Rescuing the Project of Post-Modernism

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INTRODUCTION

When the faculty search committee asked the student representative what kind of studio teacher she and her classmates wanted. Her reply was "Someone who knows how a building is put together, someone who is practical and won't make me do silly things." "Silly things?" I asked. "Yes, like the teacher who told me to put broken plates on the sides of my building", she responded with some agitation. Citing Simon Rodia and Gaudi, but not Julian Schnabel, my colleagues asked why the plate idea was silly. "Because the instructor is not a registered architect so obviously she doesn't take building seriously", came the now clearly adamant reply.

That exchange and others like it over the last few months have caused me to wonder whether the cult of the practical has returned to schools of architecture? Is this merely the revolt of the children against the parents? Is the job market so rough that being fully functioning CAD operators now forms the most important student aspiration? I long, to my own surprise, for the professed humanity and whimsy of early post-modemism. After exchanges like the one just recounted I cannot help but wonder, yet again, just what the nature of post-modemism really was (is?)? Was it just another modernist riff? Given the words and buildings that have indundated us these last thirty years there is little question that post-modemism has become the most slippery of terminologies and that it can be almost anything for anyone. Moreover, many would argue that this chameleon quality is post-modemism's greatest strength. Without arguing this last assertion let me simply state that for the purposes of this paper, post modernism will be far more narrowly defined.

With the magazines and most of the schools having moved into post-modem's most recent incarnation—deconstruction; this is an appropriate time (and an auspicious one- 4th year of the decade) to examine the project of post-modemism. Looking past the verbal and visual pastiche I am convinced that there was a post-modem project and one that needs to be understood, appreciated and rescued. If you believe, as I do, that architecture is both mirror and mover of the culture and that it has extraordinary responsibility as a constituent part of the political, social and economic arenas then we must seek this project.

Such explorations are often focused on identifying beginings and ends. Much has been written, for example, of the end of modernity. There is much to recommend such discussion of starts and stops. Unfortunately, such searches, be they serious or superficial, evidentiary or anecdotal, empirical or theoretical all suffer the fate of looking for 'things', when we should be searching for their meanings. Several million tons of pastel dryvit notwithstanding, there was meaning to the post-modem project. This is often belied by architecture's recent history.

Building production has been marked by two paths. One trajectory begins with ideas or theories and uses built form as a test of those notions. The theories often are rooted in other disciplines (philosophy, social theory, linguistics) and their seduction is not always based on their efficacy.

The second, and more often witnessed, journey uses many of the same ideas ex post facto. A building is produced without benefit of ideas—cerebral or visceral—and then is propped up intellectually and emotionally, with theory. The pitfalls of the first path are that it may lead to a dead end and rarely to beauty. The second scenario can only lead to an architecture of disdain. Bankrupt of ideas ab initio there can be no real exploration, hence no joy. A cynical approach can only produce cynical environments. The ideas, applied after the fact, and without regard to their unwitting host become intellectual trompe l'oeil. The eye becomes the last stop on the journey to conciousness, rather than the first way station. Sadly, this scenario accurate, if unflattering, is what post-modernism has become.

The relatively prosperous banalities of the years bracketted by the end of the Korean conflict and the assassination of President Kennedy served to repress the extraordinary horrors of the Second World War and the Great Depression that preceeded, and precipitated, it. This decade long lull gave modernism the chance to rescue its project—the rational, Enlightenment ideals espoused in the first quarter of this

century were now fulfilled. Adversity had been overcome by reason. The rational, modem world of capitalist America had bested the irrational, ancien regime. The last vestiges of the old order had been swept away. The 101st Airborne had completed the job begun by the Bauhaus. Now only comrnunism, that lingering piece of 19th Century Europe, stood in the way of our post-Enlightenment paradise.

That much of the tumult and tragedy had been wrought in the name of reason was either conveniently forgotten or left unspoken. Why argue with progress? Then came the body bags—two Kennedys and a King—almost lost amid the countless killed in Vietnam. Old questions about the efficacy of reason were raised anew. The prosperity and the progress had been based on war. The price was, for many, too high.

