ARCO214: Critical Text Analysis

The Architecture of Deceit
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Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................ 3
The Architecture of Balance.................................................................................................................. 4
Architecture and Politics.................................................................................................................... 6
Fashion, Feeling and Critique............................................................................................................... 8
Conclusion.......................................................................................................................................... 10
Bibliography....................................................................................................................................... 11
Introduction

It is interesting that a profession which is intrinsically bound to a myriad of wider, external factors can unabashedly ignore so many, so frequently. The analogy of the city of Manchester as an example of this deceit is an apt opening to Diane Ghirardo's essay. It makes no sense that a city, with huge social, cultural and ethnic diversity, naturally shields itself from "the eyes and nerves of the middle classes" (Ghirardo, pp.63) with faux cleanliness and respectability so as to not offend a few moneyed individuals. Ghirardo outlines a number of key architectural discussions in her essay that relate to this problem, but she makes clear that it is no singular manifestation of architecture that is at fault, but a lack of many that pertain a failure in such an esteemed profession.

I will focus on three main points which I think are most significant in diagnosing this 'architecture of deceit'. Firstly, I will consider the conflict architecture has as either an art form or a service, and how this disharmony has produced a failing in the architecture of substance. Secondly, I will seek to understand the extent of the 'role and responsibility' of the architect in the politics of building and how the extremes of both abstinence and control are equally as bad to the wider social and political context. Lastly I will outline how architectural critique has blurred the most natural of perceptions: the architecture of feeling; and how even this cannot save an architect who abides by the status quo.
The Architecture of Balance

Of all the professions in building construction, architecture finds itself in a unique position. Although of common standing to the associated industries of construction and real-estate, it transcends both "by virtue of being an art rather than a trade or a business." (Ghirardo, pp.64) This is not entirely correct, argues Jameson, It is both an art, and a service. "Architecture is business as well as culture." (Jameson, 1995, pp.256) One cannot exist without the other. Interestingly, the symbiotic, dual perception of architecture has polarised a massive difference in opinion. Jameson explains, "there is also, for example, the fundamental tension between architecture as the art of the individual building and urbanism as the attempt to organise the life and circulation of the larger city space... nothing in the other arts quite corresponds to this tension or contradiction." (Jameson, 1995, pp.256) Ballantyne also recognises this division. "The architect who deals with the mundane world has a self-image as a professional, and takes pride in dealing effectively with everyday problems, working through consensus for an idea of the general good. The visionary architect has a self-image as an artist, and takes pride in having strong convictions which must be realised at all costs..." (Ballantyne, 2002, pp.39) This is an apt observation, summarised in his metaphoric analysis of architects as those who either "build nests" or are lured on by the "pillar of fire." (Ballantyne, 2002, pp.40)

Ghirardo recognises that the critical position in America, summarised in the "cogent" writings of William Curtis, generally ignores the wider social, political and cultural considerations in favour of aesthetic and form. "It involves extended visual analysis, concentrating primarily on a few 'important buildings.'" whose visual quality "transcend not only political, social and ideological contingencies, but their own time as well." (Ghirardo, pp.64) The philosopher Gadamer also recognised the superiority of aesthetics, and visual appeal. "The nature of decoration consists in performing that two-sided mediation; namely to draw the attention of the viewer to itself, to satisfy his taste, and then redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies." (Gadamer, 1975, pp.140) Yet unlike Curtis and the art-historian, he argued that aesthetics can actually help in achieving a greater understanding of the wider...
architectural context.

The connection architecture shares with economics and art helps differentiate itself from all the other arts. Jameson highlights, "The other arts react to the market, they somehow work outside of it, and then offer their wares for sale. Architecture seems to be first for sale, and only later on, after it is built, to leave the market and somehow become art or culture as such." (Jameson, 1995, pp.257) He argues that architecture is first and foremost a business; only with time does structure rise to any higher plane of sculptural significance. Curtis tends to disagree, arguing that the masterpieces of modern architecture, "The Robie House - the Villa Savoye, the Kimball Art Museum (pictured)" (Ghirardo, pp.64) are primarily art forms. Their success is in their visual appeal, not from the functionality of their design or their value as a business item. This view can be attributed to much of the modern movement, whose replicated works seem to contain little substance. Jameson wonders, "whether the general low-rise modernist glass-box style of yesterday did not fulfil a symbolic function with respect to the social (and not merely represent a quick and undistinguished financial and spatial solution)... they remain messages, even though their content may be little more than mere repetition." The same can be said of the re-hashed, neoclassical and mock-antique works of 20th century America. As Ghirardo points out, such "aesthetic indulgences simply masquerade as architecture." (Ghirardo, pp.67) Pallasmaa is similarly critical. "Today's fashionable attempts to re-create a sense of place and rootedness in history through application of historical and regional motifs usually fail because of the one-dimensionally literal use of reference and a manipulation of motifs on the surface level." (Pallasmaa, 2005, pp.133) This, 'copy and paste' culture not only impedes originality and innovation, but clinically disregards regionalism, context and all other sociological and political considerations. The disharmony of style over substance, as Ghirardo points out, "reveal architects in full retreat with the actual world of buildings." (Ghirardo, pp.67)

