausibly into its upper reaches, as if swept up there by a great tsunami. One can even see the “foundations” of the building hovering implausibly overhead. A small shrine at the base of the tree completes the design and its semantic ambiguity.

I would take the Naha Harbor Diner one step further. I propose to rebuild it next to the Stata Center at MIT, along Vassar Street. The Stata Center, after all, is typical of Gehry’s unique brand of antiseptic modernism. The new tree will serve as an alien insertion – a Photoshop architecture – that speaks a different language than that of the great architekton.

MARK JARZOMBEK, WHO PUBLISHES  
WIDELY, IS CURRENTLY ASSOCIATE DEAN  
AT THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
AND PLANNING AT MIT, WHERE HE HAS  
TAUGHT SINCE 1995.