

Prolegomena to Any Future

Dog Architecture



"A Socratic approach to high technology could lead to the concretion of sublimity and lowliness: the reflection of how feeble its capacity for simulation is in comparison with the complexity of the world; how far its order goes beyond humane conceptions of order, appearing in them as a menacing disorder; just how far the skyscraper is from the sky."¹

Hannes Bohringer, "Daedalus or Diogenes" (1989)

Facing what at the time seemed a barrage of attempts to appropriate large regions of architectural theory with new methods and vocabularies from linguistics, Alan Colquhoun uncovered, in an essay published in 1972, an unpleasant difference between the role of theory in language and architecture. He noted that while theories of language never for a moment affects the way humans speak, the most anaemic axioms of these theories applied to architectural meaning impose new and severe conditions.² The potential extremity of theory's cheekiness is laid out in one of Borges' famous short stories, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", where a secret encyclopedia about an imaginary planet leaks out to the public, creating a sensation for things Tlönian.³ The end of this nightmare is the full-blown reconstruction of the unreal, the contamination of reality by fiction. In architecture, Colquhoun suggests, the Tlönian nightmare is dreamt every time we shut our eyes. Say a few nice things about technology, get buildings that look for all the world like robots. Mumble Vitruvian sentiments and wake up to boutiques and corporate headquarters decorated with the worst-for-wear peristyles and broken pediments.

This "vulnerability factor" has led to despair over architecture's semantic future. The resulting position of nihilism, relativism, positivism, and so on can be summed up as varieties of a well reinforced cynicism practiced by Master Cynics who know that power over form and money is the real object, and that the public enjoys being kept in the dark.⁴ Having begun as a philosophical showpiece of Socratic doubt, cynicism has turned to sophisticated use of institutions as reinforced bunkers. Far from the cynicism of the "dog philosopher" Diogenes, who from the demonstrable poverty of his demeanor stood in the face of Athenian self-confidence, this new cynicism matches ends to means in an artificially induced "twilight" of skeptical doubt. These new blast-resistant cynics find any consideration of meaning virulent. They greet it with a politicized repugnance that masquerades as its philosophical ancestor, full of humility and scorn. As David Bell reported,⁵ one indignant reader of the *Journal of Architectural Education* provided the representative cry of outrage:

Dear Mr. Bell,

Speaking of meaning...

I defy you-I defy anyone- to
tell me what the hell this means!

"a reader"

But after its momentary demonstrations of enlightened doubt, such cynicism scurries by an unmarked path back not to any Diogenetic tub but to its apartment well furnished with luxurious theories, systems, and vocabularies exempt from reflection and critique.

One is tempted to audit the accounts, to question this exemption, to follow these beggars back to their extensively remodeled caves. Bell's skeptic should be shaken down for the more than loose change really concealed in his pockets. But here I have chosen another tactic which I hope may serve the same purpose. The negative critique of unmasking an illusion is, we have seen, easy enough to accomplish, but it leaves a vacuum that is not quite neutral. Into it rush trace amounts of ideology: the "at-least-one truth" of the skeptic with an institutional bank account; the "single best means" of the technological attitude; the mindless "what's next?" of nihilism.

My suggestion, put in the form of a "prolegomena", is to develop a positive version of the negative critique: a doctrine of cynicism that takes place amidst the ironies of the current condition but which adopts a new means of entertaining the perennial issues of architecture by maximizing the possibility of contamination and minimizing the opportunity to develop a "theoretical stance". This involves the pursuit of the detail, the moment, the materiality of architectural experience - in short, all those *small pieces* that escape being noticed by systematic views for no other reason than that such small pieces are *composite beings* unable to be added up to units of higher aggregate generality. They are likewise indivisible and incapable of being reduced. Actually, they are *surds*, rock-bottom irrationalities.

