On Sufficient Density, or, Things Approximate a Wall

The exterior is always an interior…in architectural ensembles, the elements of the site itself come into play by virtue of their cubic volume, their density and the quality of the material of which they are composed, bringing sensations which are very definite and very varied…The elements of the site rise up like walls panoplied in the power of their cubic co-efficient, stratification, material, etc., like the walls of a room.[1]

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SPACE FIRST / OBJECT FIRST

Corbusier is not clear. Which comes first? The room or the walls? Room first is the usual way to understand architecture: there exists a room, an abstract unit of space for people, and walls are built to fit this *a-priori unit*, fitted and bespoke-cut to its contour. The profession of architecture is codified like this, where abstract systems precede the objects that are fit to them. NCARB exams for licensure are named things like "Building Systems," "Structural Systems," and "Building Design and Construction Systems," instead of "House Test," "Column Test," and "Nail Test."

There is another way to read a room, though: walls first. It is possible to imagine architecture as sufficiently dense accumulation of things.[2] That is, instead of a room, a hall, a plaza, or any other abstract unit of space that organizes solid material around itself as a fortifying container, the empty zone for people is the residue left over between a collection of designed solids, which, by virtue of the way they have accumulated, leave a gap between them that affords places and uses. Architecture is always susceptible to this reading. Sometimes it offers itself easily like a primitive hut built by angels who stack whole tree trunks—each as separate, unitary, and incidentally aware of the sticks above and below as a pile of *Davids*—atop one another to produce shelter. Other times the *object first* reading a more difficult exercise, like Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* which, as an array of cells distributed with respect to an imaginary eye, is such a perfect translation of abstract order into material that its difficult to see the rooms for all of the circles, center points, and radial systems of subdivision. Even prison cells though, eventually yield. From the abject prisoner's point of view, he is stuck between four walls, a floor, and a ceiling.

The ease of this reading, its flippant and obvious universality, give it the aspect of a Zen *koan*[3]: "architecture is a sufficiently dense collection of things"—there's an incantatory ring to it that conjures scented smoke and a bell. The words do not constitute an act of discovery so much as an absurd form of enlightenment that provokes an unsettling "great doubt"[4] about a built environment that appeared to be completely settled in terms of the values that motivate its construction. Given the ease of alternating between *space* and *object* points of view,

does the difference matter? Well, what if? Pursuing the koan to its end, using it as a first principle of design instead of a merely "possible reading" post-facto might yield an architecture characterized by three doubts.

1. **Envelope Doubt**. Without the idea of discrete volume to be bounded with walls, buildings open up. Things at the perimeter exert space-defining pressure in all directions, making it impossible or at least arbitrary to define an absolute envelope. A building is a loose territory, "that place over there between…" defined by the pressures of implication. Delineating property ownership gets difficult as everything is on the verge of being held in common.

2. **Preposition Doubt**. As the envelope falls away, people move between the outsides of solids, continually navigating a series a exterior, public elevations. A kind of total publicity prevails no matter whether a person is technically inside or outside. Sure, the exterior is always an interior, but the interior is always an exterior.

3. **Completion Doubt**. As a collection of things, a building can be edited. Operations like addition and subtraction are easy and never threaten the unity of the building as an organism; re-curating is as easy as reshuffling or redecorating. Buildings are open and extensible without being repetitive. It is the pipe dream of ad-hoc-ism with none of the organizational superstructures—scaffolds, grids, pod stacks—that make the utopian ad-hoc architecture of the 60's and 70's numbingly intolerable.

WE HAVE ALMOST BEEN HERE BEFORE

Despite the implausibility of a built architecture that seriously entertains these doubts, certain periods have come close, particularly the early 18th century rococo as it was practiced in Bavarian churches. The church of *Saint John Nepomuk* built by the Asam brothers in Munich over a period from 1733 to 1746, while still a building, comes close to an inversion of the usual relationship between space and objects. Inside, it is difficult to identify a precise location of the building envelope or to figure out what exactly constitutes a room. The difficulty unfolds in a progression. The first impression is of a crust of ornament so dense that it is difficult to name the walls, columns, arches, or any familiar architectural componentry that would normally indicate the presence of an abstract ordering system like a column grid or a bay of space. After the initial shock of encountering such an enormous quantity of things, the next impression is that it is impossible to determine the location of the building envelope by referring to a fixed point of reference outside the building. Natural light from the sun, for instance, emanates from somewhere above, but it is not clear from where. A window behind the alter is one of the few places where a visitor can see a plane of glass dead-on, but the light coming through it doesn't appear to be from outside.

