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Resistant Geometry, Architecture and Subjectivity.

Tom Loveday

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Can there be a de-subjectivised architectural design practice? This paper draws on some of the issues discussed in my PhD in regard to the relationship between art and architecture. The paper starts with the proposition that with the revival of visually aestheticised architectural design through digital representation, that there is a strengthening of "Enlightenment Subjectivity" in architectural design. It is proposed that this strengthening draws design in architecture away from trends towards de-subjectivisation in other disciplines such as art theory and philosophy. It is expected that the conclusion to the paper will be that, due to this resurgence of Enlightenment subjectivity, there will be, or already is, a revival of avant-gardism in architecture that weighs against the solutions proposed by other disciplines, for many of the social, cultural and environmental problems now about.

Resistant Geometry

Preface

In her book, *Architecture From the Outside*, Elizabeth Grosz is careful to limit her field of concern to the boundary between philosophy and architecture. Likewise, I too would like to limit the field of concern here to architectural theory, rather than letting it be taken as a philosophical work or a work concerning the practice of architecture, from which I have been absent for many years. Having made that point though, no field can be completely contained, so there will be links to other areas that are incomplete in this paper. It is the intention here to ask questions, so perhaps these incomplete links can be taken as questions for others to address.

1. Historical note as introduction.

In his essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism"¹, Kenneth Frampton calls for an architecture of resistance founded on what he calls "critical regionalism"² forming an "arrière-garde"³. Critical regionalism is the engagement of intellectual criticality with regional styles of architecture, as Frampton writes,

The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal [modern, Enlightenment] civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place.⁴ (*Italics in original*)

This of course is a noble attempt to revive site-specificity in architecture against the relentless advance of universal international style, corporate modernism. While Frampton opposes the Enlightenment "myth of progress" and a nostalgic return of the "pre-industrial"⁵, his position rests entirely on the "indirectly" italicised in his concept. This rests, in turn, on the intellectual ability of any particular architect. Frampton, obviously sensitive to this, then writes,

But it is necessary, as I have already suggested, to distinguish between Critical Regionalism and simpleminded attempts to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular.⁶

If architects are not "critical" and "intelligent", his idea will possibly not work, which when set in relation to the words of Leon Battista Alberti that, "if you have simple sons, teach them architecture", produces a curious effect. It seems that one has to guard very carefully against "Populism" that might result from the close proximity of "rhetorical techniques" and "advertising".

This of course is the same semi-flattering appeal to elitism used to unite the intellectual student movement with the peasants in Mao's revolutionary China. Intellectuals are given the purpose of cultural critique which is then added to the naïve but hard work of peasants, thereby establishing a moral tone by which one achieves a "cultural" revolution. In Frampton's revolution, however, the target is the universalising style of modern architecture, which is considered bad because it is a threat to local individuality and cultural specificity, similar to the green resistance to corporate globalisation.

Like most utopian schemes, critical regionalism assumes that a change in architectural subjectivity is possible through an argument that appeals to rationality. In other words the rational argument assumes that an enthusiastic

critical capacity is an essential characteristic of the architect. This is surely a romanticised Enlightenment approach to self-hood for architects. In this approach there is an equation of being (rationally) and doing (rationally) within an assembled subjective form, the architect. Architectural subjectivity is retained while a change in judgment is supposed to be caused by the awakening of a moral conscience, through a kind of hindsight. The architect corrects his or her subjectivity by reflecting upon critical argument in this style of theory. As such, Frampton's argument appeals to, at the same time as addressing, the avant-garde orientation of architects, especially when enhanced by the seductively contrary term "arrière-garde".

Architects however are more complex than this and far less amenable to the consequences of revolution than rebellious students. Few architects can afford to alienate themselves from the mainstream of consumer culture suggested in the level of criticality needed in Critical Regionalism. The result is that Frampton's Critical Regionalism became one more idea (or idealism) submerged under a sea of globalised industrial consumerism and the multitudinous flow of capital into which architects must hurl themselves in order to survive. Occasionally revived by an unsuspecting architect when presenting a scheme, it is certainly no longer a feature of the avant-garde in architectural practice.