To do this, I would use a single cover, the idea of a "dog architecture", which means that any critique of the cynicism of the present will benefit by adopting materials and the methods of its subject. The philosophical cynic's traditional mascot (kynic = "dog" in Greek), circumstantially embodies the ideals of the search for a radical cynicism, and the emphasis on roots suggests that a change of spelling would help distinguish the "kynic" or dog architect from the cynic engaged in nihilism for power's sake.

The rubric "dog architecture" is not chosen to be funny or derisive, but as a means of getting beyond the often too-hopeful terms by which an author attempts to ennoble his subject. "Dog architecture" is not a thing with the same claim to history as "baroque architecture". But "dog" has a long history in the English language, and the animal itself has a privileged position in our anthropology. The dog has always represented the bottom end of experience. For this and other reasons, the kynics found in the dog a model of their own self-effacement and impiety towards theoretical truths. One identifies with the dog out of humility, but without going too far. If man is a dog at bottom, then the bottom is not so bad as to be incapable of great things. William Empson, in his able essay, "The English Dog", asserted that "Dog...became to the eighteenth-century skeptic what God had been to his ancestors, the last security behind human values."⁶ Today, we find ourselves in desperate need of this "last security". This security, the real and the poetic dog, is my starting place, from which I hope a real and poetic architecture might be drawn.

THE DEDUCTION OF PURE CONCEPTS OF DOG ARCHITECTURE

This "prolegomena" can get only a few words forward about what a "dog architecture" might constitute. The first consideration is, naturally, philosophical. Diogenes is known as the most important dog philosopher because he more than any other kynic carried philosophy out of the theoretic clouds down to the level of his own abused body. He slept in a tub, performed every private act in full sight of passers-by, exorcised his fellow philosophers with rude gestures and foul-play. Diogenes is philosophy's favorite "bad-boy". His contemporaries were genuinely fascinated with his brand of philosophical fool-play that made a sham of seriousness and provoked an inverted world view.⁷

Diogenes' simplicity was not a return to nature in our sense, but to the Greek *physis*, "a universal, invariable rational norm" as opposed to *nomos*, "convention, tradition, custom". The oracle had told Diogenes to "debase the currency". After fleeing Sinope where had exercised a too literal interpretation of this advice, he applied himself to a systematic destruction of the symbolic currency, the *nomos*, in favour of the universal value of *physis*. The philosopher lived in the open not out of humility but truth.

The architect's insight is that *nomos* and *physis* contrast primarily in terms of the *projectability* or "representability" of the former and the *non-projectability* or resistance to signification of the latter. That is, the custom or convention acts as a token, a substitution, just as the drawing is used to represent the building. Its value is in its pretended transparency, the untroubled way influences the universal as much as the universal the particular.⁸ Tlönsville. The token pretends to project the value of the thing in representation, but *physis* conditions as it is conditioned.

Where the representation projects to then and there, *physis*, the tonic of dog architecture, reflects back to the here and now - a sublime point. There are two main metaphorical vehicles for the exchange of *physis*. The first is that of experience portrayed as pilgrimage: the topography or surface of travel. The difference between non-projective and projective travel is that between authentic travel and travel that degenerates into running an errand, package tours and other fakeries. The real traveler realizes what might be called a "thickness" of the travel surface - a resistance to glide (desire) that calls for a philosophical brand of spelunking. The informative anecdote is Odysseus' visit to the Cyclops' cave. The dog architect is down the Cyclops' cave like a terrier in a rat hole, trying out the hospitality of the traditionally rude Cyclops with his wit. Dog topography is compressed into this fable as if it were a formula. The key for escaping the thickness of the travel landscape is a logic composed of argute ("sharp") points aimed at the Enlightenment's single eye. Argute expressions - metaphors - are the means of escaping technology's "single best means" or the sort of thought that venerates "the bottom line".