Working to find the limit of the building in the opposite direction from the inside out is equally difficult. On every vertical surface there are complex sequences of bas-relief objects passing through one another that make it difficult to establish what is on top of what. At the South edge of the church, for instance, there is a pulpit that appears to be clipped onto a marble surface, in front of a niche that affords a place for the priest to stand. At four corners where the pulpit rests against the marble, figures protrude as if from a space that is somehow wedged in the vanishingly small gap between pulpit and marble. But this space, apparently just a crevice, has miraculous and contradictory properties. Its dimensions and physics can be inferred from the variable expressions of the figures: a maid, serene, floats out from a roomy aerie, a stolid ox, impassive, provides no clue as to whether it carries the burden of the weight above, and a swan, grotesque in its agony, is crushed. The literal layering of objects is complicated by the drama of their apparent relationships to each other. In this mixture of the real and the fantastic it is clear that the wall, wherever it is in the Asam Kirche, has two obligations, one to make a container that keeps the rain out, the other to play out an involved

series of relations between sculptures. As they squeeze and shape the space around them, the objects are partially irresponsible to the project of space-making and they are also are up to something else not completely beholden to the project of making a wall. Although this divided purpose engenders the most radical doubt—"who is this for?"—the effect is not anti-human. There is a pleasant aspect to the self-involvement of the objects that comprise the Asam Kirche, "an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter....and in a word a silence which belongs to the realm of fairy tales."[5]

IT ENDED BEFORE IT BEGAN

The Bavarian rococo did not survive the 18th century. The death of the style left the project of *object first* architecture incomplete. In his *Livre d'Ornamens*, Messonier fantasized on paper about the possibility of rocaille ornament breaking free of spatial organizations like rooms altogether to "become an independent object...[like] a house or a tree or a rock,"[6] but real building never made it that far.

What caused the rococo's collapse and a subsequent reversion to *space first* architecture of neoclassicism? In his Bavarian Rococo Church, Karsten Harries gives an account of the reasons: the dawn of the enlightenment no longer tolerated the public display of the bizarre and illogical; 18th century Bavaria, impoverished and backward with an incredibly high infant mortality rate, needed to divert expenditures from useless craftsmanship to projects for social welfare; the state, needing a more modern economy, had to find ways to break the superstitious beliefs of the peasant classes that kept them from productive work in favor of anticipating heavenly reward in the afterlife. Of course, of course—all of that has the ring of familiarity. While I am not interested in debating the accuracy or inaccuracy of Harries' explanation, I am interested in the quality of inevitability that attends the reasons he gives. They have a the natural appeal of inevitability: the tonic to rococo excess was naturally to spend and decorate less, to redirect work away from the production of things and toward useful activity, to displace superstitious belief in the power of inanimate things with rational principals that carefully segregate the living and nonliving worlds. Underneath this natural quality is an old-fashioned metaphor for good housekeeping: round up and expel the offending pile-up. This tidying up is literally what happens at the level of design—fewer things would populate the interior of future churches—but it is also what happens at the level of the history of ideas. The investigation of cause, the identification of the motivating forces of history, turns way from design and toward some other field of "harder" social science like politics, economics, or sociology. The rococo is reduced to "an epiphenomenon of social history,"[7] allowing us to purge it by turning attention to the underlying abstractions that motivate the production of things instead of paying attention to the things themselves.

It is not just a tidy blankness that the cleanup effort achieved, though; there is something else. Something was expected of emptied space itself. In 1770 Elector Max III Joseph issued an edict for new church construction:

> In order to prevent all exaggeration when a new county church needs to be built, and so as not to leave the planning of the church to the self-centered whim of some priest or official, but rather to assure that a thoroughgoing uniformity in church architecture be observed as much as possible, following the example of Italy, we shall let experienced and skilled architects provide different model floor plans and elevations...so that in this way a pure and regular architecture my be preserved, eliminating all superfluous stucco-work and other often nonsensical and ridiculous ornaments and showing in altars, pulpits, and statues a noble simplicity appropriate to the veneration of the sanctuary.[8]

The principals of good housekeeping are all here. "Plans" will be made, "pure and regular," "eliminating" the "superfluous," the "nonsensical," the "exaggeration," the "self-centered

whim." But something is gained in the evacuation. In the emptiness there will be "a noble simplicity appropriate to…veneration." The void itself will carry something "noble," its ether will contain the principals of social good and correct behavior. We will remove the bad things and then bad actions will not happen in this clean house. A superstitious faith in the power of things is replaced by a superstitious belief in the cleansing, morally fortifying power of the void. Under the rule of the housekeeping metaphor, architecture can serve the public good or become absorbed in the production of things, but it cannot do both.