This criticism of Critical Regionalism has of course already been made in other places, although, if may I suggest, only with a slightly dulled blade due to the elevated status of its author. I make the point here though, because what is of interest is not so much the concept itself but the subjectivity it assumes. This subjectivity is a resistant and contrary one that forms itself in a rigid and conservative way as a kind of paradoxically transcendental zeitgeist.

Without the experience of its body, architectural subjectivity moves into the world to establish an empire of the mind over and against the ignorant and the simple, using platonic ideals to determine the shape of the world against the flow of nature. Perhaps a closer look at architectural subjectivity is needed.

2. Rebellious Subjectivity

Albert Camus wrote in 1953,

Freedom, 'that terrible word inscribed on the chariot of the storm', is the motivating principle of all revolutions. Without it, justice seems inconceivable to the rebel's mind.⁷

Then Camus wrote,

There comes a time, however, when justice demands the suspension of freedom. The terror, on a grand or small scale, makes its appearance to consummate the revolution. Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being.⁸

This Camus argues leads to the innocent guilt of armed violence by the rebel. Camus argues that this formulation generates an equal guilt from an equal freedom, leading to a cycle or the true meaning of revolution: a cyclic reversion to states of control and oppression, masked by the rhetoric of freedom and supported on a redistribution of hope.

The rebel hopes for revolution by forming a precise cycle of chaos and control to institute the world as they believe it ought to be, as was described in

philosophy by René Descartes in his Discourse on Method, by using an architectural metaphor⁹. For architects this means eliminating the repetition of flows in the world and replacing it with pure representation in time or a perfect cycle of events. Destruction and rebuilding, clearing and gathering, moving and dwelling. What does not fulfil the perfect cycle is not normal in the sense that the cycle becomes a normative form. For example, the seasons become imperfect when they are not "average". Normative tendencies, such as in local government¹⁰ abound in practice and are filled with determinate theories of how-to-design, such as Critical Regionalism.

Variations in the cyclical flows of the world must it seems, be determined in order for us to be free. It is our subjectivity that must be reflected in the world and so the world becomes a place in which flows and changes must be turned to that subjectivity.

But what of subjectivity?

Elizabeth Grosz, in a lecture introducing Deleuze and Guattari's concepts at the University of Sydney in 1999, (at a time when Grosz was writing a book called "Architecture From the Outside") began her discussion with what seemed at the time to be an odd and rather off-hand statement. The gist of the statement is that one ought to get the metaphysics sorted out before making excursions elsewhere. In other words, one ought to have, at least under certain conditions a theory of being. For Grosz the topic was Deleuze-and-Guattari's What is Philosophy?¹¹, which meant that one ought to have some grasp of a theory of being from that work before proceeding further. The lecture was primarily to architects and architecture students. These excursions were to be into architectural theory, which is the main focus of what was then a forthcoming book, Architecture From the Outside. The result of that approach is to ask, "what is a subjectivity?", in the presence of a professional group that is primarily driven by its architectural identity. The significance of the point was largely lost to an audience assured of its subjectivity as a matter of course.

Architectural identity is where the doing of architecture is equated with the being of the architect or "I am an architect because I make architecture". Subjectivity, in this form is primarily about attaining the means of self-expression through architectural design work, or a kind of instrumental subjectivity that is played out against the collective requirements from which the work gains its motivation and the architects their fees.

Grosz's point both in her casual statement and in the book, is that this subjectivity needs to be addressed in order to establish an orientation towards and within which one can know and act. There is something Quixotic about Grosz's persistent engagement with this topic throughout her book that leads one to suspect that it is the message itself that is important rather than the deaf ears upon which it falls. Grosz's persistent message is that architectural subjectivity needs attention, also that some Deleuzian concepts might be useful and that one's subjectivity is not from what one sees within oneself but is how one sees the world. For architects, this is how one understands one's work, at which point Grosz ends the title essay of the book with,

I am not able to address this possibility adequately in specifically architectural terms; it is something for those trained or working in architecture: the question of the unthought, the unbuilt, the outside for architecture itself. It is a question that I believe needs to be posed in all

seriousness whenever the formulaic and the predictable take over from experimentation and innovation, realignment and transformation.¹²

