

GESTURES WITHOUT MEANING

The destruction of the city by contemporary architectural sculpture

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Since at least the 1990s, events in contemporary architecture have been dominated by increasingly spectacular architectural sculptures. The trend was started by the Guggenheim Museum – the unconventional and oversized ornamental landmark, clad in titanium panels, that Frank Gehry erected in the middle of Bilbao in 1994-1997. This original building, which shook every traditional notion of what a museum building is supposed to be, immediately attracted unprecedented interest from both specialists and the general public – catapulting the previously nondescript Basque city to the status of a desirable tourist destination. Ever since, local government bodies, building developers and architects have regarded the Guggenheim as a successful model and have been competing with each other to create the most extravagant possible architectural designs.

THE TRADITION OF SYMBOLIC QUALITY

There have been iconic buildings throughout the history of architecture. Eridu, the earliest important settlement in Mesopotamia, can be traced back to the sixth millennium BC; it was adorned with 17 remarkable shrines in the shape of ziggurats. In Babylon, the legendary Tower of Babel (which was in fact also a ziggurat temple) was almost 100 meters high, a match for the equally legendary Hanging Gardens of Semiramis, which formed part of the royal palace there. The Egyptian pyramids, with their pure shape and immense size, are also early examples of monumental architectural works that have a bold symbolic quality. The large early Christian basilicas and the medieval cathedrals were both endowed with special shapes, and they deliberately exceeded the scale of the cities they were built in – often causing a certain amount of trauma. The list could be extended indefinitely, including palaces and town halls, theatres and opera houses, and later railway stations and hotels. All of these buildings make use of size, monumentality and originality to attract attention and proclaim their unique purposes.

The more uniform and humble the appearance of the cities in which these buildings spread, the more successful the buildings were. At that time, the city consisted of buildings that were usually just slightly varied repetitions of the same type. Even Renaissance palaces followed this rule, although they were erected explicitly to advance the reputation of each of the local noble families in Florence, Siena and Rome, as well as London and Paris. The families believed they would be able to promote themselves in the city's conditions of mutual rivalry by using a slightly larger architectural mass, an unexpected transformation of the traditional ground plan arrangement, and innovative architectural decoration.

Only extraordinary buildings that were intended for exceptional purposes were therefore able to stand out emphatically and even insensitively from the urban mass. Their special qualities in terms of size and design represented and symbolized the special nature of the buildings' (usually public) function and standards. More precisely, they were the means used to display special qualities of content and spirit. This close association between content and form was undermined by the eclecticism of the late 19th century. The architectural types and styles of earlier periods began to be regarded as freely disposable and were used in quite casual ways. An emblematic example of this tendency is the development along Vienna's Ringstrasse, where the Opera House, the museums, the extension of the Hofburg, the Burgtheater, the town hall, parliament, university and stock exchange present themselves as massive individual buildings dressed in ornate styles. Despite this, the revived historical forms still match the specific purposes of the buildings they enclose. This is particularly clear in the case of the parliament building, with its archaizing classicist design suggesting the republican virtues that were supposed to be cultivated there, or in the town hall, which uses neo-Gothic elements to refer to a mythic folk tradition to which its content is also dedicated. Perhaps even more importantly, all of the self-contained buildings that were erected along the new street, in accordance with the emperor's wishes and as a gesture of

respect for the bourgeois upper classes, fit together to form an urban continuum that is perceived as a unit, despite all its agitation. The individual architectural components are complacently pleased with themselves in their recognizability and in their special features, but they respond to each other in the service of a common urban planning and political idea.

No trace of any of that is left in the showpiece buildings that are springing up in our cities today. Their shapes are arrogantly self-referential and completely detached from any sense of obligation to content. Like Gehry's Guggenheim, a museum may look like a tangled, crumpled metal tent, or it can look like a ziggurat with a spiral ground plan, or like an amoeba. An opera house can look like an oversized clam or a gothicizing crystal, and an office block can look like a lop-sided prism or a gherkin. And the tent, spiral, amoeba, clam, crystal, lop-sided prism and gherkin never form a continuum of any sort, but simply spring up at every conceivable or inconceivable site in the city, in accordance with the capricious and largely impenetrable laws of global capitalism and of ad-hoc provincial urban planning – irreparably destroying the city's peaceful normality.