This was not always the case however. Alvar Aalto, one of the most outspoken critics of the modern movement, detached himself from his counterparts by embracing the current. His architecture, "is connected with a general sense of time and place rather than with any specific style or place." Balancing "motifs of history and vernacular tradition" with the language of modernism, he created architecture "remarkably rooted in place of time." (Pallasmaa, 2005, pp.134) The key to his works, explains Pallasmaa, is that "Aalto's motifs are not borrowings; they are re-creations and they merely hint at a possible origin elsewhere." (Pallasmaa, 2005, pp.133) It appears that, only when a balance between substance and form is achieved, can any real architecture be created.
Architecture and Politics

Although the grand utopian schemes of the early European modernists, Le Corbusier's in particular, are now critically considered "unrealistic" in their liberating approach against the confines of social realities. Their aspiration and vision prompted a revision in what people saw as the role of the architect in the societies they served. Ghirardo maintains that these claims were greatly "exaggerated" when considering the reality and success of their schemes. (Ghirardo, pp.66) Indeed, in a regional and sociological sense, "It was not the architects, but engineers and builders of bridges, roads, viaducts, railways... who thought out space [in the modern town]." Yet the fundamental principal of the architect as a visionary gave extraordinary power to post-war modernism. (Foucault, 1982 , pp.371)

The gesture of Le Corbusier's great pilottis was "violent, visible and had a very real symbolic relevance" in reference to it's sociological context. (Jameson, 1991, pp.243) It distanced his grand Utopian schemes from the surroundings of the "fallen city." The disjointed relationship between concept and place is evidence to what Ghirardo terms, his "authoritarian strain" (Ghirardo, pp.66) which is later summed up by Jameson: "Le Corbusier's great pilottis, whose gesture radically separates the new Utopian space of the modern from the degraded and fallen city fabric which it thereby explicitly repudiates (although the gamble of the modern was that this new Utopian space, in the virulence of its novum, would fan out and eventually transform its surroundings by the very power of its new spatial language." (Jameson, 1991, pp.243) Foucault agrees, but is less critical, "He was, I am sure, someone full of good intentions and what he did was in fact dedicated to liberating effects. Perhaps the means that he proposed were in the end less liberating than he thought, but once again, I think that it can never be inherent in the structure of things to guarantee the exercise of freedom. The guarantee of freedom is freedom." (Foucault, 1982 , pp.371) Which brings us to an interesting point, is architecture political?

Certainly, on a conceptual level, Le Corbusier's social programs are inherently political. He himself wrote, "But I pause to go into this adjustment of moral and social concepts. I have the right to, for I am concerned by individual man and by that man living in society; and that is the very foundation of architecture and planning." (Le Corbusier, 1929, pp.273) To be concerned with the social and moral is one thing, explains Jameson, to use architecture purely as a political tool, to 'liberate' or 'free' (or fundamentally control) its inhabitants is entirely another. "I have come to think that no work of art or culture can set out to be political once and for all, no matter how ostentatiously it labels itself as such, for there can never be any guarantee it will be used the way it demands." (Jameson, 1995, pp.258) Foucault agrees with this view. "Men have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom by definition." (Foucault, 1982 , pp.372) The only way in which both can blend is if both community and architect mutually accept each other. "A community must accept the commitment and work so that architectural thinking can take place." (Derrida, pp.322) This is easier said than done, argues Ghirardo, "to suggest that the world contains an ineluctable harmony which an architect need only discover in the realm of forms and feelings is dangerously naive," (comparable to something out of a Walt Disney plot) "it simply does not correspond to the [world] in which we live." Take South Bronx in New York for example, (pictured) "where officials chose to deal with socially troubled, abandoned, and physically scarred public housing projects by spending thousands of dollars to replace broken and boarded up windows
with decorative panels depicting houseplants and window shades, thereby avoiding a serious confrontation with the community's problems."
(Ghirardo, pp.70) Ghirardo's argument reveals a common trend among architects, who distance themselves from the wider political sphere, concerning themselves to the "trivial issues of fashion and taste." (Ghirardo, pp.70) True, the omnipresent, social, stylistic and political mediator of the Corbusian architect seems confined to the world of theory and academia, but instances do occur where the role of the architect and the aspirations of the community occupy similar middle-ground. Indeed, when asked whether or not architecture can resolve social problems, Foucault responded, "I think that it can and does produce positive effects when the liberating intentions of the architect coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom." (Foucault, 1982 , pp.372) In essence, Ghirardo's critique of the modern architect is apt. But, as Foucault points out, there is an underlying strain in the profession to better the world in which we live. Yet only the subtle and considerate architect can balance the socio-political considerations and hope to begin fulfilling that thought.

