

EN TERROR FIRMA: IN TRAILS OF GROTEXTES

"It is amazing how complete is the illusion that beauty is goodness."

Leo Tolstoy

Recently a client said to me, "Peter, for the past five hundred years the discourse of science has been about man overcoming nature. Man overcomes nature through things that are rational, which are good, which are truthfull, and ultimately these take on the characteristics of the natural itself, i.e., the beautiful." "Obviously," he said to me, "it follows that architecture has been about this overcoming of the natural because architecture symbolizes the structures, the cosmological attitudes of the society: architecture mirrors what the society is about." Thus, without having it explicitly stated in this way, architecture has been representing and symbolizing this struggle of man to overcome nature. "Today," he said, "this is no longer the problem which science is addressing. This is no longer where the discourses, which are on the forefront of thinking, are." He said that the problem today for man is to overcome knowledge. And he looked at me, and said, "You see, computers have knowledge, robots have knowledge, the technological clones that we are developing have knowledge, but man has wisdom. The knowledge revolution, artificial intelligence and the systems of knowledge have gotten out of hand, and have started to control man, rather than the reverse. Science today is trying to find a way to control knowledge, and the knowledge revolution." And my client then said to me, "Peter, you architects, for too long, have been solving a problem, representing and symbolizing a problem which is no longer where we are." He said, "I want you to do a building which symbolizes man's capacity to overcome knowledge." I looked at him and thought, what is that? He said, "Do you know something, you are supposed to be an architect on the edge." "Yet," he added, "there is nothing you could do toward this end that would upset

me at all." He said, "I do not want you to merely illustrate the problem. I do not want you to merely decorate a façade with a computer chip, cut into the chip, and say, there - we have symbolized the overcoming of knowledge." "No," he said, "I am not talking about that. I want something far more significant. I want something that deals with the occupation of space, not just the surface of that space. I want you to challenge perceptibly, conceptually, and physically the way we occupy," he said. "And I do not think you can do it."

I thought he was probably right, but faced with such a client I began to realize that it is we architects who are the problem, not the clients. Clients, if they could only articulate the way that they conceptualize, would suggest that what architects are doing is far from what they, the clients, are thinking and what they need.

Now why is this? First of all, architects traditionally do not speculate on the here and now, on gravity, as scientists do. Architects have to deal with the real conditions of gravity. Architects have to build the here and now. They have to deal with presence. In fact, architects continually not only symbolize the overcoming of nature, we *must* overcome nature. It is not so simple for architecture to merely shift and say that overcoming nature is no longer the problem, because it remains a problem. Nature, traditionally, was the liminal, the boundary definition; it mediated, in the anthropocentric world of the enlightenment, for the lost certainty of God. The natural became a valued origin, both useful to explain the world metaphorically and as a process and an object to be emulated. Since architecture has taken upon itself to symbolize the overcoming of nature, it is more than reasonable to think that the overcoming of knowledge is also a central problem for architecture today. However, it is a problem which requires both a displacement and a maintenance in architecture itself.

In this sense, it is possible to respond to my scientist client and at the same time still deal with the problems of presence and

gravity. To do this the architectural discourse must be reconceptualized. The issue is not that architecture must be built to withstand the forces of gravity, but the manner in which this overcoming is symbolized. In other words, it is not good enough to suggest that buildings must be rational, truthful, beautiful, good, i.e., that buildings which in their mimesis of the natural suggests man's overcoming of the natural. Rather, as the architectural discourse changes its focus from nature to knowledge, a far more complex object emerges, one which requires a more complex form of architectural reality. It would follow then that the notion of the house or for that matter any form of the occupation of space, requires a more complex form of the beautiful, a beautiful that contains, say, the ugly or for that matter a rationality that contains the irrational. This idea of the containing *within*, necessitates a break from the tradition in architecture of categories, of types which in their essence rely on the separation of things as opposites.

At the root of the present conceptual structure of architecture is the Vitruvian triad of commodity, firmness and delight, (use, structure and beauty). The beautiful as a dialectical category has been understood as a singular and monovalent condition; it has been about goodness, about the natural, the rational and the truthful. It is that to which architects are taught to aspire in their architecture. Thus, they search for and manifest conditions of the beautiful as a form of delight in the Vitruvian sense. It was within such a desire that this form of the beautiful was to become as if a natural condition for architecture over the past five hundred years. There were rules for the beautiful, for example, in classical ordination which although modified through different periods of architecture, much as styles change in fashion, were never essentially displaced.

In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant began to destabilize this singular concept of beauty. He suggested that there be something else, another way to conceptualize beauty other than

as goodness; other than the natural. He suggested that within the beautiful, there was something else, which can be called, for now, the sublime. When the sublime was first articulated prior to Kant, it was in dialectical opposition to beauty. With Kant came the suggestion that the sublime was within the beautiful, and that the beautiful was within the sublime. This difference between being in opposition and being within is at the very heart of the argument to follow.

Now, interestingly, the sublime also has within it a condition which the conventionally beautiful represses. It is a condition of the uncertain, the unspeakable, the unnatural, the un-present, the unphysical; taken together these constitute the condition of subliminal terror.

