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IDEAS | BUILDINGS | PROJECTS

[1983 -1999]

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Murali Ramaswami | Selected Work

The line that belongs to the table

When I say, e.g., that the table is a yard long, it is extremely questionable what I mean by this. But I presumably mean that the distance between THESE two points is a yard, and that the points *belong* to the table. (italics: my emphasis).

L. Wittgenstein

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There are those who want a text (an art, painting) without a shadow, without a "dominant ideology": but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text (see the myth of the woman without a shadow). The text needs its shadow: this shadow is a bit of ideology, a bit of translation, a bit of subject: ghosts, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce is own chiaroscuro.

Roland Barthes

The Critical: architecture with a capital C

The painter is purer. He has less options
John Hedjuk

The proliferation of architectural publications has transformed our perceptions of meaning and architectural experience. The printed word has long superseded architecture as a primary from of communication. And, images, in the form of ubiquitous architectural photographs, are consumable and easily digested, leading to the visual, rather than the tactile are consumable and easily digested, leading to the visual rather than the tactile and spatial, sense of architectural reality. The crucial question then is, how does one experience architecture?
Foreword
Architecture and Abstraction
Pratt Journal of architecture 1985

J.K: What is guiding your design in these six projects?
P.J: In some of these projects I concentrate on the effects of colliding forms or breaking forms apart, in others I am interested in playing with new shapes and odd angles.
J.K: How do you assess the current design environment?
P.J: Well, it's clear enough we are in a mess. There are many directions to follow as there are architects. Until some new god completely captivates the architectural imagination as it did in modernism, things will not change. On the other hand, what an exciting mess it is!
An interview with Philip Johnson by Jeffrey Kipnis
Architecture+Urbanism April 1992

A critical pursuit of architecture is imperative. This is the responsibility of one possessing fluency over the medium; the fluency that Kahn distrusted. It is a fluency that is not merely possessed by the individual designer, but one that comprises the resource of the "entire catalogue of formal possibilities, from historical quotation, to the invention of new forms, in the service of aesthetic experience."(Kipnis). Without critical exploration arbitrariness threatens to ensue. Should we follow Johnson's lead and focus on building essentially mono dimensional aesthetic skills to partake in this (as he calls it) "exciting mess," or, accept his equally disturbing alternative and wait for a new architectural "God" to emancipate and reestablish a direction? Neither would appeal to those are who are not prone naturally to prolific production of visual excitement; of "fun"- which in itself not by any measure of morality wrong, but as an end-all implies a surrender of our minds overwhelmed and incapable to positively engage cultural complexities through architecture. Such engagement is possible without extremes of utopianism or fatalism. Critical thinking, following Cartesian trust in equanimous distribution of common sense, seems possible to be encouraged and sustained.

Peter Eisenman in a 1986 lecture makes a charged appeal for a critical approach to architecture and notes a contemporary condition wherein architects have "abdicated the responsibility of the debate in favor of being the decorators of power." While his remarks are directed toward the ideological underpinnings of post modern vocabulary, Philip Johnson's University of Houston Law School, figuratively Deconstructive and yet patently dissociated from its ideological, theoretical agenda serves as an example of indiscriminate formalism, of "decoration of power"- a criticism that might delight Johnson. Stylistic and emptied of content, his design serves to substantiate his claim (as represented by Kipnis) that "however much spirituality, ideology or theory may act as motives for the investigation of the formal possibilities, in the end, none of these are ever actualized in the material form." It is in this last, in its simplistic expectation of architecture as representational medium, that a critique of the aesthetic approach can be found.

Can architecture be primarily a visual art tainted by function? And, if architecture must transcend this "mere" aesthetics of material form or the burden to re/present spiritual/ideological/theoretical notions, in what way can it then be critical?

Ignoring ideological, spiritual, political substructures that are operative both at the levels of generation of new aesthetic paradigms and their subconscious influence upon new ones through cultural diffusion, is the fundamental fallacy of a "pure" aesthetic mode. Objectified and made mute, architecture is regarded a source for aesthetic consumption- one way transaction untainted by values, world-views and such. After the fact of a paradigmatic shift, an aesthetic does become "available" for consumption as well as for exploration. Even while consciously favoring the non-archetypal, non-universal forms, an *a priori* visual agenda is determinism at odds with the goal of particularities of place, portending a particularity based on the notion of aberration.

One critical pursuit may be posited: a reflective non-representational mode deriving from an experiential perspective which does not naively ignore or disregard other modes (historic, scientific, theoretic, scientific, cultural/connotative etc.) of knowing but

merely holds them at a critical distance. As Kahn said "Knowing is one thing, Knowledge is another." This distancing of institutionalized knowledge (and yet within its context) should occur concurrently with a subjective process of (re)search to seek personal interpretations that will still evince traces of inter-subjectivity. Even as the term *poetic* suggests a deeply personal expression filtered through individualities, poetry does not threaten us with a condition of severance; of disjunct/alienated individualities. Evidenced, too obvious it may be to add, by the fact that poetry connects with many a reader. Conventional modes of analysis and synthesis, while of irrefutable value, can be held in suspect in a manner that Goethe distrusted tools of science.

Empirical/experiential understanding resists description and defies visualization and therefore seems impossible to engender so long as architecture is seen as a medium of representation instead of as a continuing attempt to realize spatial embodiment of experiences. The mechanical, predominantly visual practice of design attempts implies prefigured, predicted emotional reactions. The admission of temporal and existential (full gamut of senses) dimensions does not have to reject the guidance of formal and tectonic traditions, but can instead offer a coherence in the usage of the visual medium and reduce "catalog shopping."

With changing perceivers and their perceptual frame of reference, "reality" (or knowledge) is in a constant state of flux and seems often contradictory. Validation of singular, exclusive, and unchanging reality is the objective when one mode of knowledge dominates. Subjective emphasis as a relativist approach (self justified by contemporary pluralism) creates another form of disjunct reality. A reflective approach that employs subjectivity to examine experience can begin to search for a poetic existence of architecture in the intersection of cultural (conventional) and personal realities. The pre-reflective process of experiencing architecture, the unconscious process of transcribing architecture onto ourselves and vice-versa is the core of human-place relationship. The interest here is to recover and apply this mode of "personal" knowledge in the critical production of architecture.

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One conception: As I can infer my spirit (character, will) from my physiognomy, so I can infer the spirit (will) of each thing from its physiognomy.

Now is it true (following the psycho-physical conception) that my character is expressed only in the build of *my* body or brain and not equally in the build of the whole of the rest of the world?

L. Wittgenstein

MATERIALITY MAKES OUR THEORETICAL BROODINGS OF OPPOSITIONS FUTILE. THE IDEALIZING AND UNIVE

The act of a line could be (poetically) interpreted not only as connecting two (or infinite number of) points, but drawing together of realms that were previously *unrecognized*. Singularity and dualism become both defined in an instance. The act of the line could also be the act of oppression, division and cutting. The duality of potential is what makes the phenomenon of line a spring-well for architectural exploration.

Projects deal with dualities as oppositions or even absurdities that require architecture as the apparatus to hold them in a sort of dialectic suspension rather than be resolved. There is an attempt here to engage inherent contradictions through an architecture that neither represents, nor hides them in its physiognomy.

Architecture begins through the intersection of the given brief (the universal presented as true) and the interpretive program (the particular as an agent of critique). There is an interest here in an overlay of readings of the program to create a place of substantial depth to engage everyday life with more poetic possibilities than what a static program suggests.

RSALIZING TENDENCIES OF ORDER IS BALANCED BY THE NATURAL DETERIORATION OF MATERIALS, THEIR