

Going Public

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Public Inquiry

Architects have a fondness for things public. Discussions about the rebuilding of the World Trade Center have revolved primarily around the public nature of the site, students want their thesis projects to “explore public space,” and the duality of public and private life has become the binary of choice for academic as well as journalistic inquiry. Increasingly, however, architecture faces a public problem. Our public interest has become schizophrenic of late: theory’s investment in publicness tends toward pluralization, while practice’s public is increasingly marked by an interest in singular consensus. Perhaps most problematic for those of us with egos (and just try to find an architect without one) is that neither pole encourages, or even allows for, architectural assertion. As an instrument of progress, our commitment to a collective civitas risks becoming a posture (instead of a stance). Our altruism may well have become the enemy of architecture’s forward motion, even at the very moment when our understanding of the public has entered a vastly more sophisticated era.

Public Opinion

Unlike “hegemony,” the public sphere is less on the side of rule, more open to opposing views. Unlike “culture,” it is more obviously a site of intersections with other classes and cultures. ...Public sphere invokes “identity,” but does so with more emphasis on actions and their consequences than on the nature or characteristics of the actors.

—Bruce Robbins

By 1993, when Bruce Robbins penned the words above as part of his introduction to *The Phantom Public Sphere*, critical theorists were already fully immersed in unpacking what public might mean. Decades of important writing have profoundly advanced our understanding of the multifaceted nature of this term. We are now acutely attentive to the dangers of oversimplification, homogenization, and marginalization. We know a great deal more today about the tricky terrain of politics, agency, and action. For better or worse, we even know enough to state unequivocally that we frankly don’t know much at all. This writing has had an enormously positive influence upon schools of architecture, including a resurgence of interest in the work of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault, and a production of sophisticated analyses of buildings and cities across broad historic and geographic spans. An inadvertent parallel to this public labor, however, has been the emergent role of the architect as public crossing guard: a generator of and mediator among multiple publics. While mediation has been rendered a productive strategy by theorists like Fredric Jameson and K. Michael Hays or practitioners like Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas, who already long ago understood mediation as an active between (that is, an engaged interaction that itself generates new possibilities

rather than compromise), more often than not, mediation has been misunderstood within architecture to mean a passive between — a simple conciliation between two sides.

Public Safety

We represent a broad-based citizenry, composed of public and private sector leaders, community activists, and multidisciplinary professionals. We are committed to re-establishing the relationship between the art of building and the making of community, through citizen-based participatory planning and design.

—Charter of the New Urbanism

The public design charrette, where residents, practitioners and local politicians work together to generate design solutions, epitomizes what has become a numbing drive for consensus or conciliation within an increasing majority of architectural and development projects. Lower Manhattan, for example, is now under the watch of millions of eyes. Will this hyper-supervision guarantee that the outcome of the WTC rebuilding project will be less banal than the harrowingly dull six schemes initially proposed? Probably not. The implication that the broadest of publics needs to approve the WTC proposition — or that it ever could reach consensus — is an assumption that should raise a red flag for architecture today. This assumption is precisely where architecture's public crisis lies and where architects, schools, and clients should take notice.

Ideologies of inclusiveness and accommodation have unknowingly become the progenitors of such forms of compromise. The neutralities that (don't) steer architectural actions in today's compromise urbanism find a strange resonance in the DNA of our intellectual upbringing. Could it be that *The Critical*, in its contemporary guise, has placed us into a Novocain-laced stupor where we can't recognize the simultaneous dilution and desiccation of what were once potent critical strategies? Recognizing and exposing options, differences, and similarities should not become an end in itself. The richness of alternatives has become an opiate whose ingestion satisfies our desire for the extraordinary, while drawing us ever deeper into a public coma.

Public Image

In the Downtown Athletic Club each "plan" is an abstract composition of activities that describes, on each of the synthetic platforms, a different "performance that is only a fragment of the larger spectacle of the Metropolis. ...Such an architecture is an aleatory form of "planning" life itself: in the fantastic juxtaposition of its activities, each of the Club's floors is a separate instalment of an infinitely unpredictable intrigue that extols the complete surrender to the definitive instability of life in the Metropolis.