The question of the unthought, the becoming, the in-between (from another essay in the same book as the above quote) or "outside of architecture" as Grosz calls it, is more than the question of form that would be generated within the architectural subjectivities of modern practice. To explore the form of culture is to explore the form of oneself, as a body, as Grosz urges a preceding essay, "Futures, Cities, Architecture"¹³. Time, space and body as elements of subjectivity need to be re-assessed as architectural according to Grosz, but the implications for architects are that they also need to re-address what it is they take up as architectural subjectivity. This is perhaps the conclusion one has to draw from the persistent reminder of gender as an architectural issue in Grosz' work in which,

To the extent that I affirm the centrality of nature to any understanding of culture and architecture, I also thus affirm the centrality of bodies-human and non-human, living and nonorganic-to formulating and refiguring and understanding of the in-between separating and linking architecture and culture.¹⁴

One of the key subjective elements for architects is in the relationship between rebelliousness and avant-gardism and its role in how architects understand architectural design. Idealism for example fits well with avant-gardism because it establishes an ideal space as the venue for ideals. In the perfect cycle, which is referred to above, architecture can become the striving for the perfect expression of assembled ideal geometry within the terra nullius of universal space. This is a dangerous conceptual orientation in a becoming world where the only access to being is in the in-between. In terms of subjectivity it alienates the architect from nature, bodies and indeed the culture within which architecture is to become. Once alienated from architecture, an architect seeks reconciliation through a claim for creative authority of the means of representation of architecture, design. Instead of an architect-builder¹⁵, the architect becomes a designer, which in terms of architecture, is an assembler of representations of geometry, with the craft of architecture shifting from the medium of building to the medium of representation.

The rebellious pursuit of representational techniques has now lead to the almost pure cycle of representation where any "scanned" object can become a building, as has been seen in recent buildings by leading architects.¹⁶ Labelled "deconstructive", this architecture addresses the conceptual conditions under which architecture is made, such as the grid, the cube, solid-void, inside-outside, even the dynamics of the geometry of city streets as well as many others. These conceptual conditions are the site for rebellion for architects and the site in which architectural subjectivity is expressed.

Architectural subjectivity asserts its rebellious nature through avant-gardist rhetoric. This rhetoric is a conventional technique of theorising rebellion in the form of the opposition between collective interest and architectural self-interest. It is the breaking down of edifices within a geometrical cultural framework. The persona of the designer-architect is isolated and against the world and works within the forms of geometry-of-resistance to, mastery of, and dominance over nature, which assemble as three aspects of Enlightenment subjectivity.

3. Rebellious Geometry.

Like avant-gardism, rebellion has been part of the hoped-for self-image of architects since the Renaissance. Architecture as a public act, however rarely makes possible the kind of self-expressive act of artists, which indeed often lures architects away from the profession. Under Kant's heady flow, design-as-architecture retains a purposiveness within its representation in that has an end towards which it directed. Art instead is not representing by necessity and so is not by necessity purposive (although there have been theorists, especially revolutionary ones, that disagree with this). Individual self-expression is set against the public need for architecture invested with collective subjectivity. The resolution is a state of compromise that is dominated by collectivity until architects gain power, in which case architectural self-expression becomes dominant.

Grosz asserts, in her essay concerning the relationship between architecture, nature and culture¹⁷, that this turns architects away from the nature to which she refers, in which there are bodies and flows,

Architecture thus always borders on a nature that is often not acknowledged as such: indeed, the more we concentrate on architecture's position within a cultural context, the more we obscure the very peculiar nature on which it relies.¹⁸

Into the relationship between nature and culture this alienated architectural subjectivity asserts its creative authority through representations of assembled geometric concepts. In a world of nature from which architectural subjectivity has been alienated, a new world of geometric culture emerges within which a new dynamic of becoming and resistance emerges. It is a world of represented geometry, within which architects rediscover becoming within those representations.

Cities become dynamic geometric systems where becoming is replaced by a divergence from the perfect cycles of geometry, that can be either contained and controlled or adapted to and worked within. Architecture becomes a resistance to the flow of city geometry, rather than to the flows of nature, as has been found with buildings like Federation Square by LAB Architects.

LAB Architects, 2001, Federation Square, Melbourne Australia.
Image by the author.

In terms of context, the building is concerned with reacting to the geometry of the city with its own discordant and rebellious geometry. Even in terms of issues of sustainability, the building uses a primal architectural symbol of geometric resistance to the world, the "Labyrinth", as its basic concept. The labyrinth, with its one path in and one path out, systematic turns and denial of difference, strips away the world before subjectivity through a repetition of control, leaving one in the presence of the unseen, the abstract.