That the overcoming of nature or the depiction of nature as *other*, preoccupied the enlightenment and the technological and scientific revolutions, was obvious. In response, the grotesque as it was put forward in the romantic movements in Keats, Shelly and Wordsworth, was concerned with rethinking this relationship between the self and nature. Therefore, what are known today as the sublime and the grotesque deal with this moment between self and the natural, and the representation of this unease in literature and painting. If the "naturalness" of nature is to be displaced in the uneasy movement between nature and self, then our ideas of the sublime and the grotesque must also be reconceptualized in terms of overcoming knowledge without losing the fear of nature and the terror of uncertainty, i.e., the fear of not overcoming nature, must be preserved in these displaced categories.

There is very little of the sublime or the grotesque in science because science by definition is concerned with certainty. When the idea of knowledge is substituted for the ideas of nature and the self-overcoming-knowledge, the situation and its form of expression become far more complex. What then is to be depicted when knowledge is overcome? The fear or uncertainty

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is now doubly present. Since the conditions for the sublime and the grotesque evolved from the expression of man overcoming nature, other terms which contain this double uncertainty, the uncertainty of not being able to succeed as well as the uncertainty of something other than the liminal (knowledge) will have to be found for the expression of man overcoming knowledge.

What does this mean for architecture? In order to achieve the necessary internal displacement, architecture would have to displace the former ways of conceptualizing architecture and formulating a method, to design in another way. The new architecture must include the fear of losing control of design because design is the expression of man overcoming nature. There seem to be four conditions which might seem to outline this condition of losing control. These four conditions should neither be seen as comprehensive, (there could be other conditions), or a guarantee, that their presence will produce such architecture.

The first condition of this *other* architecture is that it is textual. Textuality in this sense is an idea of process which displaces the univocal object sought by the traditional design process. A textual architecture cannot be designed as such, because 'design' is the method of repression, i.e. the method which produces an unrealistic idealization of what we conceptualize as Western beings within the dialectical tradition. We may design something which may be said to be crazy or outrageous, but that craziness may be only an expressionism, a mannerist distortion of an essentially stable language. It may not displace the stable language but on the contrary only further stabilize its normative condition. This is certainly the case with many examples of current architectural fashion.

Thus, the process of architectural design, which was in fact merely a convention, became something thought to be natural. In this 'thought to be natural', in its unacknowledged conventionality, resided a repression. The notion is straight-forward:

Any convention which assumes the value of truth represses something else, i.e. the unconventional. Architecture thus became a discourse saddled with the repression of the unconventional by equating the conventional with the natural.

Architecture cannot be designed or conceptualized outside the conditions of a stable language because it is not possible to know what this 'anything else' is. For example, at present architecture is only conceptualized in plan, section and elevation; in turn these are presented in Euclidean geometry. What is being suggested is that intuitive design will no longer be the way, at least initially, to move into this *other* architecture. There is a need for a process other than an intuitive one based on, 'I like this, or I like that.' Because when it is intuitive, it will already be known, and therefore complicit with the repressions inherent in architectural 'knowledge'. Intuitive design can never produce terror, only illustrate it. In these terms it can at best produce the banal or kitsch, the illustration of terror. While the concept of the grotesque or the uncanny can be conceptualized and imaged, it cannot be designed. We can only design something which is essentially monovalent, because design involves certainty; something always has to be made. To attempt to design between design, *between certainty or multivalency* only produces a superficial illustration. If we can design it, it is no longer uncertain. Even when we 'design' with multivalency as one does traditionally in architecture as with form and function, structure and ornament, figure and frame, these are dealt with as separate categories. Text as process takes form and function, function and structure, structure and ornament etc. and attempts to construct a process which through some external logic produces some initial condition of form.

What is this external wall? The result attempts to be uncertain: it seeks something which looks almost designed, (that is, not rational or logical), yet on closer reading something uncanny insists that this condition could not have been designed.

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By its very nature such a process will require at least *two* texts.

Thus, the second aspect of this *other* architecture is something called twoness. There are many different twonesses in architecture which already exist; One is the twoness of form and function, another is the twoness of structure and ornament. But these are hierarchical categories. They exist in opposition as independent conditions. Therefore, a second text, which is the displacing text, is required to move between these polarities. It will be in a sense, subliminal, that is, present, but not dominant. When the second text becomes dominant, the result is illustration or kitsch. For example, when the first text is too dominant there is no displacement. When the second text becomes presence itself it obtrudes and loses its terrifying capacity. The second text cannot obliterate the first text but must be interior to it. This second text thus will always be within the first text and thus between being and non-being.

In addition the second text must be outside of architecture. What does it mean to be outside of architecture? The third condition of this *other* architecture is a condition of within or interiority.

The fourth condition of this *other* architecture is betweenness by which is meant to suggest a condition of the object as a weak image. If the object were to have a strong image this would give a primary dominant meaning to that image. Not only must it not have a strong image, it must have two weak images. In other words, it must be between in its imageable sense: it is something which is almost this, or almost that, but not quite either. It has to be at some distance so that it cannot be fully known. But it cannot be so far away that it cannot be known at all, the experience is the terror of a partial knowing. Yet it cannot be too close and too familiar. Therefore, it must have a blurring effect. It must look like it is out of focus: that it can almost be seen but not quite. Again, this between, is not a between dialectically but it is between within...