

BEAUTY IN THE XXI CENTURY

In contemporary architecture of today, we are witnessing a simultaneous emergence of new aesthetic models. Many of these models are revisions of those inherited from the Modern period, others descend from the systems of contemporary thought, while others emerge from the fascination of a neo-machinic logic and from mass culture, derived as a social and political phenomenon. The convergence of all of these trends often leads to contradictory systems that are influenced by a compulsive nostalgia of the past or future.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this increase in confusion is the fact that, as victims of a modern Puritanism, many are incapable of articulating their proposals as they really are - pure projections of an aesthetic and ethic model. With this in mind, it might perhaps be more productive to study these cultural constructs as tentative aesthetic systems, with the intention of not only clarifying their bases, objectives, references, and results; but also to learn from their procedures and techniques in order to better understand their currency and performance (their capacity to be realized) in the world to come.

One can start from a simple assumption that aesthetic systems result, at least partially, from a gaze which cuts across philosophical systems, plastic and artistic practices, scientific paradigms and new techniques. In addition, these systems can also result from a necessity to give expression to what is perceived as new wishes and needs, for those not satisfied by the preceding aesthetic systems. From this perspective, it can be argued that there are at least seven paradigms which correspond to the most active and attractive fronts identified today in professional practice. A summary of these can be outlined in terms of their requirements revealing a comprehensive landscape that from the start acknowledges their provisional and subjective nature with regards to their names and descriptions.

The seven aesthetic paradigms are assigned as follows: formless, environmental, banal, pragmatic, neo-materic, picturesque, and procedural

7 IDEAS OF BEAUTY / 7 DESIGN TECHNIQUES: UN EXTENSION NY

The studio project proposes a reflection on the architecture of the high-rise of the 21st century which, to a certain extent, also means a search for the differences and similarities from the modern tradition of building in height.

The place is one with a highly determined 'genius loci' as the only site where the two great masters of modernity and the high-rise –Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, as well as Oscar Niemeyer, (the last one alive) – proposed a project each. The site is north of the collective project of the United Nations in New York, one left empty after the completion of the complex, and later built-up in a vulgar manner by Abramowitz.

The challenge lies in conceiving a vertical project, without binds to program, technique, planning restrictions, or scale; that subjects the project exclusively to the pressures of conceiving an object that searches for the beauty for the 21st century, in a place mediated by its past, future, and its institutional, universal, and utopian character.

The studio proposes a successive investigation of the seven aesthetic paradigms mentioned above, associated to seven design techniques, as a methodology which constructs its brief progressively throughout the course of the semester.

FORMLESS

In the recent decades, the fascination for complex geometry in form has invaded the professional landscape. Without a doubt, the extension of digital technology into a many of the processes of material production has further fueled this fascination, habitating not only new forms of conceiving, but also of building – where dihedral geometry becomes one more possibility. Simultaneously, the scientific paradigms have experienced an epistemological change, both in pure, natural and social sciences – described some time ago by Prigogine as the unification of all the sciences into the study of complexity. However, this attraction for complexity and the formless should not be limited in its description as only being an effect of techno-scientific advances. A similar process of immersion into the formless has been detectable, with some level of precision, in modern philosophy (from Bataille to Deleuze) and in different artistic practices fascinated by the organic and scatological – from Ana Mendieta to Paul McCarthy – opening up meanings and territories of exploration that go much further than the technical fetish of the purely formal.

ENVIRONMENTAL

The political rise of environmental questions has meant an important change in course with respect to the modern practices of space making. Both architecture and urbanism have reconsidered many of their ideas in scientific and social terms, due to the problematic nature of a modern industrial model which is insensitive to the unlimited consumption of natural resources.

In fact, this process of increasing sensibility has been induced significantly by the emergence of new professionals (biologists, ecologists, geographers, etc) who have introduced new models and methods (in part brought together by some of the contemporary landscape schools) in the disciplinary environment, previously an exclusive domain of architects. However, a question has yet to be raised with respect to the aesthetic model which these practices imply; a new model transformed by a new construction criteria, by the concept of energy in the project, by the emergence of new types and scales within architecture and planning. It can be argued, that this shift represents a destruction ‘from within’ of many of the modern aesthetic paradigms. This destruction is then articulated from its own scientific technicality, which itself gives rise to these changes, and shifts its heading towards a different direction.

The environment now becomes the object of urgent aesthetic speculation, with a clear set of political undertones.

BANAL

The quotidian has gained increasing currency with respect to market techniques which publicly inflate the values of the 'new' and 'original' along with capitalism refining its methods and extending its scales and dominance. To remain outside of these extensive processes of capital and fashion, while at the same time being immersed in the material practices of a contemporary society, becomes the challenge to many designers which impose themselves a certain level of resistance to a hegemonic logic. To recognize the techniques within a real human experience becomes the challenge, disinfesting our gaze in order to see 'what one wants to see', and not 'what is imposed' upon our view. The aesthetic of the quotidian is similar to allowing oneself to 'drift along', looking with Warhol at each supermarket wrapper as an opportunity for an instant explosion of beauty and avoiding moral judgment. This 'drifting' is perhaps the process of learning to survive in this jungle as the environment that we have been dealt, one built upon non-reflexive and accelerated basis, trash-television, and a consumerist fashion and leisure. To identify its possible beauty, the techniques associated with an independent perspective are equivalent to having the keys to its expansion and enrichment, perhaps building 'from within' a more natural and habitable place.