A DIFFERENT WAY TO MAKE SPACE

Is this choice required? Does the metaphor govern a real exchange of value systems? In *Collage City,* Rowe and Koetter identified similar housekeeping rhetoric in the rhetoric of the Modernist *avant-garde*: "Let us eliminate the gratuitous; let us concern ourselves with needs rather than wants; let us not be too preoccupied with framing the distinctions; instead let us building from fundamentals."[9] In exchange for the act of cleaning up, though, modern architect at the scale of the city produced an "interminable naturalistic void." The social good intended in the act of cleaning up did not have a medium that would sustain it or register its presence after the act itself was complete. Space was the result, but it contained only the image of the good intent, an "alleged city of freedom and universal society."[10] The reason was two-fold: no matter the intent, emptiness tends to reify the value of the object in a sparse field; and without a density of objects to impinge upon space, to squeeze it, to communicate, the ether of space itself is not full of social function, does not in fact exist any more than *aether*—it is just empty. As it was to play out in the 20th century, at least, the housekeeping metaphor did not regulate a real choice.

In fact, the opposite seems to be the case. While Rowe and Koetter were not writing a book in favor of rococo planning principals at an urban scale, it is possible to co-opt them as allies and re-read *Collage City* as a manifesto linking a congestion of objects to positive societal effects—provided their arguments are allowed to make two extensions. First, extension of the argument across a greater range of scales. Whereas the ideas in Collage City are applied at something larger than the scale of a city block, it is also possible to apply them to a single building or even just a collection of building parts. This is to say that the emptiness inside *Crown Hall* is more or less the same as the emptiness in the park outside the *Unitè d'Habitation*. It is also to say that *Collage City's* figure-ground diagram of Parma looks a lot like a wall section of the Asam Kirche. Second, an expansion of the definition of "texture." Whereas Collage City emphasizes the desirable homogeneity of buildings in a "the solid and continuous matrix or texture,"[11] it is possible to relax this stipulation and allow a lot of variation between buildings and building parts. And although Rowe and Koetter ultimately tow the uniformity-over-difference line in order to preserve the symmetrical quality of the fight they pick with Modernism, they continually flirt with the possibility of extreme, even chaotic difference. The "virtually continuous" built material in their city has an "incidental make up and assignment." It is less a homogenous texture than a pile-up of found objects. They entertain questions about how to build a "field of objects which are legible in terms of proximity, identity, common structure, density…" by wondering "how much such objects can be agglomerated" "before the trade breaks down and the introduction of closure, screening, [and] segregation of information becomes an experiential imperative."[12] They come very close to wondering how walking through the streets of Parma might be like walking through a gigantic still life: a collection of sufficiently dense things.

PRINCIPLES

There are signs of a possible revival in object first architecture. The efforts are still nascent, and the moralizing clean-up crowd still clings to their superstitions, *Collage City* notwithstanding (read: Swiss architects, a crop of neo-neo-Palladian, and architecture reviews in

ENDNOTES

1. Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture.* London: Dover, 1986. Pages 191-192.

2. Credit for the coinage of this phrase belongs equally to Meredith Miller and Thom Moran.

3. John McMorrough was the first to call out this Zen quality.

4. The purpose of a koan is to test a student's progress in Zen teachings by provoking "great doubt."

5. Roland Barthes. "The New Citroen" in *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Page 88.

6. Karsten Harries. *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. Page 24.

7. Harries, 8

8. As quoted in Harries, 196

9. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter. *Collage City*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983. Page 65.

10. Rowe and Koetter, 64

11. Rowe and Koetter, 62

12. Rowe and Koetter, 64–65

the *New York Times*). If the attempt is going to survive the inevitable social critique, it must develop a catalog of objects that clear two tests. Objects in that catalog will share a few principles:

1. They will be sites. They will project organizational tendencies outward from themselves. They will collate and organize other things. They will be treated as found, as a place to rest and build.

2. They will be hungry. They will fold other things into themselves without resistance. They will be not only materially pliant by identity-malleable, like the putti of certain rococo ornament with heads that are both balloons and baby faces—a baby face inhaling the surface of a balloon, or maybe vice versa.

3. They will be always coming together or falling apart. As individual pieces they will be tautly formed in some parts and informally relaxed in others; as agglomerations they will be perpetually under construction or demolition: at both scales open and extensible without being repetitive.

4. They will be forms. They will be forms in the sense of 19th century musical composition—material accumulations that bind together morphology and use.

A partial list of these objects? Mountain, patch, carpet, blanket, pillow, balloon, cloud…