Library as Carnival:
Reflections on Rem's New Proposal for Seattle's Public Library

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A friend working in one of the offices in Seattle recently lamented to me the way his colleagues were quick to criticize Rem's proposal for a new public library in that city. He was of course correct to point out that offering criticism from a spectator's point of view alone contributes little or nothing to the discipline of architecture. In reply, however, I suggested that this faulty judgement does not necessarily represent the weakness of a select few, but the manifestation of a much larger cultural phenomenon; namely that the nexus of public life where people are effortlessly intimate with their surroundings has long been replaced by a world in which the computer increasingly defines how we establish our knit with society. We no longer understand the world with our body but with our eyes.

I mention my brief exchange with my friend for the reason that it struck me as particularly germane to Rem's manner of reinventing the library. In fact a quick look at his proposal would suggest that he was bent on correcting all that my friend sees as problematic in our age of disengagement. To bring people back into the city, Rem invests the library with a carnival-like scenario in which the electronic

Fig.1 A carnival-like scenario in which the lobby is excited with a melange of activities

medium plays a central role and where the book constitutes but a single component of the entire culture of the building. Here the library is no longer limited to books and reading, but is exploded to include functions as diverse as a museum, a children's center, a coffee house and perhaps even a nightclub. In Rem's words: "In addition to the typical library there will be "attractions" that ...will transform the library from a space to read into a social center with multiple responsibilities."[1]

In his book on Rabelais and the Carnival, particularly as it matured in the medieval context, Bakhtin provided a thorough account of the way Carnivals can help bring about renewal and personal connections to an otherwise stagnant condition.[2] Before their reduction to mere themes in literature from Shakespeare onward, Carnivals were actual events that for a short period during the year transformed the city into a space where unspeakable acts of vile gestures were given license to take place. Liberating about this moment under the sun was the way in which hierarchy of all sorts was dissolved, inviting individuals to shed the burdens of their professions or station in life and connect with, and indeed learn from, those that have acquired experience through a different, yet no less important, route. Whether the hierarchy was religiously associated or politically so, this was a time to leave your self-importance behind and engage a world where all parameters, moral or otherwise, had been deconstructed. The excessive professionalization of the world tends towards both excessive privatization as well as excessive compartmentalization, all of which generating in their wake a social system so closed that neither self- awareness nor true creativity or inquiry is allowed entry. Baktin refers to this state of being as "phony seriousness"; having closed ourselves inside a concealed profession we begin to gain a distorted and exaggerated sense of importance as to who we are and to whom we belong; here the carnival becomes instrumental in providing a counterpoint of ridiculousness to a much regimented condition. In it we are reminded of our pervasive tendency towards folly and the love of pleasure and of the fact that ultimately a life without diversity and tolerance is one bound by hopelessness and final death. Rem's sense of the carnival then is such that in his new library he seeks on the one hand to provide a counterpoint to all the sobriety that has come to be associated with books and scholarly work and on the other to remind us of the capacity of the city to bring much gaiety and even frivolity to our lives and in so doing allow us access to irrational joy.

Rem is one of those architects who feels it necessary to offer designs that explain the world and the currency of the times, and not simply solve a particular programmatic problem. It can also be said of him that he is a philosopher of the transitional moment and that his aim is one of capturing the essence of the unfolding crisis in architectural terms. Which means that his buildings are not the expression of the beautiful but of the problematic or the enigmatic. In our age this means coming to terms with the computer and all the telecommunication capacities that have been made possible through it. Inventions such as email and the world wide web, which by now have become ubiquitous and fully integrated into our psychological construct, have enabled us to transcend traditional boundaries and act independently. We no longer rely on the shop or the office for the things these places traditionally offered, we only need them as an aesthetic experience, a place that affords visual stimulation and social interaction. I no longer rely on the physical role of the bookstore or the clothing store or the travel office down the street to advance my life, but I do need them as agents that could help me socialize, show myself and act like a dandy.[3] In this light, Rem has this to say: "...the last decade has shown an accelerated erosion of the public domain, replaced by increasingly sophisticated and entertaining forms of the private."[4] And insofar as the library is concerned, the

information revolution has placed it in an increasingly more marginalized position: with information moving about with greater liquidity it is less likely that people will depend on the centrality of its purpose. Here Rem uses an emerging phenomenon as an opportunity to empty out an old function and replace it with another to advance a new cause.