The other architectural dog is drawing. Usually conceived as the principal means of representing architectural objects, the drawing has in

the last ten years undergone considerable obedience schooling at the hands of closet dogs whom we have learned to respect by their bark (and bite). In certain cases, the de-perspectivalization of drawing has led to the production of "architectural machines" dedicated to reviving our neglected interest in dimensionality and the technical attitude. If *physis* works both ways, the dog drawing is one that reveals the world *already to have been drawn*. This begins with the hieroglyphic mythic mentality described by Vico in terms of "true speech".⁹ I would suggest that dog drawing begin with a redefinition of dimensionality, abandoning the Cartesian concept that each dimension comes with its own world, as it does with the act of reading and the movement of the "line" of thought. With dimensions unhooked, it would be impossible to use two dimensions to represent three without dealing directly with the irony of the sagittal dimension of view: the cone of vision.¹⁰ The Cartesian "machine" of representation is turned into a roulette machine that is also a decoder: a reading, writing and memory machine as in Libeskind's fiery examples. Where architecture = drawing, drawing = machines that convert reality to acts of drawing. *Graphos*, drawing or describing, is a matter of coming to verbal and geometric terms with the *liminal*, whether in the *logoi* of cannibals in Herodotus or the labyrinths of facts in the encyclopedia.

ENVOI

Unexpectedly, dog drawing is in the position to draw the logic of jazz. A major portion of early jazz grew from the work song, where communications among slaves were concealed from the master's notice by *double-entendres* and complex rhythms. But the primitive ancestors of the work song were full-bodied musical concealment of the acts of hunting, gathering, and fabricating. The thinking went that any harvesting of nature was an act of theft from the gods. The hymn concealed by praising. When modern jazz adapted the work song to the Mephisto rhythms of the machine age, it merged with a parallel critique of *l'homme machine* that had been developing through Mozart's *Monostatos* (*Die Zauberflöte*), Goethe's *Faust*, and Shelly's *Frankenstein*. The *Todentanz* looked better as the Black Bottom, Lindy Hop, or Stomp. And it kept the machine-god from noticing that we weren't really gears.

In a secularized age, the dog architecture of machine-drawing hides our poetic selves from our technological selves - and reveals the same to the same - by a logic opposite that of personification. We are given the Pauline dyad of vision and blindness. Blindness to find, vision to know. We still need to steal, and (this is the troubling truth) although the gods are no longer, we still have the need to lie.

1. Hannes Bohringer, "Daedalus oder Diogenes/Daedelus or Diogenes", *Daidalos* (1989): 23.
2. Alan Colquhoun, "Historicism and the Limits of Semiology," reprinted in *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 129-137.
3. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1962), pp. 3-18.
4. A full account of philosophic, artistic and political cynicism has been provided by a recent study by Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Originally published as *Kritik der Zynischen Vernunft*, English translation by Michael Eldred, *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 40 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
5. David H. Bell, "Reflection", *Journal of Architectural Education* 41/2 (Winter 1988): 2-3.
6. William Empson, "The English Dog", in *The Structure of Complex Words* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 168.
7. Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1937), p. 17.
8. This backflow was the problem cited by Colquhoun. If one restricts architecture to the *nomos* of convention, a *physis* is unavoidably engaged. The signified becomes the sign: that is, architecture is dematerialized.
9. In the work *On the Most ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, Vico poses the notion that mythic thought, lacking the trope of irony, takes its view of the world as authentic: appearances are gods because they are the true auspices of reality. There is something dog-like in myth's transposition of qualities of its own body to nature and its subsequent fear of the result. Tail-chasing, or barking at the moon, gets at the Vician sense of myth through a shortcut. See Lucia Palmer's translation (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
10. Instead of thinking of the cone of vision seriously, as does in my view Victor Burgin in his article, "Geometry and Abjection", *AA Files* 15 (Spring 1988): 35-41, I would suggest the alternative vision of Camillo, who reunited the cone with its traditional bizarre companions: the kissed-to-death Endymion, who allies wisdom with eroticism; the truncated cone of the ancient funerary stupas; and the headless bride of Duchamp.

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