Julian Benda, the late 19th/early 20th Century journalist and intellectual saw the disillusionments of his age and wrote *The Treason of the Clerks.'* His thesis was: if, we no longer had a group of people who had no civic duties, but were only to maintain values outside the mundane world of reason; then, we were doomed to a world of banalities subject to the forces of the marketplace, the playing field and ultimately the trenches of World War I. Benda saw that humanism and the Enlightenment were not the same thing. Karl Mannheim also saw the distinction. While his *Ideology and Utopia*[2] is largely an attempt to give currency to the social sciences by placing them on equal footing with the physical sciences, it does illustrate afresh the distinction between humanism and reason. Mannheim states that the physical sciences deal with external uniformities and regularities; whereas the social sciences seek the inner meaning of a phenomemon.

The project of post-modernism was to promote the existence and importance of this distinction. It asked to engage in what the Enlightenment would have termed 'dangerous thought'; questioning the cult of the practical and the supremacy of reason. The project went awry for a number of reasons. As with many 'new' theories those promoting the post-modem project sounded a call-to-arms when gentle persausion would have proved longer lived and more seductive. Like many controversial points-of-view, the post-modern project saw the need to tear down the existing structure before a new one had been built in its stead. So eager were the early post-modernists to pin all ills on modernity that what might have been the predicate for serious and provocative discussion quickly dissolved into cynical pessimism. The intellectual pyrotechnic ignited not a cleansing forest fire but a blaze of marketing that devoured every good idea—leaving only charred remains. The post-modem project in architecture was reduced to a stylistic adjunct to consumer fetishism. It had been co-opted by the same cult of the practical it had sought to dislodge.

Years before, Mannheim had seen the problem with remarkable clarity. Again, in *Ideology and Utopia,*[3]

"The view which holds that all cultural life is an orientation toward objective values, is just one more illustration of a typically modem rationalistic disre-

gard for the basic irrational mechanisms which govern man's relations to his world."

And this was because, Mannheim believed, groups are socialized into accepting and espousing certain beliefs promoted by the power structure.

Foucault also believed this. In 1976 he wrote,

"I would say, then, that what has emerged in the course of the last ten or fifteen years is a sense of the increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses. A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence—even, and perhaps above all, in those aspects of it that are most familiar, most solid, and most ultimately related to our bodies and to our everyday behavior. But together with this sense of instability and this amazing efficacy of discontinuous, particular, and local criticism, one in fact also discovers something that perhaps was not initially foreseen, something one might describe as precisely the inhibiting effect of global totalitarian theories."[4]

He goes on to note,

"we have repeatedly encountered....that it is not theory, but life that matters, not knowledge, but reality, not books, but money.....but it also seems to me that over and above, and arising out of this...there is something else to which we are witness.....an *insurrection of subjugated knowledges....* I mean two things:....historical contents that have been buried or disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal system.....and a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task....naive knowledges, located low down on the heirarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scienticity."[5]

This notion of subjugated knowledges, bound up as it is with the struggle for power is tied directly to early postmodern architectural theory. It was precisely the hegemony of modernism—its scienticity, its disqualification of 'inadequate' ideas and its universality that post modernism called into question. When post-modernism asked us to look at the vernacular as something more than a curiousity; when it questioned the universality of reason and its offspring—modernism; when it spawned critical regionalism and the realities of a pluralistic culture—when we began to hear other vocies, in other rooms—that was the post-modern project. It questioned the status quo, sought alternative paths, was, for a flash, truly inclusive.

Foucault's 'subjugated knowledges',

"entertain claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, heirarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects."[6]

This is precisely the project of post-modemism. It is the struggle to listen to the other voices and build the other rooms without resorting to the reduction of all to some universally applicable and irrefutable psuedo-science. As with Foucault's lucid criticism of 'Marxist science', neither is architecture part of the 'scientific discourse' that has gradually subsumed all of Western thought be it 'scientific' or not.