In his public presentation to the city of Seattle, Rem talked about the e-book, an invention lingering in the horizon, in which the reader need not worry about the stacks of books that so constitute the labyrinth of the old library and through which many individuals have been lost to eternal dizziness. No, in this hyper-minimal world, the entire collection of world literature is condensed in a singular piece of work, a single book whose electronic storing capacity allows us access to whatever book we want. In an ironic and deranged twist of events, this is akin to what Borges had in mind when he wrote in "The Library of Babel," that "in some shelf of some hexagon, men reasoned, there must exist a book which is the cipher and perfect compendium of all the rest: some librarian perused it, and it is analogous to a god...To me, it does not seem unlikely that on some shelf of the universe there lies a total book." And at the end of this fable about books and knowledge, Borges leaves us with an eerie footnote that predicts in metaphorical terms the course of things to come:

> *"Letizia Alvarez de Toledo has observed that the vast library is useless. Strictly speaking, one single volume should suffice: a single volume of ordinary format, printed in nine or ten type body, and consisting of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages. This silky vade mecum would scarcely be handy: each apparent leaf of the book would divide into other analogous leaves. The inconceivable central leaf would have no reverse."*[5]

It is unsure what "silky Vade Mecum" means, but it does conjure up, along with "a single volume...consisting of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages...," an expression of this very same e-book that Rem and others are talking about: a screen through which an infinite number of flat pages, (whether one calls them leaves or web pages or dialogue boxes, it does not matter), are retrieved, read and then dissolved once again. This flat yet dense medium offers an abundance of information, perhaps too much, whose plentitude has already begun to generate more confusion than clarity. Where there is too much information the results are such that one piece of information begins to coalesce with the next and the next and so on down the layers, leading to a kind of contamination in which facts and simple truths become distorted and in a way irrelevant. The labyrinthine world that Borges envisioned was then an expression of the way we have allowed for the loss of the hegemonic rule of texts over knowledge and in so doing opened the ground up for all sorts of intellectual debasement. What used to be held as a basic premise for certain values in life, now becomes relegated to the status of opinion, a neutral and ineffectual collection of words and statements, the victim of which is no other than the very democratic institution itself. Meaninglessness at that point prevails where nothing and everything matters. Again Borges writes: "The Library is a sphere whose consummate center is any hexagon, and whose circumference is inaccessible."

Rem went on to speak briefly about the context of the site and said that the neighboring buildings exhibit little or no character at all and are as such "generic". This is interesting because when he finally flipped on the slide that showed his design, the results were such that his proposed expression was in many ways even more generic than the building across the street. It is true that his sense of aesthetics can be said to be unique and provocative in the way he shifted the volumes and created, in his terms, "a pre-quaked" expression. Yes the manipulation of volumes is striking in the way they appear as if floating in thin air, but the final results are such that the volumes are so abstract they allude to nothing other than their relentless adoration for the box. Unlike his design for the Educatorium in Utrecht where the exterior gave explicit hints as to the section of the interior, here we see little other than the anonymous box hovering in space, seemingly defying gravity. All this may sound like criticism but interestingly I do not mean it that way necessarily. I am ambivalent about the design at this point as it is a bit too early to place judgement on it; all I mean to say is this: namely that the generic quality of Rem's expression as it stands seems to complement his view of placelessness vis-a-vis the computer and its concomitant telecommunication abilities. Speaking in this light, Hans Ibelings writes in *Supermodernism* that

> *"[a[lthough the individual's radius of action continues to expand as a result of increasing mobility, space itself is being steadily reduced to a zone that is traversed, an interval in a continuous movement interrupted at most for a brief stopover...Herein lies a paradox of the expanding world, for while the area designated as familiar territory is larger than ever before, people find the world less and less meaningful, precisely because a large portion of the known world is familiar only from a fleeting visit and is not a place, with which people feel some affinity, where they feel at home, where they actually meet other people rather than simply being thrown together by chance."*[6]

And along the same lines of thought, Paul Verilio, the French cultural critic, writes of the idea of the "interface":

> *"From the fence to the screen by way of the rampart's stone walls, the boundary-surface has been continually transformed, perceptibly or imperceptibly. Its most recent transformation is perhaps that of the interface. The question of access to the city then should be asked in a new way: Does a greater metropolis still have a façade?"*[7]

One could ask the same question about the façade of a building today: Does a public building have a façade in the age of electronics? Rem obviously does not think so as his proposal shows neither reference to anthropomorphism nor any bias towards frontal associations. His boxes are anonymous and mute to urban forces and as such can be said to be faceless. The face of the building has in this sense given way to a kind of interface, to use Verilio's term, in which activities are inserted and hyper-energized. Rem actually speaks of the spaces between the floor slabs (see fig.2) in those very terms: these "in-between spaces are like trading floors where librarians inform and stimulate, where the interface between the different platforms is organized spaces for work, interaction and play and reading."