PRAGMATIC

The technological process in modernity introduced not only a revolution in the methods of production, but also new forms of conceiving philosophical tasks, not trapped in a metaphysical discourse, but finding the reaches of a new productive capability. Pragmatism becomes a bridge between the 'making of things' and the 'purpose of things', between technique and theory. Few forms of knowledge seem more urgent to revisit in a current world characterized by a state of complete mutation, and new technical, digital, and telematic states of becoming; implying a complete change of the physical, political, social and cultural space. In addition, the city, its location, scale, sense, and economy, have changed dramatically, making it necessary to find today new forms of interpreting and orienting these phenomena; forms so efficient, also culturally, are reminiscent of those developed in the sixties for the construction of the American city.

What are our available aesthetic tools, methods, and values associated with an architectural revitalization which pretends to emulate the current surge of philosophical pragmatism? Is there a beauty associated with the forms of organization of the workplace, and the scales and timelines of its construction in the large operations of today? Is there a beauty in the competing metropolitan global markets, and reaching further than the pure subservience to an overriding efficacy of the new medium? Is there a beauty in the vague Koolhaasian terminology of the generic city?

NEO-MATERIC

Matter has ceased to be thought as a passive container of forms and substances capable of producing sensations associated to moral or ethical values. From the Aristotelian hylomorphism we have quickly passed to a holistic view of matter, at times transfigured as the only productive agent for the project. Matter has ceased to be understood only in technical terms, but has extended into contemporary philosophy and biology – as a codifying protocol of the laws of organization,

aggregation, and growth which can completely inform the operations and tactics in the procedures of the project. Yet, as this process is emerging, we are witnessing how information and communication have become privileged material, even if they are in themselves immaterial; extending the limits of the understanding of matter as it has been understood merely thirty years ago. Meanwhile, scientific researchers have opened the possibility of designing new materials by altering the traditional notion of matter through a subjective process designed with abstract parameters, one which is no longer a passive entity in the creative imagination.

Contemporary architects compete for identifying a materiality capable of extending the limits of experience and of the inherited propositional methodologies, opening questions that deserve reflexive consideration with regards to this almost instinctive calling, a true sign of the times.

PICTURESQUE

The elaboration of a unified aesthetic criteria capable of interpreting equally the natural phenomenon and artificial constructs, with the understanding of the aesthetic experience as a narrative temporal sequence no longer based on isolated objects; becomes the primary paradigm which the English Culture of the 18th Century built under the category of the 'picturesque'. This paradigm also extends to the invention of the notion of place, or the active presence of context, in the project. Today, these topics, at least from within the realm of criticism of modernity started in the sixties; characterize with a growing intensity the recent architecture, refurbishing it with a new perspective.

However, the more or less conscious return to an idea of the picturesque, not only describes a recent tendency characteristic exclusively of the professional practice in architecture. Biotechnology deconstructs the antithetical notions of nature and artifice. Bruno Latour reclaims a voice for those things in a modern democracy which propose a political model based in the assumption that the 'genius loci', is now activated by empiricists sensibilities. Doug Atkin and Olaf Eliasson give presence in their videos and installations to natural and artificial phenomenon which incorporate visual and temporal sequences. Toyo Ito reclaims a new primitive hut for the Tarzan of the media-tic forests...

From the moment in which Robert Smithson reclaimed a picturesque tradition for his work with entropic landscapes, many wish to work on an expansion of such tradition adjusting it to a current view and technique. To study these potentials, yet to be explored in this system, allows one to amplify the objectives and fields of work; incorporating in them new methodological processes, extending their capacity and performance.

PROCEDURAL

There is already an old but highly active tendency, which here we will consider as another aesthetic tendency, based in negating the value of objects and traditional systems of aesthetic evaluation which are normally associated with artistic creation. This value is translated in a vision of consistency within the processes themselves, in their conception as a limit with regards to the project. This entails certain complacency with the machinic, or the delegation of decisions to the

operators of the system, and a certain fascination for leaving the formal results inconclusive or open and without autobiographical traces.

The primacy of the process over the object is surely inherited from the analytical thinking which has for some time, been challenging the pragmatism in the academic realm, particularly in America. This tendency is also inherited from a scientific fascination of the first radical moderns 'sachlich', along the lines of Hannes Meyer, who pretended to transform the profession through the emulation of the creative and organizational processes inherent in the new forms of production. It is also because of this, that a tendency which sees as positive the new forms of interdisciplinary collaboration emerges, one which incorporates time as an active variable consubstantial to every process. What can the surge of the 'procedural' over the 'formal' mean today? Is there an 'architecture of process' similar to that of the 'art of process'? Which professional forms of practice are implicit here? Which role is the architect constructing here?

Surely others would propose other categories which are different from those mentioned above, yet it is probable that at the end of the day, these will not find themselves too far from the areas of interest which the previous categories are attempting to describe. What is significant here is perhaps the consciousness that arises in order to face the present, in which similar attempts awaken a visceral rejection by the architects themselves. To face this challenge today appears to be an urgent task in order to advance and to see 'what is beyond'. It is necessary to separate these strands of research in order to study affiliations across them, their own language of inscription, their own techniques and protocols. But it would be infantile to attribute to this, or any other taxonomy proposed here, any normative or dogmatic value. The task at hand is to detect and follow the movement and instability of these categories even as far as to contribute to the erasure of their exclusive character – of 'this or that' – which is often associated to these classifications. Such an effort would help to identify the originality and potential of a hybrid aesthetic model in constant interchange, highlighting the technical and conceptual complexity which such a model implies. It is in this challenge, which perhaps a few years ago could not be dared to be identified, where we should learn to look and see the sense and pleasure of things and processes in which we build; forgetting the singular tense of the words – essence, truth, form – in order to articulate a new 'plural language', 'mestizo', and 'foreign' to transcendence: this is the beauty which is to come, the beauty of the 21st century.

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