Underlying social problems: (Bronx New York) "http://static.panoramio.com/photos/original/6647675.jpg"
Fashion, Feeling and Critique

The critic Shermer-Smith produced a particularly potent commentary on the weird world of the academic. "Of all the lands a geographer may visit, there is, perhaps, none so strange as Academia. Academics the world over recognize one another and even if they do not speak the same surface language (French, Polish, Hindi) or even the same middle language (Physics, History, Lit. Crit.), they usually think, feel and communicate in the same deep academic language." (Shermer-Smith, 2000, p154) It is perplexing to think that this group, so far removed from the wants and needs of the general populous, has such an influence over the profession. Indeed, "As society's arbiters of taste, critics also help to distribute society's rewards - prestige and money - to those architects who are willing to produce fresh new fashions destined for elite consumption." (Ghirardo, pp.68) Both Scruton and Ghirardo agree that this practice is partially responsible for turning architecture into an intrinsically hollow, "and ultimately meaningless and consumable artefact." (Ghirardo, pp.66) We are missing the point argues Scruton, "The disaster of modern architecture stems from a misunderstanding of this education, and a disposition to discard the true disciplines of the eye and heart in favour of a false discipline of the intellect." (Scruton, 1994, pp.53) It is the natural emotion evoked by even the most basic of architecture that is important, not the hollow and ever-changing landscape of formalist critique. Consider the steeply pitched roof (pictured), explains Alexander, it is probably the "most natural and simple" thing to build and yet it evokes a "primitive feeling" that is lacking in most contemporary architecture. (Ghirardo, pp.68) King reinforces this view, claiming that our interaction with the architecture of 'everyday' actually defines us as people. "Here, the towns and cities we live in and the domestic space we occupy - homes, houses, apartments, flats, both internally and externally - become instrumental in shaping whom we become." (King, 2004, pp.191)

It is not fashion or the critique argues Jameson, as birth child's of the modern movement, we, as humans are at fault. "My implication is that we ourselves the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject." (Jameson, 1991, pp. 242) According to Jameson, we simply have not yet evolved for the contemporary to harbour any substantial, emotional attachment.

The most primitive of forms: the 'pitched roof' (Wooden Tipi of Sannai Maruyuma, Japan) "http://z.about.com/d/archaeology/1/0/X/-/1/bark_thatched_pit_dwelling.jpg"
However, we must consider the main fault of feeling as an architectural stimulus: individuality. Both feeling and memory are different in each occupant. Jameson notes that "the spatial unconscious can associate anything with anything else - a dead body meaning jubilatory euphoria, a loved one's photography triggering violent xenophobia." (Jameson, 1995, pp. 258) Although extreme in his examples, he successfully highlights the problem of individuality across the collective.

This also correlates with the concept of the house. Bachelard notes the importance of dwelling to our subconscious, "These virtues of shelter are so simple, so deeply rooted in our unconscious that they may be recaptured through mere mention, rather than through minute description... for the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism do no readily lend themselves to description. To describe them would be showing them to visitors. We can perhaps tell everything about the present, but little about the past." (Bachelard, 1969, pp.90-91) The individuality of memory is a problem, explains Ghirardo. A place of high emotional value to one individual could be completely irrelevant to another, simply because the two do not share a universal experience of the past. The architecture of feeling simply cannot please the collective. "This group arrogates the power to decide what you and I will find "authentic," "integrated," "natural," and "comfortable." (Ghirardo, pp.68) Underlying this archaeology of primitive forms is a desperate search, shared with the formalists, for a universal architecture and a universal standard of value." And therefore is no better than the formalists it attempts to surpass.

In practice, however, architecture of fashion overrules any architecture of feeling. The superiority of fashion and the aesthetic over most else is explained by Ghirardo. "It is... far easier and far more tidy to persevere in formalist critiques, thereby avoiding the risk of antagonizing moneyed interest." She deplores this lack of courage, "In none of its manifestations does the profession dare question the politics of building" for fear of rebuke. (Ghirardo, pp.70) The powers that be hold the key to much of architecture’s problems. According to Ghirardo, "only when architects, critics, and historians accept responsibility for building - in all of its ramifications - will we approach an architecture of substance." (Ghirardo, pp.71)
Conclusion

In conclusion, Ghirardo argues that architecture is hampered by the politics of building. An omnipresent, omnipotent power structure controls the profession, masking any desire to confront any serious problems associated with the many spheres of architecture near impossible. I believe that yes, fundamentally the job of the architect is to appease the contractor, and in this sense, one’s hands are tied. As reiterated by Jameson, architecture is business first, then art later. Yet is naive to say that no architecture of substance has been created as a result. Although generally considered unsuccessful, the visionary programs of Le Corbusier reflect an attempt to break the status quo of this higher power, (confronting and replacing the "fallen city fabric") (Jameson, 1991, pp.243) I find comfort in the words of Foucault, who believed that architecture of substance, can and does exist; when the social, political, regional and architect interconnect in harmony: (in, for example, the works of Alvar Aalto.) Yet even when you consider the constraints of formalist critique, revolts in style and the small power elite, I believe architecture of substance can still be sculpted by the considerate.
Bibliography

Word count: 2872.