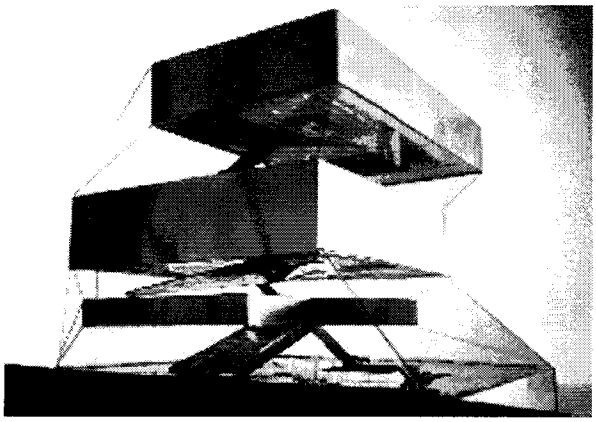

Fig. 2 Model of proposed library showing its prominent slab expression and the ethereality of its in between spaces

There is perhaps little surprise in all this; architects all over the world have been working with this kind of an idiom for a while now, and one in which Terrence Riley tried to bring forward in his 1995 exhibit at the MOMA entitled *Light Construction*. What is of note here, however, is the issue of composition and how it seems to have been truly, and I

believe for the first time, discarded. Looking at Rem's assemblage of boxes and spaces, at least at this early stage of the game, one gets the impression that there is no "a-priori" compositional agenda and that everything we see is in principal to make room for a cultural, technological and psychological phenomenon. Which means that in designing this building, Rem does not seem guided by the eye of an artist looking to make a beguiling image true to the principles of solid and void, center and edge, balance between the horizontal and the vertical, and so on and so forth, but by the mind of an intellect who seeks to interpret and exemplify his world. And what is this world about that seems to deny composition further life: it is one in which the capacity to bring within a singular view the totality of one's universe has been completely lost. Even scale is obliterated in a place where scale had traditionally been paramount: there is really no telling how big this building is or how many floors it embraces. Rather, like the leviathan Moby Dick, it rises in a shroud of scaless ambiguity.

To be sure, there have been several attempts over the last 100 to 150 years to accomplish similar results and do away with the idea of composition altogether. The Beaux Arts way of thinking had since the age of Louis XIV objectified composition to point of dogma and reduced that which was deemed acceptable to few principal moves. But by the early 20th century the situation was well on its way towards change and the whole idea of working with a pre-established equation between forms and numbers was clearly seen as being at odds with the spirit of the age. This was a time in which new technologies had already begun to create a rupture in the way we experience space and understand individual freedom. Now we were no longer held back by the limitation of territory and local craft, now we could reach out and bring into presence distant influences, the result of which was a new form of personal independence. Composition as an agent of unity where the part and the whole form a cohesive pattern now became either altogether obsolete or at best a function of the picturesque. Speaking on behalf of the modern master's sentiment on the subject, Colin Rowe, in his seminal book on *The mathematics of the Ideal Villa*, says "that for them "composition" implied a regard for mere appearances, had suggestions of subjectivity, of formalism...."[8] F. L. Wright was himself unabashedly straightforward: "Composition is dead that creation may live." But despite all their best efforts and intentions, the moderns, with few isolated examples such as one can find in the design of Villa Savoy, were never quite able to fully rid themselves of the basic premise of composition; they simply widened the ground on which this subject is engaged and manipulated.

Peter Eisenman always prided himself on having arrived at his solutions fundamentally through the mind first, and not the eye, but at the end his buildings always emerged with an unmistakable compositional correctness. I remember quite vividly the days when he would go on and on about his concept (if one could call it that) for the Wexner Center and how the form was a product of "excavating" hidden forces, geographical, historical and otherwise. He seemed at pains to suggest that whatever he came up with was not necessarily of him but of a "deeper structure" embedded in the site; and that his role was simply that akin to a psychotherapist who draws out deep seated inhibitions and makes them available for revisions. Eisenman hated admitting that his skill lied in understanding the basic principles of composition and that as an architect he simply could not let go of that talent. His fear stemmed from the impression that in focusing on compositional issues he might forgo his will to act intellectually and inspire others to shape the world accordingly. Eisenman's work has always relied on good compositional skills and despite all his intellectual efforts his buildings have always beguiled because of that. Even Rem himself, who is as fascinated by the mind as Eisenman, was no different until now, always kicking off his drawings with an intellectually charged idea only to ultimately end up with a composition that is cool, elegant and self-referential in its own right.