CHAOS, VANITY AND IRRESPONSIBILITY

Neither this indictment nor its subject matter is new. Even in the early 19th century, Pugin was horrified by the way in which the vast new factories that came with the Industrial Revolution impaired the hierarchy and legibility of the historic city – with chimneys that were even taller than the church spires, causing the deeply Catholic



British architect particular pain. Nearly a century later, in a book entitled *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture*, Pugin's compatriot, the architect and architectural theorist Trystan Edwards, raised a demand for well-behaved contemporary buildings that would respond to each other and enter into

dialogue. In meticulous studies, he tried to establish how much similarity was needed in order to achieve consistency and how much variety was needed in order to avoid boredom. Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets dedicated their major work, *The American Vitruvius: an Architect's Handbook of Civic Art*, published in 1922, to the "cultivated" urban ensemble, which they contrasted with "chaos and anarchy in architecture." And in the 1960s, the Italian architect Aldo Rossi – on the basis of theories developed by Pierre Lavedan and Maurice Halbwachs – declared in *L'architettura della città* that the city mainly consists of a continuum of buildings, from which a few large monuments stand out.

Well-considered and well-justified indictments, warnings and theories of this kind are like water off a duck's back for the great majority of contemporary architects. Inspired and encouraged by conceptual approaches such as that of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard – who promoted a view of architecture as a "pure event" and even claimed it had a subversive quality – these architects, with irresponsible thoughtlessness, are focusing their talents and energies on creating objects that are as memorable, overcomplicated and exhibitionistic as possible, often overlooking constructional and functional requirements and almost always ignoring the building's purpose and context. And even more: opposing that context, since

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it is precisely being different that is the goal. In today's hotly contested architecture market, it is only shouting and exaggerated gestures that seem to be capable of attracting attention. It is visibility, originality, rhetoric and extravagance that count. These are the qualities that ensure that a project has the uniqueness required, and everything else can and must be sacrificed to them.

It is a trend that has various causes, which are only tangentially related to the vanity of architects who are hoping to achieve artistic self-fulfilment. On the contrary – self-fulfilment and authentic subjective expression are increasingly being sacrificed in order to create a spectacle that is completely artificial. Novelty showpiece buildings no longer represent settings into which individual life plans and mental states can be projected; instead, they are based on artificial innovation and a need to produce surprise purely for its own sake.

It is primarily the large institutional property developers who are demanding this and who are exploiting architecture for advertising purposes. This type of building has to be conspicuous and unmistakable, and it certainly has to be different from everything else. Consequently, it has to defy every convention, including the conventions of the city. Far from being condemned by the media, this unscrupulous deal is on the contrary appreciated and even rewarded. And no wonder – the media themselves are caught up in a system in which distinctiveness and uniqueness are indispensable. The more sensational the architectural work they present, the greater their publication's appeal. It profits directly from the extravagance and conspicuousness of its subject matter.

And for the sake of this, most journalists are quite willing to ignore their duty to voice criticism. Having a special quality is extremely valuable; it is even worth painful social sacrifices. A new district is currently being built in Milan, in a central area that used to be home to the trade fair there. Behind the alluring name given to it, "CityLife," what emerges are three high-rise office blocks and three excessively compact and fenced-off "gated communities." The public would never have accepted this scandalous example of urban destructiveness if it had not appeared in the miraculous forms of Arata Isozaki, Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind.

In addition to the developers' need or desire to achieve effective self-promotion and pseudocultural legitimation, there is another reason why contemporary property developers tend to resort to architects who produce buildings with a peculiarly sculptural quality. The originators of these buildings – at least those of the first generation – are a handful of architectural artists who are celebrated as such in the public sphere. The recognition they enjoy serves as a guarantee for the quality of their projects, and that quality consequently does not need to be questioned (allegedly). This relieves the modern developer of the commitment and responsibility involved in critically analyzing the project being commissioned. In the same way that the labels on fashion products attest to the good taste of the people wearing them (in increasingly ostentatious ways), choosing a star architect endows the developer with an aura of refinement. And even more – just like the person wearing a designer suit, developers are spared the effort of developing their own taste.