Thus the rebelliousness of architects finds a new voice in the breaking of the geometric constraints of rectilinearity of the city and to do this, uses argument of becoming that are applied to the animated computerised geometric representations of culture, inspired by Peter Eisenman's texts and Daniel Liebeskind's buildings. Avant-gardism, rather than being re-examined as architects move to a new embodied form of subjectivity, becomes even more entrenched within Enlightenment architectural subjectivity.

4. Architectural Subjectivity

Architecture has a long history of scanning philosophical concepts and turning them into rhetorical devices for the assertion of various formal precepts. Modernism in architecture for example is a blend of abstract formalism and positivism. The subjectivity of architecture seems to elude the attention of architects when they pursue philosophical concepts for architectural theory.

To show how this might occur, one needs to describe the ontological assemblage of architecture itself - which is to describe what it is that architects are equating themselves with. My argument is that architects already firmly identify with resistance but have been driven towards rhetoric within an ancient formulation of resistance that consists, within Enlightenment terms, of the conceptual assembly of transcendental forms to be represented in buildings placed against nature, the becoming.

Enlightenment architecture is the resistance against becoming that calls up geometric assemblies within nature in the form of stone, timber and in more elaborate technology, glass and steel. Geometry is assembled in these materials, gathered together within the conceptual clearing under the terms of Kant's *sensus communis* as architecture. The Enlightenment world is organised to resist the flows of nature and form some part of the world into mankind's form, to give subjectivities a space in which those flows are not present, a timeless, spaceless place, a Cartesian void beyond and away from nature. It is an interiority in which subjectivity can find its own reflection or "culture" in the sense of a sustaining medium. This is the safety of a space in which nothing changes, nothing moves and one's reflection always, like Dorian Grey's painting, never shows the signs of change. The most valued architecture is that which holds this position the longest, even at the cost of its material. So Plato's cave shows a shadow play where stories fill the dark spaces of the shadows giving roundness to their forms, making them seem real.

But interiority, like Plato's famous cave, is only lit from the outside, through the opening in which stands, with back turned to the outside, the prophet, the seer the caster of shadows on the wall. Its interior is filled with a lesser light, the light of reason that is more tolerable than the harsh and unforgiving light of reality. Even electric light however, comes from the outside and leaves us with ash and dead gasses to fill our atmosphere. The interior becomes a play of shadows in Plato's cave controlled by whoever stands in the doorway. Cartesian interiority is merely a case of protecting the back of that figure who stands making shadow puppets and gestures that appear to us as forms dancing about in our interior. Architecture is rhetoricised to protect that doorway figure, half in and half out of the cave.

But in that half in and half out state there exists a confusion between the shadow and the figure, the story and the shape, which is only clarified by complete rejection of a worldly interior, such as it is our body. The figure itself becomes a shadow, a shadowy figure and a subject within its own interiority or a dwarf of its self, as Nietzsche so cruelly put it.

In architecture, the subject makes reflections of itself because reflections are the sole province of the visual in its lens-like disembodied form, thereby satisfying the need for a shadowy self. Pure speculation is the emblem of a ghostly subject creating pictures to fill in the shadowy outline it has made of itself on the wall of its interiority. Architecture of pure speculation then is a representational narrative, a tale to fill the shadowy ideals within a void-interiority of Platonic subjectivity.

Resistant geometry is the form of subjectivity in which pictures fill out that shadowy figure. It provides cities with the sense of city-ness that is best seen from above, where its geometry can be seen spreading across the flow of nature, crossing, dividing, determining as resource; taming, managing, resisting, assembling for reflection.

Becoming, however, is not so easily arrested. It resides still in all aspects of being: from the slow decay of sandstone to the rapid sag of one's flesh, from the weedy sprouts of concrete cancer to the rusty burst of mould in carpet. The work of resistant geometry is that of a collective Sisyphus, humanity forever rolling back the world only to have it leaking down the walls next time it hails. If architecture is going to re-enter the world of becoming, it is going to have to re-assess its specular subjectivity and all that that entails.