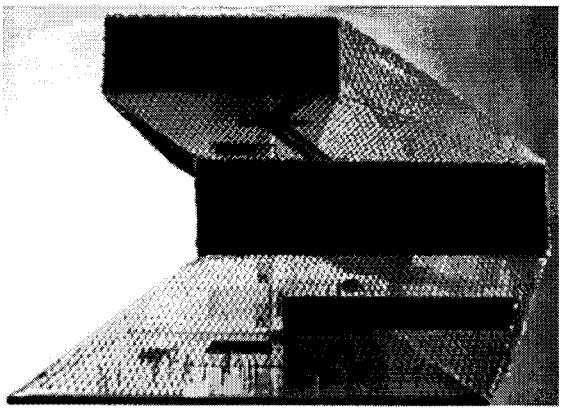

Fig. 3 A close up image showing the character of the structural web

With the library, however, we get a distinctly different sensibility, namely that the forms seem less motivated by a skilled hand, keenly interested in the poetry of tectonics, and more by a mind deeply fascinated by the currency of the age and the way recent technologies are shaping and reshaping our lives. Most noteworthy in this light is Rem's brilliant way of synthesizing the metaphors of the electronic age, namely the idea of the Web, with the need to make for a new structural expression in architecture. Some may criticize Rem's representational ways here, using puns to form something fundamentally so 3 dimensional and grave, but unlike the idea of the Deleuzian fold whose intensely philosophical agenda is simply untranslatable into architecture, but whose appeal has already been unsuccessfully adopted by several architects, the introduction of the web metaphor into Rem's expression captures quite elegantly his vision of a world made homogenous and ethereal by recent technologies. To be sure, Rem never quite refers to this structural device in terms of the electronic web, however it is not too difficult to infer this association given his theoretical language thus far. It is the web that enshrouds the community into one, like the plastic wall at Ronchamp achieving similar aims in addressing the unity of the congregation. Here the web structural invention is used to hold almost the entire assemblage of slabs, yielding to an expression in which the solids appear to levitate in mid air, as if hypnotized on thin layers of light.

Another interesting gesture that looks appropriate here and which seems to operate at the same spirit as the rest of the discussion presented so far is that of the elbow. The elbow is one of those structural members of our bodies that conveniently express our desire to push into place new possibilities. To elbow myself through a crowd and get ahead, is in essence an attempt to chart new ground and enter new and completely unpredictable experiences. The internet has, in a sense, allowed us such an expression; namely in allowing us access to one world it has also accidentally pushed us into other areas simultaneously. In searching for a book, a hat or vacation outlet on the internet today, we are likely to enter an experience in which new temptations open up before our eyes, from which new possibilities and ideas can emerge and initiate new beginnings. Traveling through his library, Rem I suppose would like us to happen upon things accidentally, to be surprised and not to be held back by an overarching plan. His elbows are there for us to envision a future of changes, to leave open a space through which the mind could wander.

In a world where the city and the self seem ever more fragmented and in a way irrelevant, Rem is out to reunite things. But unlike the New Urbanists, his method does not rely on sentimentality; he does not romanticize the old but provokes new possibilities for the future. He does not, for instance, push aside the computer to re-establish universal and timeless values, but uses the qualities of the electronic age to correct everything that that technology marginalized in the first place. *The Post-*

Intelligencer, a Seattle paper, for instance reported Rem having talks with local companies, such as Microsoft and Amazon.com, "to explore how best to incorporate technology into the library."[9] With the library reinvented in the image of the carnival, it is likely that people will now not only look at their city but also engage it experientially and in the round.

NOTES

[1]"Seattle Public Library Proposal," a book illustrating in schematic format Rem Koolhaas's and his OMA firm's conceptual ideas; Fall 1999. This book is public information provided by the Seattle Public Library.

[2]Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World,* translated by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana university Press, 1984.

[3]For more information on this subject see Christine Boyer's book on *Cybercities* as well as William Mitchel's book on the *City of Bits*. As for the subject of the dandy or the flaneur in the city, the litertaure is expansive but I suggest reading *The Spectatorand the City in 19th CenturyAmerican Literature* by Dana Brand along with Benjamin's expansive *Arcades Project*

[4]*Seattle Public Library Proposal* by OMA and Rem Koolhaas, Fall 1999.

[5]Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, "the Library of Babel," Grove Press, New York, 1962.

[6]Hans Ibelings, *Supermodernism,* Nai Publishers, Rotterdam, 1998.

[7]Paul Verilio, "The Overexposed City," in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, Edited by Michael Hays, MIT Press.

[8]Colin Rowe, "Character and Composition or some Vicissitudes of Architectural Vocabulary in the 19th century", first appeared in *Opposition* 2, 1974, but here taken from *Mathematics of the Ideal Villa*, MIT Press 1982.

[9]This quote appeared in an article by Phuong Le of the Seattle Post Intelligencer entitled "The building will be an invitation," December 16, 1999.