This is a considerable relief in the field of architecture, in which – as in every art form – there are no absolute criteria for right and wrong, or even for indisputably good or bad. Although architectural quality can be assessed in largely objective ways, judgements can only be reached through reasoned argument. This requires commitment, patience and expertise – virtues that are singularly rare among contemporary property developers.

What happens nowadays when an industrial tycoon, or a city's mayor, appoints Zaha Hadid or Norman Foster to design a building is in no sense a later repetition of what happened when Pope Leo X commissioned Michelangelo Buonarroti or when Alexander VII commissioned Gianlorenzo Bernini. The two popes deliberately chose individuals with personality who had, or were gaining, a reputation for being the best in the architectural profession (as well as in other art forms). The popes laid down a precise and demanding program for the architects, developed it further in discussions with them, and repeatedly interfered in their work – while nevertheless respecting their artistic autonomy and authority. Nowadays, it is not an individual personality but a label and a large architectural office that is selected, or possibly even a commercially astute impresario, and there is hardly any risk involved in the choice. Above all, however: the architects who are selected are left to their own devices with a

usually flimsy program and are expected to turn it into something intended not to be useful, but instead memorable. It is therefore not only work that is consigned to them, but also – and above all – responsibility. In return, they are shown generosity – cost overruns, technical and architectural defects, functional errors and astronomical operating costs are tolerated with nonchalance. One example among many that could be mentioned is Hadid's museum of contemporary art in Rome (the Museo di Arte Contemporanea di Roma, MACRO), which opened in 2009 and was celebrated uncritically by the expensively entertained world press, who described it as representing the entrance of contemporary architecture into the venerable ancient city.

AGAINST THE CONVENTION OF ECCENTRICITY

The fact that despite all of this, the objects produced are not in fact unique in the way desired and intended is due to the process itself and is an irony of fate. Star architects are hired to produce star architecture. Consequently, they do not give expression to the developer's own individuality or to the specific architectural task in the specific context; instead they leave behind their own trademark, dutifully exaggerated. Since they are making a living from the recognizability of their own formal gestures, all they can do is repeat them. The cult of distinctiveness itself thus gives rise to a new uniformity. However, the result is not the relaxed monotony of everyday urban architecture, which exudes a soothing calm and shows off the major monuments all the more effectively. Instead, it is a pretentious repetition of an unvarying state of over-excitement that turns up in an alienated way in the most diverse places like an inappropriate company logo.

And all the more so since the first great inventors of form in contemporary architecture began to be followed by countless imitators, who do not invent but merely copy; and what they imitate is not a rule, but an exception. An exception can only have a transgressive effect against the background of a rule, however. If the background has been lost, the exception becomes a convention itself. The result is the convention of eccentricity that was already witnessed at the Venice Biennale in 2004, organized by Kurt W. Forster with the theme "Metamorph". In the meantime, it has penetrated even to the most unimaginative of provincial towns.

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What is being lost here is nothing less than the city itself. It is increasingly degenerating into a hodgepodge of curiosities that ignores everything that architecturally constitutes the expression of a community. Our cities are able to withstand the unprecedented onslaught of contemporary architecture only because they have such an extensive and magnificent historic substance at their disposal. The historic substance is able to calmly absorb the attacks of the autistic intruders, and the modern city has hooked itself onto that substance like a rampant parasite. But a city can never emerge from a mere accumulation of individual objects, and could not do so even if they were beautiful and poetic ones.

Particularly in an age in which half of the world's population is already living in cities and the numbers are still increasing, urban planning is a task of fundamental importance. If we want to take urban planning seriously, we need to abandon the idea that the contemporary city must necessarily consist of trendy apartment blocks, exhibitionistic office complexes, fashionable cultural buildings designed as theme parks, arbitrary and impractical park facilities and pharaonic, dysfunctional railway stations and airports. We need to set aside our vanities and regard each new building as forming part of a larger collective work. This applies to everyone: architects, developers, journalists and citizens. There will be less scope for individual gestures, but in the newly outlined framework they will still be possible and even necessary – as they always have been throughout the history of architecture. If we work towards that kind of city – a city consisting not of self-indulgent ornaments, not of gestures without meaning, but of meaningful architectural elements that relate to each other – then we will not only be working towards a city on a human scale, a city that is worthy of human beings, but also building a community. ●

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