5. Embodied Space.

When a subject looks into a mirror, it does so in the split, Lacanian way that sees both an identity outside time and space, the Dorian Grey image, but does so only under the terms of seeing becoming and so it also sees the gradual change of the its body, much to the frustration of those with a desperate desire for a body to match their faith in transcendence.

There is no answer to an architecture of embodied space. To attempt this is to make the same mistake that the Enlightenment did, which is to confuse being and doing within a subjectivity. This leads to the claim for universals, whereas becoming is always and already particular, divergent and repetitive. All that can be argued is that a position or orientation of embodiment is necessary in some way so that this planet remains reasonably habitable.

Architecture then becomes specificity of work within this subjectivity. In order to question subjectivity from the point of view of practice however, some suggestions can be made for consideration by architects.

Questions:

Can form be anything other than geometry clothed in material?

Can architecture relinquish the privileged blank site or "terra nullius" as the place of the purest work?

Can architecture relinquish its professional status and associated power without losing its authority?

Can "function" become the result of architecture rather than its motivation?

Can architecture be designed by collaborations or even committees?

- 1 Frampton, Kenneth, ?, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", in Foster Hal, 1998 (first published 1983), *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The New York Press, New York, USA, pp. 17-34.
- 2 Frampton, Kenneth, ?, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", in Foster Hal, 1998 (first published 1983), *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The New York Press, New York, USA, pp. 22-26, §3 "Critical Regionalism and World Culture".
- 3 Frampton, Kenneth, ?, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", in Foster Hal, 1998 (first published 1983), *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The New York Press, New York, USA, p. 22. The term "arrière-garde" is French for the guard that looks back to protect the rear. During retreats, this is what was formerly the front of the army.
- 4 Frampton, Kenneth, ?, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", in Foster Hal, 1998 (first published 1983), *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The New York Press, New York, USA, p. 23.
- 5 Frampton, Kenneth, ?, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", in Foster Hal, 1998 (first published 1983), *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The New York Press, New York, USA, p. 22.
- 6 Frampton, Kenneth, ?, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", in Foster Hal, 1998 (first published 1983), *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The New York Press, New York, USA, p. 23.
- 7 Camus, Albert, 1971 (first published 1951, first English translation 1953), *The Rebel*, Penguin Books, London, UK, p. 76.
- 8 Camus, Albert, 1971 (first published 1951, first English translation 1953), *The Rebel*, Penguin Books, London, UK, p. 76.
- 9 Descartes, René, (Clarke, Desmond, trans.), 1999 (first published 1637), *Discourse on Method and Related writings*, Penguin, London, pp. 12-13, 18-19.
- 10 Town Planning has through a mild form of revolution become urban design, and yet it is still the same people doing the same jobs. They have merely refigured what their principles are in a process of apostasy and zealotry in which there is yet another appeal to an idealistic essence, the community.
- 11 Deleuze, G, and Guattari, F, 1991 (Eng trans 1994), *What Is Philosophy?*, Columbia University Press, NY.
- 12 Elizabeth Grosz, 2002, "Architecture From the Outside", in Grosz, Elizabeth, 2002, *Architecture From the Outside, Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, MIT Press, Mass, USA, p. 73.
- 13 Elizabeth Grosz, 2002, "Futures, Cities, Architecture", in Grosz, Elizabeth, 2002, *Architecture From the Outside, Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, MIT Press, Mass, USA, pp. 49-53.
- 14 Elizabeth Grosz, 2002, "The Natural in Architecture and Culture", in Grosz, Elizabeth, 2002, *Architecture From the Outside, Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, MIT Press, Mass, USA, p. 100. It is notable that this is where Grosz carefully places the first person pronoun so that the central concept of the book is clearly attached to a particular orientation (hers) at this point in the essay.
- 15 It should be noted here that the architect-builder is a continuing subjectivity but one that is of lesser status than the architect designer.
- 16 For example Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim Museum and Experience Music Project.
- 17 Elizabeth Grosz, 2002, "The Natural in Architecture and Culture", in Grosz, Elizabeth, 2002, *Architecture From the Outside, Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, MIT Press, Mass, USA, pp. 91-105.
- 18 Elizabeth Grosz, 2002, "The Natural in Architecture and Culture", in Grosz, Elizabeth, 2002, *Architecture From the Outside, Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, MIT Press, Mass, USA, p 101.