Foucault's insights into the issue of 'subjugated knowledges' could have reinforced the foundation of the post-modern project. Sadly, like post-moderism itself Foucault's works have often been co-opted and trivialized.

In Foucault's subject matter and methodology we find two separable tracks. The substance of his work—the questioning of the totalitarian power structure, the repression or marginalization of the mentally ill, the diseased and homosexuals — has proven far too rough and real for most academicians. His adulation in the Anglo-American academic communities is founded on his method and presentation—abstractly brash and couched in brilliant words. Their hero is not the queer who died of AIDS, but the fleet footed rhetorecian who could demolish his critics. Foucault's followers were drawn not to forays into the land of the insane, the infirm or the undesirable, but rather to his dizzying associations and unorthodox methods and conclusions, which in the hands of lesser talents became an arcane, jargon ridden pastiche of pseudo-erudition. Without Foucault's passion and brilliance you get intellectual dryvit. Like Foucault, post-modernism's hard questions and encounters with unpleasant realities were too tough. Copying the look was easy and lucrative. Deconstruction is only the latest risk free stylization of provocative and risky ideas that could only have arisen in a post-modern milieu.

So, what of rescuing the project of post-modemism? Has too much bad architecture been built in its name? Must we continue the Enlightenment project of searching for universal truth? Are Foucault's 'subjugated knowledge's' a path to that rescue? As a partial response to these issues we should turn to David Harvey's excellent and comprehensive *The Conditions of Post-Modernity*. There is much here that is relevant to this discussion including Harvey's most lucid analysis of the rise and fall of modernism. But I am particularly drawn to two statements, one by Aldo Rossi and one from Harvey, himself.

Rossi's post-modem response, "To what then could I have aspired in my craft? Certainly to small things, having seen that the possibility of great ones was historically precluded."' This is an extraordinarily affirming statement and one that could well be an anthem for rescuing the post-modem project. It is closely tied to Foucault's notion of local and often submerged knowledges. Most important, as a builder,

and theoretician, Rossi has shown us that the path to good building is based on ideas and is responsive to the condition of the culture in which it is built.

Harvey's statement on modernism, "while modernism always ostensibly asserted the values of internationalism and universalism it could never properly settle its account with parochialism and nationalism"[8] is another reminder that the Enlightenment project is no less limited than the post-modem. To ignore the local, the particular, the 'subjugated' is to eliminate from consideration ideas and emotions that could provide vital sustenance not just for architecture, but for all human endeavor. Harvey, in summing up, offers a number of responses to the post-modem condition. It is his third (off four) hypothesis that has the greatest resonance with rescue.

"Find an immediate niche for political and intellectual life which spurns grand narrative, but which does cultivate the possibility of limited action. This is the progressive angle of post-modemism that emphasizes community and locality, place and regional resistances, social movements, respect for otherness........"[9]

I would add that this is not only possible but imperative. As Vaclav Havel noted in his acceptance of the Liberty Medal this year,[10] new meanings and directions must be drawn in times of transition. In the collapse of accepted value systems new ones, ones that draw on history, as well as, the future are set in place.

A rescue is a dramatic undertaking and one filled with hope.

NOTES

[1] Benda, Julien, *The Treason of the Clerks* (The Betrayal of the Intellectuals) Trans. Richard, G. Routledge, London/American Ed. Morrow, New York 1928.

[2] Mannheim, Karl, *Ideology and Utopia,* first published in 1936, translated from the German by Louis Wirth and Esward Shils, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York.

[3] Ibid. p. 82.

[4] Foucault, Michel, from "two Lectures" of 1976, in *Culture, Power, History,* ed. Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley, Sherry Oertner, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994. p. 202.

[5] Ibid. p. 203.

[6] Ibid. p. 214.

[7] Harvey, David, *The Condition of Post-Modernity,* Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, MA, 1989. p. 40.

[8] Ibid. p. 275.

[9] Ibid. p. 350.

[10] Havel, Vaclav, "The New Measure of Man," an address delivered in Philadelphia on 4 July 1994, reprinted in *The New York Times* Friday, 8 July 1994, Op-Ed page.