—Rem Koolhaas

When Rem Koolhaas defined the "Culture of Congestion" in *Delirious New York*, he looked back to look ahead: he exposed the often unconscious strategy of radical hybridity present in the psychological explorations of Surrealism but also in the normative modernism of American mid-century corporate architecture. In his own projects (La Villette, Euralille, Congrexpo, ZKM, Jussieu, etc.), Koolhaas developed, accelerated, and refined the hybrid ethos, breathing life into this strategy through an aggressive urban and architectural research program. The aura that Koolhaas's work legitimately produced has become something altogether different in its contemporary proliferation as a generalized architectural strategy of our time, however. Radical programmatic juxtaposition has become a mere sign, an accepted stand-in for a radicalized public realm. In its propagation, hybridity has endlessly reproduced the *image* of a pluralized and invigorated public, but its effects have returned once again to the unconscious, repeating *ad nauseum* the cross-programming strategies that were once radical but which are now only facile. Such strategies, which only twenty or thirty years ago created new worlds through the alchemy of juxtaposed conclusion, have become familiar in the hands of the less imaginative, and have only produced the repetitive inconclusiveness of hybridity as a *technique* rather than a *proposition*. The image of radicality in these derivative projects is not enough to veil their overwhelming nostalgia for a remembrance of radicality recently past.

Public Nature

I would rather look at a cultural landscape that is as desiccated as it is in actuality, rather than one that is falsely comforting.

—Benjamin Buchloh

Of course, it is hard *not* to be nostalgic for the radicality of the late 1960s, 70s and 80s. And those working during that period were in turn nostalgic for the radicality of the 1910s, 20s and 30s. Juxtaposition, collage, rotation, dissection, assemblage, and other strategies were the “something borrowed, something new” for the second generation or neo-avant-garde — a new beginning that digested history as it decidedly stepped into the future. Rather than render repetition redundant, which is what the superficial borrowing of these strategies does today, it is time to recognize them as a means embedded in a historical moment, not a timeless endpoint. Furthermore, while there is no doubt that we are fortunate to have inherited the ideologies of the neo-avant-garde, we don’t need to treat them with kid gloves. As the *avant*³ (avant *x* avant *x* avant or neo-neo-avant-garde), we stand face to face with this historical pattern. In order to advance rather than recycle, we should revel in the conscious *manipulation* of borrowed techniques — in addition to forging new ones — in order to reflect our agendas. Our architectural ambitions can be honed through the exploitation of expanded architectural strategies. We are well equipped to identify today’s architectural constituency (architecture’s public) and to articulate architecture’s commitments (are we really so far removed from commodity, firmness, and delight?). Architectural excellence is repeatedly defined according to criteria that are often out of date; the critical project is falsely comforting precisely because it was so important in advancing the discipline. The historical significance of the critical project is diluted, however, when we pretend that it can automatically impart architectural importance, as if criticality were simply a sprinkling of MSG. Today’s cultural landscape *is* desiccated, but rather than burying our heads in the sand by trying to maintain a pretence of a landscape that has past, we need to exploit architecture today in order to contour tomorrow’s cultural landscape.

Going Public

In this kind of world,” Peterson said, “absurd, if you will, possibilities nevertheless proliferate and escalate all around us and there are opportunities for beginning again.

—Donald Barthelme

Wake up. Architects, students and theorists ought to sit up for a moment and take a look around. Thanks to decades of intellectual effort — the acumen of certain architects, theorists, curators, schools, and publications such as *Oppositions* and *Assemblage* — we are surrounded by a remarkably fertile field of *stuff*. Our disciplinary ambitions — formal, technological, material, and intellectual — are poised to flourish. We would do well to shed at least a good part of our Obedience Complex. Lesson learned (really); let’s move on. We know now that the public realm is a heterogeneous field; let’s exploit the possibilities of our own architectural expertise. Rather than lose ourselves among its heterogeneity, we should aspire to change this field’s topography. In order to do so, architects must engage, lead, catalyze — *act*, rather than only *react*. Our expertise lies in defining forms, spaces, and materialities; we should not be afraid of the results and subjectivities (read: *biases*) that such definition implies. Unlike other disciplines in the liberal arts, architecture’s relationship to critical theory is not entirely concentric. Rather than bemoan this fact or conclude that theory has no bearing on architecture —two options that guarantee architecture’s intellectual suicide — architects interested in the progressive project have no choice but to take advantage of our ability to slip in and out of critical theory’s rule. After all, hasn’t critical theory itself defined the rule-zone as, at best, a fuzzy entity? New spatial orders for the public realm thrive in the oxygen of expectant uncertainty. Architecture’s ability to skip across, float on top of, or choose to obey critical theory’s frameworks gives us an exhilarating vantage point. Damn the torpedoes. Full steam ahead.

Literature review

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